**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 13**

**Episodes 1352-1447**

**Episode 1352**

CHARLIE

All exhausted from the drills, we crashed back into our dorm room.

“Why isn’t this more fun?” Zachery grunted, plopping down onto his bed. “It’s like being in the army.”

I was pretty sure that if I weren’t a werewolf—secret werewolf—I would have been just as whiny as he was. “It kind of *is* being in the army. That’s the point, isn’t it?”

Zachery looked outside the window, eyes narrowed. “Sergeant Pepperdine is a pain. One day he’s going to pay for all the things he’s done to me.”

“Like making you exercise?” Aisha asked him, smirking.

He gave her a serious nod. “Obviously.”

Reggie agreed with Zachery, and both of them started griping. I chimed in a little too, just for the hell of it, until Aisha spoke up again.

“Hey, you assholes had better stop whining!” She looked around, gesturing at all of us. “The world is a dangerous place, and we have a huge responsibility to help protect it.”

The way Aisha worded things gave me pause. I thought of how badly my parents wanted me to accept my hunter side. It really was a big responsibility. I just wished that I could share it with Violet. I wished she were here. Being someone’s mate was both incredible and heartbreaking. My heart was *actually* aching. I’d only been away from her for such a short time, and I already, like, *yearned* to see her again—to touch her, kiss her, to make her smile…

I was itching to grab my phone and text her. I’d once thought that I loved Sandi, but what I shared with Violet was on a whole other level.

“Hey!” Zachery suddenly barked, interrupting my thoughts. “What do you think it’s going to be like when we actually stake a vampire?” He was smirking, clearly having no idea how terrible that really was. “Will it be like the movies? Will I need to stuff its body with garlic afterwards?”

Aisha and Reggie started laughing. “Oh my god, what if they glitter in the sunlight? What if sunlight literally sets them on fire? I’ve seen that in movies!”

“I’ve seen the other thing,” Reggie said, “where you have to chop their head off and burn it, and that’s the only way they die!”

“No,” Zachery declared. “I’m sure we’re supposed to stake them. And then what happens is—”

“They turn into dust,” I burst out.

Everyone turned to stare at me. Zachery raised an eyebrow. “You sound a little too certain there, man. Have you seen that in a movie?”

I looked around the room, feeling a little uncomfortable. But I couldn’t back off now. That would be a cowardly move, and I was already hiding enough shit. “Um… Am I the only one here who’s actually fought vampires?”

Reggie gaped at me. “*Vampires?* Like, more than one?”

Still feeling awkward, I nodded.

Aisha watched me with wide eyes. “Wow.”

Zachery snorted. “You’re so full of shit—you’re just trying to impress us!” He winked. “Don’t worry, they already like you. You don’t have to lie.”

I scoffed, rolling my eyes. I was about to go into detail about what had happened when I caught myself. I had to be cautious about this. I couldn’t actually offer up too much information here, because I didn’t want to accidentally give myself away. I didn’t want to give them any clues that would hint at the fact that I was a werewolf—even though shifting was what had really helped me fight off the vampires.

In the end, I just said, “My family was attacked, actually. I just sort of did what my parents did. It came naturally, I guess.”

Nobody spoke for a moment. Reggie threw a pillow at Zachery, who was still gaping. “Dude. I think he’s telling the truth.”

Then everyone started drilling me with questions, full of excitement.

“How did you kill the first one?” Zachery asked.

Reggie wrinkled his nose. “Did it smell?”

I answered everything, and then Aisha asked me, “How did you feel after your first kill? I guess I’m a little nervous about that, for the future. I know they’re monsters,” she added, “but still.”

I hesitated for a moment. My first kill had been during the battle with Silas. But I couldn’t explain that to them. I thought back to the fight with Gregor’s coven. I’d been driven by an urge to protect Violet. I’d been set on destroying anyone who got too close to her, but I’d also been guided by instinct.

Instinct had played a major role.

“I only knew that I had to stop the vampire before it harmed someone I loved,” I replied. “I didn’t really think about how to do it. And when it was over, I felt a little shaken. But also… proud? Because I’d survived it, and the people I cared about were okay.”

Aisha nodded. “What about now, though? How do you feel when you think back to it?”

“The more time passes, the better I feel about it. Does that make sense?” I asked.

Aisha nodded again. “Of course.” Then she looked at me up and down, shaking her head. “This is super impressive. I hope when the time comes, I’m as cool about all this as you are.”

That was the last thing Aisha told me before she started getting dressed. As the rest of the guys kept asking me questions, she got all dolled up.

“Wait, where are you going?” I asked, a little intrigued.

She smirked. “I met this really hot third-year.”

My eyebrows shot up. “You’re just going to hook up?”

She grinned. “If I’m lucky. They’ve killed vampires as well, you know.”

Reggie and Zachery started snickering, asking her about her “late night sexy times.”

After she left, I turned to Zachery. “I can’t believe she’s not scared about getting caught. I thought this place was for serious hunter training!”

Reggie chuckled. “It is, but hormones are hormones—stay here long enough and you’ll understand.”

I scoffed. “How do you know that? You literally just got here.”

“Both of my older brothers have been through this bootcamp,” Reggie said, very seriously. “Dude, the stories they used to tell me… You have no idea.” His voice lowered, all conspiratorial. “There was almost an orgy once.”

What the *fuck?* Had I walked into some sort of Netflix raunchy teen TV show without realizing it?

“Think about it,” Zachery said. “You’ve got all these pumped up hunters stuck together—all that energy has to go somewhere.” He winked. “It’s like the athletes in the Olympic village—they’re always hooking up.”

“I can’t believe you just compared us to fucking Olympic athletes. You literally almost started crying earlier when you were whining about practice,” Reggie said, laughing.

As the two bickered and gave each other shit, I thought to myself that even though everyone else was hooking up, *I* sure as hell wasn’t going to. I was just interested in getting through this, so I could join Violet again. So I could see her, and do, um… all the other stuff as well.

*I miss her so much…*

“Dude, did you just sigh?” Reggie asked me, looking weirded out.

I cleared my throat. “No. Just, you know, tired.”

“Hard same.” Reggie yawned. “I’m going to bed. I’m pretty sure tomorrow is going to be tougher than today.”

“I’m too amped to go to bed,” Zachery grumbled. “You two dipshits had better stay awake with me.”

Reggie flipped him off as Zachery turned to me. “I’m serious! I can’t stop thinking about tomorrow. What do you think they’re going to make us do?”

“I have no idea,” I replied. “I can’t believe how much we’ve done already.”

Zachery snorted. “You know, despite all the bullshit and the exercise and whatnot, I’m glad you’re here with me.”

“Me too, man,” I said, smiling.

“Your love is beautiful, you guys,” Reggie said.

“Shut up, Reggie,” Zachery said. “You’re supposed to be asleep.”

“I can’t sleep. You mushy fuckers won’t shut up.”

Zachery threw a pillow at Reggie, and then turned to me. “By the way, what’s up with that cute dancer girl you’re with? Sandi, wasn’t it?”

I hesitated for a moment. “We broke up.”

“Shit, man. What happened?”

*Well, I met my werewolf mate*…

“Things got complicated,” I said out loud.

Zachery grinned. “Oh… So you met someone else?”

I nodded. My heart started pounding the moment I thought of Violet.

“She must be something, all right. You look all moon-eyed and shit,” Zachery said with a smirk.

“Yeah,” Reggie piped up. “She hot?”

I arched an eyebrow at him. “I thought you were sleeping.”

Both guys chuckled.

“So? What’s she like?” Zachery asked me.

“She’s… She’s really special.”

“Special, huh? I hope I get to meet her—maybe during the family and friends gathering in a few weekends,” Zachery said, clearly intrigued.

Well, fuck. That wouldn’t be awkward *at all*…

We shut off all the lights and settled down to sleep. My mind remained filled with thoughts of Violet, creating a sort of cocoon.

But just as I was drifting off, I was awoken by a blinding flashlight and a harsh voice yelling, “It’s time to see what you’re made of!”

**Episode 1353**

I glared at Big Mac. “You’d better stop pointing the finger at my sister, when clearly, as we’ve seen, there are bigger things to worry about!”

“I don’t think you’re listening,” Big Mac scoffed. “I’m not blaming Artemis. I’m blaming you and Greyson for not letting me *deal* with Artemis. I’m blaming you for Marta almost *dying*.”

Her words were so horrible that I gasped.

“That’s enough,” Greyson rasped.

But Big Mac, was—of course—not done. “I haven’t heard you admit yet that your sister is practically a shining beacon for dark magic, Cali. She might as well be the fucking bat signal for it by now!”

I marched up to the witch, leveling her with a glare. “Don’t you dare speak about my sister like that!”

“What am I supposed to do when you’re acting like a fool?” Big Mac turned to Greyson. “And *you* are a fucking fool for indulging your mate. Do either of you have any brain cells left, or has your little romance drama burned them all out?”

The rage I felt was so potent that I wanted to blast Big Mac. I had to hold myself back or I’d just create another mess.

“You want to hear the truth?” I snapped. “Whatever happened to make Artemis turn on Marta, I don’t trust you to deal with it. I don’t trust you, Big Mac. I don’t think you see Artemis as a person. I just think you want to destroy her without even trying to save her first!”

Big Mac gasped, looking wounded. *About time!*

I kept talking. “You’re worried about the Orb and dark magic, while I’m more concerned about saving my sister—and I have the right to do that!”

“Even if she killed someone?” Marta spoke up. Her voice was gruff and chilling.

Guilt hit me like a train. Greyson went rigid next to me.

Big Mac stared at me with a severity that made me hold my breath. “You protect Artemis because you love her, but what you’re actually doing is enabling her. What you’re doing is going to kill her long before I can, because whatever made her attack Marta—it’s not going anywhere.”

My head was hurting. I wished everyone would just leave. “I need to talk to my sister without you breathing down our necks.”

Big Mac scoffed, but Greyson finally spoke up.

“Everyone, get out of the room,” he said. “I’ll take care of this.” He nodded toward Artemis, who was sitting on the floor in the corner, her arms wrapped around her knees.

The sight of her tugged at my heartstrings.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I told Greyson. “I’m just—”

“You can stay,” Greyson told me sharply.

Big Mac snorted. “Just know that I’m keeping an eye on all of you. Because if you don’t trust me to do this, Cali, then I don’t trust you to be smart about anything anymore. How’s that?”

*Oh my god, the* nerve*!* I thought. *Someone hold me back before I fucking blast her!*

Meanwhile, Sage piped up and said, “I don’t want to blame Artemis, but we can’t let this keep going. It would have been terrible if Marta had died; we can’t excuse that like it doesn’t matter.”

Jay nodded, peering at me. “I agree.”

“Thank you, guys,” Marta whispered.

I felt like an asshole, as if Artemis attacking the medium had actually been my fault, and Big Mac was right. *Is she right on some level?*

“Everyone,” Greyson repeated. “Get out.”

Before I could tell the medium anything, Marta was the first to vanish, apparently all too happy to get out even though this was supposed to be her room.

Everyone else retreated as well. Big Mac left last, after she shot me a glare. Only Artemis, Greyson, and I remained in the room. Artemis was still sitting on the floor, looking like a scared little kid, almost like she was in a trance. Greyson glanced at her before he led me out into the hallway and shut the door behind him.

“Can you believe Big Mac?” I demanded. “This is just—”

“I don’t think you’re going to like what I’m about to say.” Greyson’s tone was even. “But I don’t see any other way out of this.”

“Excuse me? What do you mean *no other way*?”

Greyson took a deep breath and leveled me with a stare. “I’m going to keep Artemis under lock and key. I’ll assign pack members to guard her.”

I choked. “She’s not an animal! That’s my sister you’re talking about!”

“Your sister tried to kill Marta. I think we can agree on that,” Greyson told me. “We don’t know why she acted that way, but until we do, we have no choice. I don’t think you want anyone getting hurt because of Artemis, do you? Or even somehow hurting herself?”

I sniffled. “No.”

“Big Mac had a point when she said that we’re the ones responsible here, Cali…” Greyson took a step closer to me. “*I’m* the one responsible. We need to think with our heads, not our hearts.”

“I get that,” I whispered, my eyes getting scratchy. “But I still don’t trust Big Mac. She’d sacrifice Artemis in a heartbeat. I feel like I could help her, whereas all Big Mac wants to do is get rid of her.”

“I understand,” Greyson said. “But how are you going to fix this?”

Just then, as if it were a reply from the universe, I got a text from Xavier. I tapped on the screen and saw that it was a recipe for the charm. The charm that could rid Artemis of dark magic, the one that Kira had suggested.

*Yes! This could work!* I thought.

“I have a plan to keep the dark magic away from Artemis. It involves a charm that Kira just sent me,” I told Greyson. “Do you trust me? Will you let me try?”

Greyson sighed. He sounded exhausted. “Of course I trust you. But I’m worried about leaving you alone with Artemis.”

“Hey,” said a familiar voice from behind us.

I turned to see Rishika. Her expression was hard.

“I heard about what happened to Artemis,” Rishika said. “I want to see her.”

Greyson let Rishika into the room and then closed the door.

This was my chance.

“What about Rishika?” I asked Greyson. “What if she stayed in the room with me and

Artemis? Would that be okay?”

Greyson seemed to process the suggestion. Then he nodded sharply. “With one condition. If you lose control of the situation, Artemis will have to be locked up.”

I gasped. “But—”

“This is not a negotiation, Cali,” Greyson said. “I didn’t want to undermine you in front of Big Mac, but the truth is that you do need to refocus here. You’re not the kind of person to risk other people’s lives, and right now, Artemis is an active threat to my pack members. How can you not see that?”

My chest ached. “But locking her up…”

“It doesn’t mean that we’re going to hurt her. It means that we need to contain her before she hurts us. And if you lose control, we’ll have to do things my way.”

Greyson’s expression was so serious that I knew I had no choice but to agree. I understood that he was right, that Big Mac was right on some level, but still. It was a hard pill to swallow. He was giving me a shot to fix this without taking things to the extreme, but…

What if I lost control of the charm?

*No!* I thought to myself. *I need to stay optimistic for everyone’s sake.*

“I have to settle everyone else down,” Greyson told me. His eyes bored into mine as he squeezed my shoulder. “Good luck. I have faith in you.”

I watched him go. It felt good to have him say that, but now the responsibility felt massive. Swallowing, I glanced at the recipe on my phone. The charm involved a lot of medicinal plants.

*Where the hell am I going to get all this stuff?* I wondered. *I bet that just gathering them could take hours!*

I was not a witch, and it was too dark to go foraging right now, anyway…

Though maybe Big Mac had the ingredients in her room.

But of course, I couldn’t just ask her for them. I’d meant it when I’d said that I didn’t trust her. Taking a determined breath, I went back Marta’s room. Rishika was sitting on the floor next to Artemis. The two of them weren’t talking, but still, I could feel the connection between them.

“Rishika?” I said. “I’m going to need your help.”

“With what?” Rishika asked, clearly intrigued.

“I promised Greyson that you would be responsible for my sister. To contain her, in case…”

Rishika understood what I meant. She glanced at Artemis and nodded sharply. “Don’t worry. I’ve got this.”

I was so relieved to see that I could count on her.

When I got back to the hallway, I could hear Greyson and Big Mac loudly discussing Artemis downstairs. I knew that I needed to act right now, while Big Mac was distracted and—most importantly—not in her room.

I stepped into her bedroom as quietly as possible and closed the door behind me. I scowled at the place. Where did Big Mac store her witchy things? Witchcraft supplies?Whatever they were called?

I was starting to snoop around when I saw a backpack in the corner. A metaphorical light bulb turned on over my head. I recalled seeing Big Mac pulling stuff from that backpack in the past. *Bingo!* I grabbed it and started to dig through. I checked the ingredients on the recipe list and found that most of them were in a Big Mac’s stash.

I slipped all the roots and leaves I needed into my jacket pocket and zipped it up nice and snug. Satisfied, I turned around to leave…

And realized that I wasn’t alone in the room.

Mrs. Smith stared at me through narrowed eyes. “What are you doing in our room, Cali?”

**Episode 1354**

XAVIER

I dozed off after my call with Cali. I was having a pretty great dream, actually. Cali was on top of me, licking down my abs, when—

“Wake up, Sleeping Beauty!” Kira was literally shaking me awake, not at all respectful of my amazing dream. *Let a man have some fun here, Jesus.*

“The hell is wrong with you?” I grumbled, rolling onto my other side. “Let me sleep!”

Kira’s voice was full of sarcasm. “Nap time’s over. We’ve just exited the highway into the lovely city of Spokane, and you’ve got some fucking work to do.”

I instantly sat up, wide awake. “We’re here already?”

“You’ve been sleeping for hours.”

Then why had I *just* had a Cali sex dream? Right at the end? That didn’t seem fair. I grunted and checked my torso. My wound was thankfully fully healed. Good. I’d have to be at my best in order to take down Garren.

“Where should we go now?” Kira asked me, brow furrowed. “If Garren is in the city, he could be anywhere.”

“Have you ever been to Spokane before?” I asked.

Kira nodded.

“You should drive through the parts of the city that aren’t on any tourist maps,” I said. “The Blood Moons tend to gravitate toward less desirable spots.”

She nodded again.

It was a little weird that she hadn’t actually said anything for the past couple of minutes, so I cleared my throat and asked, “Are you okay?”

“Do I *not* look okay?” she shot back.

“It’s just that you’re squeezing the wheel like you want to strangle it, so I thought I’d check in.”

Kira glanced at me, snorting. “Are you worried about me?”

I scoffed. “Of course. You’re my new best friend. What would I do without you?”

She actually laughed at that. “I’m fine, Xavier. It’s just that knowing that Garren could be here puts me on edge.”

“Makes sense.”

“I’ve been thinking about this moment ever since Geoff died. And now that the end is near, my feelings are kind of all over the place,” she admitted.

I understood where she was coming from, but that wouldn’t do. It was too dangerous—Kira was dangerous enough that if she didn’t keep herself and her powers under wraps, we would have a major fucking problem.

“You need to keep it together,” I said. “We can’t let emotion enter into a situation like this.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’ll be okay. Stop worrying.”

“The mission will go to shit if you don’t keep it together.”

“I’ve spent a long time around vampires, Xavier,” she told me. “I think you should be more worried about yourself. I’m like a bag of chips to their taste buds. But you? You taste like filet mignon.”

Did she really have to remind me of that? I shuddered at the thought.

“Stop comparing me to food,” I said. “It’s fucking creepy.”

“And you stop telling me to calm down when I *am* calm,” she replied. “Also, like I said, stop worrying. It’s going to give you wrinkles, and then all the beauty sleep you put toward maintaining that face will go to waste.”

I ignored her obvious attempts to fuck with me and focused on the fact that she was still gripping the wheel tightly. She was upset, and understandably. Her husband’s murderer was on the loose, and nearby. But her losing it wouldn’t help in this kind of mission.

I wondered if I’d made a mistake, bringing her here with me.

Maybe I should have made this a solo trip.

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When we arrived at a rough-looking warehouse area, I opened the window. Wrinkling my nose, I asked, “What’s that smell?”

Kira shrugged. “I don’t smell anything unusual. It’s like any other city.”

I scowled. “There’s something unique about this one. It smells like werewolves and death.”

“That sounds pleasant.”

“Do you have to be sarcastic right now?”

“I know, it’s a problem,” Kira said. “I get extra sarcastic when I’m nervous.”

“I thought you weren’t nervous,” I told her, raising an eyebrow.

She scoffed. “I said that I wasn’t about to lose my shit, not that I wasn’t nervous. Who wouldn’t be? It’s not like we’re here on a day trip.”

“How about you stop talking then, and let me do my job?” I said.

“Fine.”

I stuck my head outside the window to scent the air.

“There are so many jokes about dogs on car rides going through my head right now,” Kira mumbled.

I felt like growling at her, but I stopped myself. The scent got stronger. More nauseating. Usually, the worse the feeling a scene brought up inside me, the better the chance I had at hitting the bullseye when I approached.

“Pull over here,” I told Kira. “The smell is too strong. We need to investigate.”

She did as I told her, but she sounded cautious when she spoke. “Do you really think we should check out something that smells like death?”

“Garren would be around things that smell like death if he’s with vampires,” I said. “He also sounds like that kind of guy.”

“Good point,” she said. Then she shot me a look, raising an eyebrow. “You actually know what you’re doing, huh?”

“I used to get paid to do this kind of thing, actually,” I replied.

She looked annoyed. “Hah, I’m not paying you. I saved your life. You’re eternally indebted to me.”

I scoffed. She really was something, wasn’t she?

“Follow me,” I said, once we got out of the car. “And I don’t care how nervous you are, stop rambling.”

Kira huffed. “I’ll try.”

Pausing, I concentrated. I took in the night air and let it flow through me, even though the smell was horrible. While Kira remained blissfully silent, I trained my senses to follow the scent until it led us to a rundown-looking block of mostly abandoned buildings. But one of the buildings had a bunch of cars and motorcycles parked out front. There was music coming from inside. It was definitely worth checking out.

The smell grew more intense as we approached, so I knew this had to be a good place to start. There were a few patrons hovering around the front of the building, smoking. I didn’t like their faces. They stared at us. They stared at Kira especially.

One smirked at her, and she glared right back.

“Hold me back before I go over there and blast that smirk off his mouth,” she told me through gritted teeth.

“You’re not doing anything,” I said. “Maybe you should wait here while I check it out?”

She rolled her eyes. “You think because I’m a woman I can’t handle myself? I could blast *you* apart right now.”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s exactly what I’m saying. You want to blast me apart, you want to blast that smirking creep apart—you’re a witch, and you don’t like werewolves or vampires. You’re also nervous. None of that is ideal for our mission tonight.”

“I didn’t come all this way to back out,” she declared.

I shook my head. “Just keep the random blasting to a minimum. Don’t do anything to draw attention. I need to be able to trust you on this. Okay?”

She took a deep breath and nodded. “Fine.”

I opened the front door, and we went inside.

At first glance, the place looked like a trendy, high-end club—at complete odds with the outside. But I was certain that it was more than a nightclub. I had seen—hell, I had *been* in—places like this before for jobs.

“This is a venom den,” I whispered in Kira’s ear.

“How do you know?”

I frowned. “The *smell*.”

It was blood everywhere mixed with smoke. It was exactly what I’d been involved in with Iñigo, not of my free will, of course. Only instead of providing a live werewolf to feed from, they seemed to be serving whatever supernatural blood the customer was willing to pay for.

“If you pay enough, you can probably get vampire venom itself,” I told her. “All the pleasure of getting bitten without losing the blood for it.”

“That’s so fucked up,” Kira said in a low voice.

I snorted. “It’s a convenient way to get high without much risk—as long as you can afford it.”

“I always wondered where some of the blood that Iñigo collected went,” she said, looking disgusted. “Could’ve lived without knowing.”

“Why?”

“Guilt can make people do messed up things,” she told me coldly.

I didn’t have time to dwell on her words.

We moved through the crowd after that. Most people didn’t pay us any attention, apart from a random creep who stared at Kira’s chest before she gave him a death glare. Thankfully, she contained herself and didn’t use her powers on anyone, even when they pushed their luck.

I couldn’t blame her for being on edge—I was on edge myself. This venue was full of vampires. I wondered if it were possible that some of the leeches that hung out in this place had fed from me. I hated being around so many of them. Especially when they were high. I didn’t even want to imagine how many poor bastards they’d kidnapped to get all this blood. I wanted to set this entire club on fire just to destroy the fucking sickness of it all.

As I was dwelling on those thoughts, Kira froze. She grabbed my arm, her eyes wide.

“What?” I asked.

Her grip on me got tighter. “That’s him. That’s Garren.”

**Episode 1355**

MARTA

I sat in the kitchen as Big Mac continued to argue with Greyson in the hallway. I could barely hear what they were saying. I was too shaken by what had just happened. I faintly remembered that Mrs. Smith had gone upstairs to get me a blanket, but she wasn’t back yet. Why did I need a blanket, though?

Oh right. Because I was shivering.

I was shivering even though I wasn’t cold.

The adrenaline of it all had been coursing through me, and now that the danger was gone, I was dealing with the aftermath. My body was still on high alert, and when I felt a light press on my shoulder, I flinched. When I turned around, though, I just saw Lilac.

He seemed concerned, his lips pressed into a thin line. “Are you okay?”

I shook my head. No point in lying. He could sense everything that was wrong with me.

He sat down next to me. “Sorry. That was a dumb thing to ask. Obviously you’re not okay. You almost died.”

“Pretty much.”

We fell silent for a moment. And then Lilac gingerly put his arm around me.

I was surprised by his action, and even more surprised when I felt slightly warmer. More settled. The sensation was odd, but not unpleasant. Not unpleasant at all. It created a weird sort of intimacy between us. Even though Lilac was technically made of… air.

“At least it’s over now,” he said. “Artemis can’t hurt you anymore.”

I offered a shaky nod. “Maybe,” I said. “Thank you for helping me out. I don’t think I would have made it out of there without you.”

“It was the least I could do,” he said.

“It was amazing to see that you still have your wolf on the other side,” I said quietly. “I didn’t expect that.”

Lilac nodded. “My wolf never left me. It’s nice to have the company as a ghost, but today I’m glad because… Because it helped me help you.” He turned to look at me, swallowing as he scrutinized my face. “For a moment, I really thought she was going to kill you. I was really afraid I was going to lose you.”

I didn’t know how things worked these days, but back in my time—so fifty years ago—teenage boys hadn’t ever admitted to being afraid. The crowd I’d fallen into had considered itself too tough to say anything like that. Sometimes I still had trouble with it, too.

There was something about the way Lilac looked at me that made me feel secure. It was as if his nervousness, his own fear for my safety, made me feel more valued. More human.

I realized that we’d never been so close to each other before. The air around me, the particles, felt charged, with this boy’s arm around me. I was about to thank him again when someone called my name.

“Marta!”

I turned to see Violet rushing toward me. At the same time, Lilac slowly removed his arm from my shoulders. The twinge of disappointment I felt when the warmth withdrew, when Lilac withdrew, surprised me. He was a ghost, but I couldn’t even remember the last time anyone had tried to hold me. To comfort me. I hadn’t been touched in so long that him giving me this kind of tenderness felt wonderful.

Before I could think of that anymore, though, Violet walked up to me, her eyes full of worry. “Oh my god, Marta!” she exclaimed. “I heard what happened! Are you okay? Are you feeling any better?”

I nodded, and Violet barreled through.

“This is horrible,” she said. “*Unbelievable*! I’m so sorry I wasn’t there to help you.”

Violet’s righteous indignation made me feel appreciated. Hers and Lilac’s and Sage’s and Jay’s reactions were more than I’d ever hoped for. I’d forgotten what it was like to have someone care. There was still that voice in the back of my head that said that they only cared because I was useful to them, but I ignored it. I didn’t want to think bad things. That never helped anyone.

“Where was my brother during the attack?” Violet asked me then, looking around.

“Lilac never left my side,” I said. “In fact, he saved my life.” I felt myself blush at the admission. What was *that* about?

Violet seemed surprised. She arched an eyebrow. “My brother saved you? *My* brother? Lilac? How?”

Lilac cleared his throat loudly. “She could sound less shocked.”

I snorted. Before I could pass that on, though, Violet sat down next to me and squeezed my hand. “I want you to know that I will make sure nothing like this happens again. Nobody will hurt you here. I have your back.”

I internally groaned. It looked like I’d acquired a set of guardian angel twins—one a werewolf and the other a werewolf ghost. I’d never liked the idea of being babysat, had always valued my independence… But there was something reassuring about the idea of them sticking close. Maybe something else I needed to admit, too, was when I needed help.

I’d needed Lilac earlier. If he hadn’t been there, maybe I wouldn’t be now.

“Thanks,” I muttered.

“Also, if you want to leave the pack house, I understand,” Violet told me. “I don’t want you to feel trapped, like you have to stick around. I know what you went through with Bert. I can only imagine…”

Violet’s words made me feel much lighter. They created a sense of trust. I shook my head. “Thank you for that. But really, wherever I go, I’ll still be tethered to Lilac.”

I glanced at the boy, who was staring at me intently.

“As a medium, ghosts will always follow me, so I might as well try and use my skills to help you and your pack friends.” I glanced at Lilac again. “And I guess I’m getting kind of used to having your brother around.”

Violet gave me a look. “Really?” she teased. “And I’ve always thought he was so annoying.”

“Hey!” Lilac said, indignant. “I’m adorable! Everybody knows that!”

I couldn’t help but snort.

“Did my brother just make you laugh?” Violet asked me with a grin.

I cleared my throat awkwardly. “I guess. He has his moments.”

“He does,” Violet admitted. “Miss you, bro.”

Smiling, Lilac nudged me, and I felt his warmth again.

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Violet wandered off to answer a phone call, just as Big Mac returned from her argument with Greyson. “I wanted to check up on you. How are you?”

“Better than before,” I mumbled.

“Have you ever had any of Sabine’s white chocolate mocha? It’s guaranteed to make you feel better,” Big Mac said, sitting down next to me. “I’m not exactly a sweets person myself, but even I like it. She did of course steal my foaming techniques.”

I shook my head. “Thank you. Maybe later.”

Big Mac sighed. “I don’t want to pressure you, Marta. I know that what happened was upsetting…”

“But you need some answers,” I said, finishing the witch’s sentence.

“Yeah,” Big Mac said. “With everything going on, I think it might be helpful for all of us. Can you describe what happened?”

I told Big Mac every detail that I could remember about Artemis’s attack. I focused on the evil look in Artemis’s eyes, how the spirits and white light had appeared, and then, finally, how Lilac had saved me. Telling it again felt almost like it hadn’t happened to me. It felt like such an out-of-body experience, like I’d been the ghost.

Big Mac was most interested in the spirits.

“They’re clearly watching out for you.” She looked intrigued by this notion.

“That’s one way to put it,” I said. “My experience with ghosts hasn’t always been positive.”

“I think what’s happening is that you’re only now coming into your own as a medium,” Big Mac explained. “When you were under Bert’s control, he drained your powers for so long that you never got the chance to fully develop them.”

I frowned. “You think so?”

Big Mac nodded seriously. “I know so. Had he tried to capture you when you were older and more in control, he would never have been able to keep you for so long. A medium’s powers have a lot of potential.”

“I had never thought of it that way before,” I said, trying to process.

“I just realized something, though. What about the revenants?” Big Mac asked.

I blinked, confused. “What about them?”

Big Mac looked thoughtful. “There’s a chance that your power may be what’s bringing them over.”

I was alarmed. “Wait. Are you saying that I’m responsible for the revenants appearing?”

Big Mac pressed her lips together. “If you’re powerful enough to make spirits help you when you’re under attack, you could be powerful enough to draw the revenants to our plane. Your abilities are far stronger than what I had originally guessed.”

I gasped. “Are you saying… Are you saying that I’m putting everyone in this house in danger?”

**Episode 1356**

I whirled around to face a stern-looking Mrs. Smith.

*Shit.*

I was totally caught. *Quick, Cali, think fast!*

“Oh hi! I was just looking for you. To talk.” I smiled at her widely. Then I cursed myself—I was looking for her? What kind of lame excuse was that?

Mrs. Smith seemed to agree with my thoughts. She gave me an unimpressed look. “About what?”

I cleared my throat. “About Greyson. About something that has to do with Greyson. Yes.”

Mrs. Smith arched an eyebrow. “You’re not a very good liar, Cali.”

I sighed deeply, groaning and instantly folding. “Okay, fine. This isn’t about Greyson.”

Mrs. Smith crossed her arms. “Of course not. Why are you here?”

There was no way that I could wiggle my way out of this one. I just didn’t have the skills. Lola was a much better liar. I wished she were here, but she just *had* to go to vampire school just so she could stop trying to eat us all. *Super inconvenient timing!*

Meanwhile, I caved and told Mrs. Smith everything. I showed the ingredients that I’d stolen, and her expression remained blank. I didn’t want all this to blow up in my face—her silence was unnerving, and I started to get a little panicky. *My genius plan is already falling apart.*

“Are you going to tell Big Mac?” I blurted out.

Mrs. Smith gave me a somber look. Then she shook her head. “No.”

I blinked. “What?”

“I’m not going to tell MacKenzie,” Mrs. Smith said. “I’m going to help you.”

I gaped. Were my ears deceiving me? Did she just say that? “What? Really?” I sputtered. “No way.”

Mrs. Smith arched eyebrow. “I assure you, it’s a yes.”

“But… *why*?” I asked. I felt like I was pushing my luck, but I couldn’t help myself.

“MacKenzie has been so wrapped up in Artemis and dark magic and the revenants…” Mrs. Smith pressed her lips together. “I’m concerned for her well-being. She’s getting fixated, and that’s never good for a witch. Things like that can become all-consuming.”

*Tell me about it*, I thought to myself, grumbling. Big Mac was like a dog with a bone! Of course, I didn’t tell her fiancée that. Instead, I said, “I could really use your help. I found all the leaves and roots that I need for the charm, but I’m missing a few things.”

I showed Mrs. Smith the text on my phone, and she started helping me with my search.

As we were looking, Mrs. Smith started talking again. “MacKenzie might be right in her assessment of things, but she’s way too intense about everything. She had it out for Silas for so long—he used to be her fixation—so I worry that she’s replacing him with this new quest. And I’m not sure I want this to be a fight that MacKenzie goes after, so if there’s a charm that could help protect us all, I’m in.”

At the same time, she gave me three different vials with the sand particles required.

“Thank you,” I said. Before I could head toward the door, Mrs. Smith gave me a hug. It was surprising, considering that our last heart-to-heart had been her threatening to kick my ass if I hurt her son. But I understood that. I understood *her*.

“Please be careful, Cali,” Mrs. Smith told me. She nodded toward my phone. “That charm you’ve got there isn’t Fae magic.”

“I promise I’ll be careful,” I said, determined.

When I got back to Marta’s room, I found Artemis asleep on the bed. Rishika was watching over her.

“We should probably let her sleep,” I whispered to Rishika.

She nodded in agreement. “What’s going on with you?” she asked.

I told her all about the spell. She agreed with me instantly.

“I’m going to keep working on this. I have to brew a potion now,” I said. “We can hopefully do the charm first thing in the morning and get it protecting Artemis ASAP.”

Rishika looked wistful. “I really hope it works.”

We spent a long moment staring at each other. My sister was sleeping a couple of feet away, and there were so many things left unsaid between us. But I felt so grateful for Rishika.

“You really care about my sister, don’t you?” I whispered.

Rishika sat down next to Artemis, pushing her hair out of her face. “I really do.”

Rishika’s voice was thick with emotion, and seeing her being so tender with Artemis made my heart swell.

“I’m glad there’s someone else looking out for my sister. Someone I can trust,” I murmured. “You can go get some rest, if you want. I can watch her for a bit, until—”

Rishika shook her head. “I’ll be fine. Go get that potion brewing. And if all goes well, soon Artemis won’t need anyone to watch over her.”

Emboldened, I walked out of the room. It was good to have an ally in Rishika. A *true* ally. Greyson had helped me out, but that was different. I couldn’t help but feel that I received special treatment when it came to him, but at the same time I couldn’t fault him for it. I felt the same way toward him and Xavier.

With those thoughts twisting in my head, I headed downstairs…

Just as Big Mac decided to climb up.

My pockets and bag suddenly felt heavy. I’d literally stolen a bunch of stuff from her, and it was all in my bag right this instant. And Big Mac’s fiancée had helped me do it! It really wasn’t just my fault.

*Oh my god, why is she staring me like that?* I thought wildly. *Is that a normal glare, or an “I know you snatched my stuff” glare? This is way too nerve-wracking!*

Thankfully, all Big Mac said was, “I just want you to know that we’re both on the same side. Despite what you think, I’m not out to hurt your sister. I’m just trying to protect everyone.”

I nodded. I was so nervous, I couldn’t speak. Big Mac walked away, and I moved down the stairs, feeling a little guilty now. For stealing, mostly—not for lying to her.

*Ugh. This is such a mess.*

I was glad to at least find the kitchen dark and empty. I had sort of expected Torin and my dad to be cooking up something, whether that was lasagna or some sort of reality game. I turned on the light over the stove and glanced at the instructions for the charm on my phone.

Now that I thought about it, I did wish that my dad were here to help me. This was actually a lot like cooking. It reminded me more of an actual recipe than a potion. *Oh no…* I’d never been that good at cooking! What if I made a mistake? I remembered what Mrs. Smith had told me—to be careful because I wasn’t using Fae magic. This was witchcraft, and it wasn’t exactly my area of expertise.

At least the house was quiet. I didn’t have anyone bouncing up and down around me and distracting me. Taking a deep breath, I started preparing the mixture. I read and reread the instructions, making sure that everything was correct as I proceeded. I recalled the time I’d tried to help Mrs. Smith on our way to the Lupo Finale and had accidentally ingested those mushrooms. I’d thought that I was losing my mind.

I shuddered at the memory. Not a thing that I should’ve been thinking about while preparing a dangerous potion. *Focus, Cali!*

The kitchen door creaked open, and I jumped in surprise before realizing it was Greyson. In the half-light, his completely naked, muscular body looked like something straight out of a sex dream. He’d taken me by surprise, so I hadn’t been vigilant about keeping my eyes on his face. I looked at him up and down, looked at *everything*. His carved abs, his thick thighs, his thick…

The sight of him was obscene. I got instantly flustered as I fumbled with my phone, clearing my throat. I shouldn’t even have been reacting this way—I had seen him naked before. I had *slept* with him. When would it stop? When would the torture just *end*?

“How come you’re up this late?” Greyson asked, striding toward me, all sly and beautiful. He stopped very close to me, and my hands started shaking. His scent was familiar and intoxicating. What was happening to me? I realized that I hadn’t been alone with him in the dark in a while… Was that the reason why I was feeling like this?

Or was it just me being too exhausted to deny myself everything that I wanted?

“Cali?” Greyson’s voice was smooth and velvety. His eyes were intense, pinned to mine. And then he glanced at my mouth. Just a look, and my hands were shaking.

As I struggled to find an answer for him, I wondered, *Am I going to break the promise I made to myself?*

**Episode 1357**

GREYSON

I could see the look on Cali’s face.

I knew that look. I fucking *adored* that look.

She wanted me.

I smiled at her, moving closer. Even though I knew we weren’t supposed to be together, I could feel the desire oozing out of her in waves, hitting me hard. Her scent was luscious, delicious, and I couldn’t get enough.

I lowered my face to her eye level, watched her squirm. Her sharp exhale of breath hit my jaw, and I felt shivers run down my spine. “You should be in bed,” I murmured.

In *my* bed, I meant. With me, with her legs spread, and with my face between them before I fucked her slowly. That kind of thing.

Of course, I kept those thoughts to myself.

Meanwhile, Cali was fumbling. “I’m—I will be. Going to bed, I mean. In the bed, my bed, in my bedroom, upstairs in my bedroom. Where it is. *There*. The bed. You know?”

She cringed at herself, and I just wanted to grab her and kiss her and swallow her down whole.

“Okay!” she squeaked and tried to move away from me. She stumbled, and of course she had to steady herself by placing a hand on my chest. My bare chest. I inhaled sharply, feeling like I’d been burned by her touch.

From her reaction, from the way she flinched back, I was certain that she felt the same. She was very obviously getting more flustered. It only made my grin wider. Knowing that I could do this to her was such a power trip. No matter how many times we kissed, no matter how many times she tried to distance herself, I loved that I could still make her feel on fire.

And she did the same to me.

Clearing her throat loudly, she quickly turned away. She started stirring whatever she had cooking, and I couldn’t help but stare at her ass. Too bad she wasn’t wearing a skirt. Too bad we were broken up. Because under other circumstances, I would have flipped up that skirt and pushed her right up against this—

“Greyson?”

“Mmm?” I hummed, my gaze snapping up to the back of her head.

“Why in god’s name are you walking around without any clothes?” she asked casually, though I heard the tension in her words.

And I kept on smirking. “I was out on patrol, just coming back to get dressed.” I leaned closer behind her. My mouth hovered at the back of her neck. “Am I distracting you?”

“*No*,” Cali replied huskily. The second she said the word, she flinched back from the pot. “Shit!”

“What?” I asked, frowning.

She turned to face me, scowling. “I burnt my finger on the pan.”

I took her hand gently. “Are you okay?”

Cali nodded, her lower lip jutting out.

I pulled her finger up to my mouth and brushed my lips over it. Her sharp inhale told me everything I wanted to know. “Better?”

Cali swallowed and nodded again.

I stepped closer, feeling victorious. “Maybe I should take a closer look.”

“You think so? I—” Cali backed up against the counter. I moved right along with her, as if she were a magnet, and planted my hands on either side of her, resting them against the wood.

“Greyson…” The way she said my name made me get even closer, until I brushed up against her.

She shuddered but didn’t move away.

Her eyes were half-lidded, her lips parted. She glanced down between us, at my dick poking out and up, pointing at her crudely.

“You should really put some clothes on,” she squeaked.

“Why?” I asked, almost daring her to answer. “I’m always hard around you anyway.”

The sound she let out was music to my ears. I pressed even closer and felt her shudder. Her skin was burning under the fabric, I was certain of it. I was certain that if I touched her right now, she’d melt for me.

“You’re not…”

“I think you’ve trained yourself not to look, Cali,” I whispered in her ear. Her scent was driving me fucking nuts. “But I like it when you do. You can look as much as you like.”

She looked up at me, gasping. Her chest was heaving, every inch of her trembling. “You’re confident,” she choked out, and I smiled.

With my mouth hovering against hers, I said, “You love it.”

I gripped her by the waist, lifting her swiftly onto the countertop. She let out a tiny yelp, grabbing onto my biceps to steady herself. Our faces were at the same level now, so close. I imagined myself cupping the back of her neck and pulling her in. I imagined myself exploring her mouth as she rubbed her hands all over me, all over every inch of me that she couldn’t keep herself from staring at.

“Greyson…” She dug her fingertips into my arms, looking up at me and biting her lip, and the low whine that escaped her throat told me everything I needed to know.

She stared at my lips, and I was certain of what she wanted.

But I couldn’t give in first. She’d broken up with me, so she needed to come to me on her own, and it felt like she would. She was going to give in.

She was going to kiss me. She was going to let me kiss her. If we were lucky, we’d get more out of it, but still—just a kiss would be fucking perfect. Just a kiss would be the perfect start to us being the way we were supposed to be. It would be the perfect start, and then we would go upstairs to that bed—*my* bed—and I’d do to her every single thing that I had missed so fucking much in the time we’d been apart.

I missed her so much it hurt.

She leaned forward, until there was just an inch between our lips—

The boiling pot overflowed.

*Are you fucking* kidding *me?*

Cali leapt off the counter, shaking and flustered. “Oh my god!”

She wiped down the overflow with paper towels, and I stood there, watching her. Panting, almost. I was so frustrated—we’d been so close, and I’d been so sure that she would cross the line she’d set for herself. For god’s sake, why couldn’t we just be together? Leave all the other shit behind us—the revenants, the pack, vampires. Xavier.

Leave it all behind us and just run away together.

“You *really* should put some clothes on,” Cali repeated shakily. Her back was to me, and she was quickly stirring the pot. “You could have been burned.”

I sighed.

The momentum between us was broken.

Gone.

*Fuck.* I was so frustrated.

“What are you even doing cooking so late?” I asked again.

“It’s the charm,” she replied. “I’m preparing it so it will be ready in the morning.”

And now, all Cali could think about was her sister.

I couldn’t blame her, but still. “I know you love Artemis,” I said, “but there’s something wrong here. We can’t ignore what just happened, and you need to be prepared for the possibility that the charm might not work.”

She faced me, clearly frustrated. “Well, you already said that I can try the charm. Maybe it *will* work.”

I took a deep breath. “You need to be prepared for failure, Cali. And I’m not sure if it’s worth the risk—what if the charm backfires?”

“It won’t,” she said stubbornly.

“How can you be sure about that?” I asked.

She shook her head slowly. Then, in a quiet voice, she said, “I fucking hate this.”

“I know. I know you don’t want to admit failure, and I don’t either. But whatever has taken hold of Artemis could come back, charm or no charm.”

Cali had fallen silent. She looked at the floor.

“It’s clearly trying to take her back,” I continued, “We don’t know who or what our enemy is. Do you get that?”

She nodded.

“And we can’t let anyone get hurt. I’m the Alpha, and you…” I inhaled sharply. “I know you’d hate yourself if you were the reason why someone from our pack was harmed.”

She nodded again, sniffling. “I know. I should apologize to Marta. What happened to her was horrible, dark magic or not.”

She looked so sad and confused that tenderness overwhelmed me. I would’ve done anything to help Cali. To keep her safe.

Sighing, I stepped closer and caressed her face. “I know this is hard for you. You’re not a witch, and the charm might not work. Maybe Big Mac—”

“I still can’t trust her with Artemis,” Cali interrupted. “Not right now.”

“But only a witch could…” I paused, a new thought hitting me.

“What?” Cali asked, looking up at me. “I know that look. Do you have an idea?”

I stared down at her. “Why don’t we take Artemis to the three witches?”

**Episode 1358**

XAVIER

Kira’s grip on my arm was surprisingly strong, and even through my shirt I could feel that her hands were icy cold with fear.

I put my hand over hers. “Just relax, okay?” I growled, keeping my voice low.

I followed Kira’s wide eyes over to Garren. He was big—bigger than I’d expected—and powerfully built. He was wearing a slim-cut blue button-down, and his back was wide as a brick wall. As he turned to look out over the crowded club, I could see that there was a mean, menacing look in his small eyes. It wasn’t directed at anyone—yet, but he looked like the type of wolf that couldn’t wait to pick a fight with the first person to meet his eyeline. I’d seen my share of dangerous bastards, and I could tell from first glance that I’d need to be smart about this.

The club was crowded with supernaturals, and I watched as Garren pushed through them to the bar, where he picked up another drink. I didn’t even see him ask for it—the bartender just had it ready when he walked over. *Talk about a power move*. I watched the guy carefully, strategically, like a lion would stalk its prey. I was waiting for Garren to show me more than he intended—his strengths, his weaknesses—anything that would give me an edge if—or *when*—it came to a fight. Garren was certainly going to be a tough-as-fuck fight—nothing I couldn’t handle, but I didn’t want to rush into anything unprepared. I’d been a mercenary for a long time, and that wasn’t because I’d made a habit of bumbling into situations without first assessing the risks. I smirked to myself thinking about how Gabriel would call me crazy for overthinking the situation, and how I should just take the first bottle I saw and smash it right over his head and get this over with.

So it surprised me when Kira leaned over and hissed in my ear. “What are you waiting for?”

I looked over at her face, which was tense and angry and very close to mine. “Relax,” I said. “What’s your hurry?”

Her drawn face went pale. “My husband is dead, and that is the man who murdered him. I thought I made myself clear—I’m here for revenge, Xavier. And I do not intend to wait five more seconds for it.”

“And *I* want to make my move when the time is right. So that’s exactly what I’m going to do. You said you wanted my help, so follow my lead.” I wasn’t about to blow our perfect opportunity because little miss widow was getting antsy.

“That is *not* what we agreed on. You said that you were going to help me get revenge, not a bunch of bullshit about timing—” Kira started, but we both looked over when we heard a shout from the other side of the club.

“*Hey!* What the fuck is your problem, asshole?” Garren was looking down at a wet stain spreading across his shirt.

Next to him, a vampire holding an empty glass shrugged dismissively. “Watch where you’re standing, man. Now you owe me a drink,” he said, turning away.

This was the wrong response.

Garren stepped forward and shoved the vampire hard in the back, sending him stumbling forward. “I owe you *what*, now?”

The vampire turned around, fangs bared. The club had gone quiet. The music still pumped, but all other conversation had died. And there were men from all corners of the club moving through the crowd toward the confrontation. The guys were rough and mean-looking—not pale enough to be vampires, so I could only assume they were Blood Moon members—part of Garren’s crew.

“I think you owe me an apology, fangs,” Garren snarled. He stepped toward the vampire, and even from a distance I could see a dangerous glint in his eyes. “And I’m going to get it.”

“Don’t hold your fucking breath, dog-boy,” the vampire spat.

Garren’s reaction time was lightning-quick—he was on that vampire faster than my eyes could follow, arms around his neck, dragging him to the floor.

Grudgingly, I had to admit that I was impressed. Garren could handle himself. I glanced over at Kira, who was frozen with fear. Her eyes were wider than ever, and she looked like a rabbit caught in the headlights of a semi-truck. I didn’t mean to, exactly, but I started to laugh.

Kira looked at me, her eyes wild and angry. “Why are you *laughing*?”

“I just don’t know why you look so shocked. What were you expecting? Did you think they were going to exchange insurance information? This is the kind of stuff that goes on with these kinds of guys. You ran with Iñigo’s crew. I’d have thought you’d be used to it.”

Kira didn’t answer. She looked back at Garren and swallowed hard.

I glanced around, trying to read the vibe of the room. “I think we should go,” I murmured.

Kira looked at me, shocked. “*What?* No! He’s *right there*! What are you waiting for?”

I stared back at her. “I’m waiting for you to get a grip. Look around, Kira. This is not the place, or the time. If you want to take him down, it has to be on our terms—not his.”

There was a sharp, collective intake of breath, and we both looked over just in time to see Garren take a sharply carved stake out of his leather motorcycle boot. He gripped it and—quick as a flash—staked the vampire beneath him.

Kira gasped, but she was one of the very few who did. I looked around as the vampire’s dust particles settled on the floor. After a few surprised looks, everyone else in the club turned back to their drinks and their conversations. What had just happened was clearly business as usual around here.

Kira had started to shake. I closed my hand around her arm and started to pull her toward the door. She was turning into a liability. I had made her a promise, but she was *not* ready for this—no matter how much she hated Garren.

In my peripheral vision I saw Garren’s crew walk over to him and pull him to his feet, slapping him on the back, congratulating him.

“See,” I muttered, tipping my chin toward them. “Garren’s not alone. Trying anything here would be a mistake.”

A huge mistake, in fact. Garren was big, but I’d met guys like him before. But taking on his whole gang? That would be exponentially harder.

And I’d made another promise—I’d promised Cali that I was going to return to her safely, and nothing was going to jeopardize that. I’d told Kira that I’d kill Garren, and I would—but only when the time was right.

“Let’s go,” I said, steering Kira toward the door.

“*Kira Boniolo?*”

It was a rough, male voice, and judging by the way Kira froze up, I’d have bet good money that it was Garren who’d called Kira’s name.

“Ignore it,” I whispered. “Just keep moving.”

But I didn’t even think Kira could hear me. She was shaking again, but I couldn’t tell if it was out of fear or rage.

When I turned around, Garren was moving toward us, a smug look in his eyes that only partly masked the anger there.

“Hey, Kira,” he said. “You trying to ignore me?”

*Fuck*. This was *exactly* the kind of scenario I’d been trying to avoid.

Next to me, Kira took a deep breath and turned around to face him.

Garren stopped and stood in front of her—too close—towering over her. “I thought that was you. Where you goin’ so soon?” he asked, arching an eyebrow. “How ‘bout I buy you a drink first? We can talk about the good ol’ days.”

Kira didn’t answer.

I kept one eye on Garren but looked around at the other Blood Moons, all of whom seemed to be watching from the bar, smiling like they were watching something funny.

Garren took a step back and looked Kira up and down. “What are you doing here, Kira?” He paused for a moment, his brow furrowing slightly as a deep chuckle rumbled through him. “Don’t tell me you came here to avenge that husband of yours?” He laughed, cold and harsh. “You can’t even talk to me. What were you planning on doing?”

I’d had enough of this. I reached for Kira’s arm. “Let’s go.”

This brought Garren’s attention to me. His lizard-green eyes slid toward me, apparently seeing me for the first time, and he spent a moment sizing me up. “Who’s your friend?” he asked, turning his attention back to Kira.

She still didn’t speak, and the tension in the air grew thick as the question hung between them.

Garren took a step toward her, closing the gap between them. “You scared, Kira? You bring a bodyguard with you?”

Instinctively I stepped in front of Kira, keeping Garren from getting any closer.

His mouth twisted angrily. “And who the fuck are you?”

I shrugged casually. “Like you said, man—I’m just a friend.”

Anger flashed through Garren’s tiny eyes. “Well fuck you, *friend*.”

Because I knew it would piss him off, I smiled. *So much for waiting for the right moment*. I was braced for this fight, my hands already clenched into fists, my jaw tightening. Then I tipped my chin toward the bar, where his crew was sitting, watching us. “You should go back to the bar, man, while you still have the chance.”

**Episode 1359**

CHARLIE

Heart pounding, I leapt to my feet and looked around in the darkness.

Instinctively, I reached beneath my mattress and grabbed the stake my parents had given me. I’d stashed it there for easy access as soon as I’d arrived, and now I was glad I had. My blood hammered through my veins, my heart thumped hard, and even my skin seemed to tingle—my whole body felt alive. I was both scared and excited as Zachery and I were hustled out into the night air, like the hunter side of me was taking over.

“What’s going on?” Zachery asked nervously. He was looking around, his expression tense, trying to pull on his socks and shoes at the same time. I hadn’t bothered with either.

“There’s been a vampire attack!” someone called.

I looked over to see who’d said it, but it was too dark and too crowded to see.

“How many?” someone else asked.

“One, or a coven?”

“How many? Who knows how many?” someone asked, sounding frantic.

“I gotta be real here, man,” Zachery said, looking over at me, “I’m super scared right now. I thought we’d be, like, getting a lot more training before we started to actually hunt vampires.”

I swallowed, remembering how sick to my stomach I’d felt going into my first fight. “Stay close,” I said. “I’ll help you. Vampires aren’t that tough. There’s probably more of us than there are of them. We can take ‘em.”

Zachery nodded, clearly grateful, and we followed the flow of people toward the center quad, where we joined a large group of milling, nervous campers.

I looked around. Who the hell was in charge here? Where was Sergeant Pepperdine?

Just then, a deep voice cut through the chaos. “Shut up, you little shits.”

A tall guy stepped onto a low boundary wall, making him seem even taller than he was. He was massive—built like a defensive lineman—and he held a flaming torch in one hand and a sharp stake in the other. He looked out over the crowd for a moment. “Right, now that the runts have quieted down… I’m Chad, and some of you might recognize me. I’m in the advanced hunting class. Now!” He glared out at us. “Who’s ready to stake their first vamp? Who’s ready to pop their cherry?”

There was a low, nervous response to this.

Chad narrowed his eyes. He held his hand up to his ear. “I can’t hear you!”

Our group gave a louder “*Let’s do this!*” in response.

Chad held up the torch and cheered, which set off the group. I looked around in confusion. This was a really weird way to start hunting vampires. We shouldn’t have been making this much noise. My parents had taught me it was best to stay low and quiet, sneak up on your target before they could get the upper hand. Something about this felt wrong.

Suspicious now, I tipped my head back and let my wolf senses out for just a second as I sniffed the cold night air.

“What are you doing?” Zachery asked.

“I don’t smell any vampires,” I murmured, speaking mostly to myself.

Zachery frowned. “What do you mean, *smell* vampires?”

*Shit*. *Way to go, Charlie. Hunters don’t have super smelling powers, do they?* “Uh, nothing. I just meant, I’ve heard vampires can smell like death… sometimes,” I covered quickly. “If the wind is right, or something.”

“Really?” Zachery looked interested in this. He leaned back to smell the air. “I don’t smell anything either.” Then he frowned again. “But I don’t know that I’d recognize death if I smelled it. What exactly does death smell like? Are we talking gym sneakers you left in a locker over the summer, bad?”

“Don’t worry about it,” I muttered. I didn’t want to keep talking about it, terrified that I might keep giving myself away.

Luckily, a sharp whistle blast from Chad distracted Zachery.

“You’re going to be broken up into groups and sent out to canvas the campground,” Chad said. “If you come across a vampire, blow your whistle and everyone will come to help you. Do not engage the vampires yourselves. Let me repeat for the slow ones in the group—*don’t engage the vampires*. Wait until we have the bloodsucker surrounded. Everyone hear me?”

Everyone nodded and called back “*Yes!*” but I just stared at him—and his whistle—dumbfounded. What the hell kind of hunting was this?

Zachery and I were pushed over into a group that was covering the south part of the camp, and, after we were handed our safety whistles, we trudged through the darkness in that direction. As we walked, I thought back to what my parents had taught me about hunting. The key element to success—and staying alive—in hunting vampires was the element of surprise. Even if we managed to completely surround the vampire—and that was provided there was really only one out there—we’d lost that surprise a good while back.

I turned sharply as I heard a group of campers burst out laughing. Were they insane? Didn’t they know how dangerous vampires were? How bloodthirsty and merciless? This wasn’t an adventure. But that was what it felt like. Like we were having a vampire hunting party.

With whistles.

None of this made any sense.

As we trudged closer to our assigned spots, I wondered what my parents would make of all this.

Our group branched off when we reached the southern end of the campground.

“You two take that area,” a girl told us, pointing to the darkest part of the woods.

I rolled my eyes. “Fine.” Gazing into the trees, I shook my head. “There’s nothing in there. I don’t see anything.”

Zachery eyed me. “Of course you don’t. It’s pitch-back in there.”

*Crap*. Zachery wasn’t a werewolf. He couldn’t see in the dark like I could.

“Right, well… in that case…” I said quickly. “We’d better go check it out.”

“Hang on, Charlie,” Zachery said, laying a hand on my arm. “Do you mind waiting a second? I have to…”

“What?” I asked, staring at him in confusion.

“You know…” Zachery danced a little, clearly uncomfortable.

“You have to *piss*?” I asked. “*Now?*”

“I can’t help it,” Zachery said, sounding desperate. “I always have to pee when I get nervous. Will you just hang on a second?”

I stifled a sigh and managed not to roll my eyes. “Yeah, fine. Go ahead.”

Zachery looked even more uncomfortable. “I can’t go with someone watching me.”

I gritted my teeth. “I’ll just go wait over there, then, okay?” I asked, tipping my chin toward a large oak tree.

Away from Zachery, I looked hard into the trees, trying to penetrate the darkness, searching for movement, but I didn’t see anything. My instincts told me that there just weren’t any vampires around. I didn’t see anything, smell anything, or hear anything. Every time I’d been around them before, I’d been able to *feel* them, somehow—like I’d been alerted to their presence by something inside me. A tingle on the back of my neck. But now, there was nothing. Now, there was just the smell of the forest at night, the feel of the wind on my neck, and the sound of my roommate pissing against a tree twenty yards away.

I leaned my head back with a sigh and looked up at the clear night sky. I missed Violet. *So much*. I wondered where she was and what she was doing. I wondered if she was thinking about me. If she was missing me. Zachery was a perfectly nice guy, but—nervous peeing aside—he wasn’t exactly what I wanted in a hunting partner. Violet, on the other hand… She and I made one badass team. She’d been right there at my side when we’d been attacked by that mess of vampires at Bert’s house. She’d had my back at every moment. Vampire hunting was scary as hell, but I always felt safe when I was with her.

A piercing whistle cut into my thoughts, and I spun around. It took a moment for my mind to catch up, but when it did, I realized that the whistle was coming from where I’d left Zachery.

Without a moment of hesitation, I sprinted through the trees, all senses on high alert. I started to shift before I even realized what I was doing. *Shit.* I could *not* do that. Even in this dire situation. I took a deep breath—it was hard as hell to stop the shift when adrenaline was pounding through my bloodstream—but I managed to reverse it before I ripped the seams on all my clothes. I *had* to keep it together.

I ripped my stake from the waistband of my jeans and gripped it tight. As I got closer, Zachery came into view. He was backed up against the tree where I’d left him, his pants still undone—though thankfully pulled up—and his whistle in his mouth. His eyes were wide, and his face was white with fear, and he was blowing as hard as he could, though it looked like the effort was costing him everything. Just in front of him was a dark clothed figure, and it was moving steadily toward him.

A vampire.

I gripped my weapon harder and leapt toward the vamp with a snarl, raising the stake to strike.

**Episode 1360**

I stood in the kitchen, alone once more. I’d sent Greyson off, telling him I was going to try to help Artemis without involving any more witches if I could help it.

But now I was finding it hard to think straight. I gripped the counter, breathing heavily. I couldn’t believe how I’d let Greyson get to me. I mean, in fairness to myself, he had just strolled in here naked, so it wasn’t like I’d really had a chance to respond in a rational fashion. It wasn’t totally surprising that I’d pretty much tossed my resolve to keep away from him out the window.

I sighed, feeling hot all over again just thinking of how close he’d been standing, and how tempted I’d been. I could still feel the pressure of where his hands had rested on my hips, where he had pressed himself against me…

I took a deep breath, trying to keep it together as heat pooled in my core all over again. This was getting me nowhere. *Due destini* seemed to be out in full force tonight—and it wasn’t doing me any favors. The last thing I needed right now was to be reminded that I couldn’t be with either Greyson *or* Xavier. I couldn’t risk hurting either of them. Or worse, killing them.

I closed my eyes, the terror of the idea shivering through me. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if anything happened to either of them.

But… I still wished there were a way through this. *Somehow*.

Maybe Greyson’s idea had been a good one. Maybe if we went to the three witches about Artemis, we could ask them about *due destini*, too. Greyson had gone to them about it before. But they were still witches…

So, yeah, maybe that wasn’t ideal. And definitely not fair. But how was it any fairer for me to keep pushing him away? Or Xavier? Ugh, this was a mess that I couldn’t see a way out of.

I turned back to the stove with an irritated huff and stirred the pot. Nothing about any of this was fair, but I couldn’t think about it anymore. Not now, anyway. I had to focus on my sister.

The viscous liquid in the pot was still boiling, but more slowly now. I’d added everything on Kira’s list. I stirred it four times clockwise, then four times counterclockwise, counting aloud the way she’d instructed. I ground the last of the wormwood with a pestle and sprinkled it in, then stirred again.

I looked down, biting my lip nervously. Was that right? What would happen if I made it wrong?

No, I couldn’t think like that. I had done everything right, following Kira’s instructions carefully. It was fine. It was a thick grey mass, just like Kira said it should be. I picked up my phone and checked the message from Xavier again.

*Kira says it’s meant to be ingested at the same time every day until the threat passes.*

So… what? A spoonful of this sludge in Artemis’s morning white chocolate mocha from now until the zombie apocalypse?

I sighed heavily. Why couldn’t *any* of this be easy?

Flipping off the burner, I searched through the cupboards for a plastic container, then I carefully poured the potion into it without spilling a drop. I wrote “DO NOT EAT!!!” on a sticky note and popped the container into the fridge. Then I rinsed the pot and dropped it into the bottom rack of the dishwasher before I headed upstairs.

My eyes lingered on Greyson’s door longer than they should have, and I felt a flutter of butterflies in my stomach. Heat rushed to my cheeks as I slowed my gait. It would’ve been so easy to knock on his door, to just slip into his bed. Not even to do anything. Just to have him close, lie near each other. To comfort each other.

Desire twanged within me like a guitar string, and I shook my head. Who the hell was I kidding? The man was built like a Greek god. What I wanted from him was much more than comfort.

So I turned decisively away and walked to my own room, shutting the door behind me and flipping the lock. Yes. Good. This was what I needed. Distance. Physical, actual distance. No leaving this room to go to his room. *Control yourself, Cali!* But no amount of internal screaming was dampening the need growing within me.

Face washed, teeth brushed, in pajamas, I slipped into bed, but my head spun. I squeezed my eyes shut, but still sleep felt so far away. I just had too much on my mind—Artemis, dark magic, Greyson, *due* *destini*, Xavier’s safety—it was all just too much to shut down, and my thoughts spun like a merry-go-round.

I took a deep breath, then another, trying to remember everything I’d ever half-learned from those YouTube yoga tutorials Lola used to make me watch. I tried quieting my body, one limb at a time. I unclenched my jaw, unfisted my hands. And slowly, slowly, *slowly*, I found myself drifting off to sleep.

But when I opened my eyes, I wasn’t in bed. I was back in the kitchen, in front of the stove, stirring the pot again. I stared down at it, confused. What the hell?

I looked around. It was still night, and the kitchen was dark, lit only by the recessed lighting above the back door. I turned back to the pot, trying to work out how I’d ended up back here. I’d finished this. I’d put the sludge in the fridge… Hadn’t I? Did I just drift off in the midst of stirring? I’d done stupider things before…

The sound of footsteps behind me interrupted my confusion. I knew it was Greyson before he laid a hand on me. I could just sense him in the way my body reacted. He leaned down, breathing me in for a half a moment before he dropped a feather-soft kiss onto my neck.

Shivering with pleasure, I leaned into him, then away. I spun around, the wooden spoon clutched in my hand. “Don’t distract me! I want to get this batch done for tomorrow.”

Greyson looked over my shoulder into the pot. “Looks like it’s finished to me.” The corners of his mouth quirked up in a smile, and he sidled closer. “Come on, babe. The kids are asleep.”

There was something about the familiar hunger in his eyes that made me weak in the knees. I pressed my lips together, trying to look stern—trying to resist, even as I let him pull me closer.

“Even after the fudge is done, I still have lunches to pack,” I said. “So I’ve got a lot to finish…”

Greyson was nodding along, as though he was really listening, but his hands were roaming downward, slipping inside my silky pajama shorts and skimming the lacy top of my panties, making me tongue-tied. He grinned. “What were you saying?”  
 My head was spinning. Hell if I knew what I had been saying, hell if I cared.

He smiled wider as he dipped his hand into my panties, his finger slipping into me, making me gasp.

Greyson bent and covered my mouth with his, his kiss hot and hungry. The pot forgotten, my wooden spoon clattered the floor as I reached for him, threading my fingers into his hair, pulling him closer and kissing him back, opening my mouth and letting his tongue enter me, control me.

With a flick of his fingers, my shorts and panties fell to the floor. He slipped his hands under my ass and lifted me onto the counter. I opened my legs, and he drove into me. My scream of pleasure was lost against his mouth, but I wrapped my legs around his back and pulled him closer, driving him in deeper.

This was all the encouragement he seemed to need, and he pounded harder, his whole body tense with the effort of it. The kids were asleep, so I couldn’t scream, so I kept my mouth on his, breathing into him, *moaning* into him. His back became slick with sweat as I dug in my fingernails. I was getting closer, the fire building fast and hot inside me.

I had to breathe, so I threw my head back, anchoring my arms on the counter behind me. “Oh, Greyson, I’m coming! Oh, YES! Greyson! Harder!” I was there. I was a volcano, ready to erupt, panting and begging for more. “Yes, please! *Harder*!”

I jolted awake, panting, hot, and embarrassingly still aching between my thighs. I wasn’t in the kitchen, but I wasn’t in my bed, either. I looked around, confused and disoriented. Where the hell was I?

It was dark, and I put my hands out, trying to orient myself. Then it hit me: I was in the hallway, and somehow, I’d ended up right in front of Greyson’s bedroom door.

**Episode 1361**

XAVIER

Garren sized me up, probably hoping I’d crack under his gaze and look away. But he was doomed to disappointment there. I’d met more Garrrens in my life than I could count, and when shit had gone down, things had always ended in my favor. In my experience, guys like Garren were all the same. I hadn’t come into this place looking to add another notch to my belt, but if Garren wanted to go there, I was happy to oblige.

Next to me, I could feel that Kira was still holding her ground. She hadn’t charged anyone, which was good, but I could see her trembling out of the corner of my eye. She was raw emotion now. I knew what that felt like, but she had to keep it together. Or at the very least channel it into something that would turn this standoff in our favor.

This whole situation was a mess, but I was already in it, so I had to see it through. Cracking my knuckles, I flicked my gaze up and down Garren. “So, what’s it going to be, man? Are you going to do the smart thing and go back to your friends and your little venom party, or do you really want to start something?”

Garren laughed, the sound harsh as a knife against steel. “You’d better ask yourself the same question, friend. You want to start something with *me*, you’re going to start it with the entire Blood Moon.” He raised his eyebrows. “Which I would *not* recommend.”

I had to admit, he was probably right. But I kept that to myself.

Garren turned his mean little eyes on Kira. “You shouldn’t have come here, witch. Your husband was no match for me. Why the hell would you think that you are?”

This taunt seemed to spark something in Kira, and she took a step toward the massive man, her eyes narrowing dangerously.

But I put my arm out to stop her. “I told you,” I muttered through gritted teeth. “Not here.”

Garren glanced at me, then back at Kira with a malicious grin. “You should listen to your new boy toy, Kira. He’s smarter than he looks. And a werewolf, too.” He made an approving noise. “Finally moving up in the world, are you? Smart. It took you long enough, but it’s good that you’ve finally recognized the superiority of werewolves. Thought you were a lifelong graverobber there, that you’d just spend your time wallowing in the dark with those gross vampires you seem to prefer banging. You should thank me for killing Geoff when I did. Looks like it didn’t take you too much time to move on from him—"

Kira shoved my arm away and stepped toward Garren, standing tall to get up into his face. “You shut your fucking mouth.”

Garren only barked out a harsh laugh in response as Kira fumed.

I rolled my eyes as I pulled Kira back, frustrated as hell. What the fuck did this witch think she was doing? She’d asked for my help and now she was refusing to listen to anything I said. I glanced around the club, unsurprised to see that we definitely had a few people eyeing us. My mercenary training took over, and I did a lightning-quick risk assessment. There were a couple of older guys who looked so spaced out I figured they were just here for the venom and were probably no threat. There was another table of women in cocktail dresses who were looking on with interest—though, as I looked over at them, I realized they were actually just looking at *me* with interest. They were no threat either, though I’d probably have to dodge them on the way out. And then there were the guys at the bar who I’d already seen with Garren—four of them—and another five rough-looking dudes around the perimeter of the club who I’d have bet my life were Blood Moon. I quickly took in the dimensions of the space, calculating the distance between us and the door, and the number of people who stood in the way.

I wasn’t loving these odds. Even if every Blood Moon in the place surged, I was reasonably sure I could get out of here alive. But I wasn’t so sure about Kira. I barely knew the woman, but I could already tell she wasn’t great at listening to instructions.

*To be fair, the dig about her dead husband would be enough to set anyone off*, I thought. *If that punkass wolf mentioned my mate in the same way, I’d have snapped his neck by now.*

“So why did you come?” Garren asked, looking down at Kira with something like curiosity.

“I’m here because it’s time to do away with *scum* like you,” Kira spat, fury radiating from her.

Garren’s eyes went wide. “*Scum?*” he asked, his laugh more like a bark now. “Oh that’s hysterical. Everyone gather ‘round, the little healer is gonna take on the big, bad wolf.”

Kira shoved his shoulder, making the massive man stumble back a step. “You live this disgusting lifestyle because of vampires. You’re hooked on them—can’t you see that? You’re obsessed with the very thing you hate—”

Garren’s face flushed with anger, and his eyes narrowed. “You listen here, witch—”

I stepped forward and put a hand on Garren’s chest, holding him back as he tried to take a step forward. “Stay right where you are,” I snarled. “Don’t take another step.”

Garren turned his gaze back to me. “What’s your deal, man? What’s a werewolf like you doing with *her*?” He gestured at Kira. “You know she was some vampire’s witch, right? You’re a *werewolf*. You shouldn’t be a bodyguard for someone like her.”

“Watch it,” I growled.

“Wolves and witches, not a great mix. Leave ‘em to the vamps, I say,” Garren went on, like he hadn’t even heard me. “You seem like a wolf who knows his way around a fight. I could use someone like you in my crew. Drop the dead weight, friend, or you’ll end up dead with her.”

I snorted in disbelief. “I’d shut up if I were you, mongrel.”

Garren’s eyes grew cold in a millisecond. “What’d you say to me?”

I shook my head, disgusted. “You heard me. I’ve heard of venom rage before—is that what’s happening to you? If so, I’d watch your step. You might try to bite off more than you can chew. You don’t want to find yourself in over your head, do you?”

Garren’s nostrils flared with rage, and he pushed Kira aside, making her stumble as he stepped close to me, getting right in my face. “What’d you say to me, asshole?”

“You got a hearing problem, man?” I asked, looking into Garren’s eyes. His pupils were dilated—his green irises were nothing but thin rings around the black holes of his pupils. He was high as a kite. And it was a venom high, which made him doubly unstable. He was full of shit, but I still needed to be careful. There was no telling what he was going to do—or what he was capable of.

I glanced over at Kira, who was looking back and forth between us, her face pale with fright. I had to get her out of here.

“You talk too much, friend,” Garren said, stepping even closer to me.

I shrugged. “Bad habit. But I’ll say this—you touch Kira one more time, and this will be the last word you ever hear from me, or anyone else: *back off*.”

Garren looked at me, confused for a moment. “That’s two words, genius.”

I smirked. “Consider it a bonus.”

I reached out for Kira’s arm and turned toward the door, towing the witch behind me.

“Who the hell are you, anyway?” Garren called after me.

“Doesn’t matter,” I answered without turning around.

“Don’t ever come into my territory again,” Garren shouted as I reached the door.

I flipped him off as I pulled the door open and tugged Kira outside.

“Kira!” Garren called, stepping after us. “I did you a favor, killing your loser husband! You should *thank* me for it!”

The door shut before he could say anything else.

Kira rounded on me, breathing hard, her eyes burning with anger. “What are you doing?”

“Saving your damn life. Again. What do you think?”

“But he was *right there*. I could have had him. We could have taken him.”

I sighed. “Kira, forget it. He was just trying to bait us—and I’m not stupid enough to fall for it.” I gave her a hard look. “I hope you’re not, either. He had us outnumbered in there. We would have been fighting right in his own damn territory and been torn to shreds. When we take him, we’re taking him on our terms.”

She didn’t answer, just continued to glare at me. I looked away, shaking my head. I ran my hands through my hair as I walked into the street, looking down the empty road, thinking hard about our next step.

But I spun around when I heard the club’s heavy door open, just in time to see Kira slip back inside.

So much for fighting Garren on our terms.

**Episode 1362**

GREYSON

I was sitting up in bed, going over the dream again for what felt like the hundredth time. The dim kitchen, the wooden spoon clattering to the floor, the kids asleep upstairs, and Cali. Cali on the counter, kissing me, her legs wrapped around me.

Running a hand through my hair, I let out a frustrated sigh. It had been a good dream—so good my body was reacting to it all over again—but it was still just a dream. Though… I couldn’t help but wonder if Cali’d had the same dream. It had happened a few times before, these shared dreams we’d had. It would have been a pretty spectacular dream to share, but I’d have preferred the reality any day.

The dream hadn’t come as a big surprise. That moment between us in the kitchen had been pretty charged. Everything between us these days seemed to be at a boiling point. At least from my perspective. And I’d gone to sleep as frustrated as ever, wondering—as I always did—why Cali and I couldn’t just be together. It seemed like the easiest, simplest, most natural thing in the world. The two of us, building a life together, riding off into the sunset, complete with all the other clichés I could think of.

I dropped my head into my hands. I knew the answer, and there was nothing easy, simple, or natural about it.

I looked up warily when I heard shuffling outside my door. There had been a lot of strange stuff going on at the pack house. I stood up, yanking the sheet off my bed and wrapping it around myself before opening the door.

“Cali?”

Talk about dreams coming true.

She looked back at me, appearing pretty confused herself. She was clad in a tight tank top and a pair of snug pajama shorts, her dark hair in a messy bun, and I didn’t know if I’d ever seen her look sexier than she did in that moment.

My traitorous thoughts went to the dream and the way those legs of hers had been wrapped around me, pulling me deeper into…

I cleared my throat and gave my head a firm shake, trying to focus. “Is everything okay? Is something going on? What are you doing here?”

“Um…” Cali started, frowning in confusion. She looked around, like she was trying to figure out where she was. “I don’t really know,” she finally admitted. “I had a dream, and I woke up here. I think I might have been sleep walking?”

A dream? The same one? Had I guessed right that we were still linked through these visions? Then I opened my door a little wider. “Do you want to come in?”

Cali hesitated. She looked past me, into the darkness of my room. “Do you think that’s a good idea?”

“Probably not,” I admitted. “But it’s got to be better than standing in the hall.”

Cali nodded. “Okay.” She looked up at me. “But nothing’s going to happen.”

As much as I wished otherwise, I knew she had a point. I nodded in agreement.

When she walked into the room, I let my eyes roam downward, admiring the view of her from behind. This woman did not have a bad angle.

She stepped into the dim room and stood awkwardly in the middle of the floor. “Did you happen to have a dream just now?” she asked, crossing her arms over her chest. “About us? In the—um—kitchen?”

So she *had* had the same dream. I nodded. “Yeah, I did.”

I didn’t know why this was happening, but it seemed that there was nothing I could do to stop myself from growing closer to this woman. My mate. No matter what, our connection just sought me out.

Even in the darkness I could see that Cali was blushing. She shook her head as she looked out the window, looking frustrated. “Why the hell does this keep happening? These damn dreams… Why are we being tortured like this?” She looked back at me. “It felt so real, didn’t it?”

There was so much sadness in her eyes, it broke my heart. I stepped toward her and touched her chin with my fingertip. “It was just a dream, Cali. Don’t let it mess with your head. Even if it felt real, it wasn’t. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. You know neither one of us is responsible for it. And I… we…”

The dream hadn’t been real—even if I wanted it to be.

Cali looked at me sharply. “What?”

“Nevermind.”

She narrowed her eyes. “It looks like you want to say something.”

*Dammit.* She was too good at reading me. I was going to have to do something about that. I exhaled a gusty sigh. “I was just thinking…”

“About what?” she asked.  
 *About how badly I want to kiss you, Cali*, I thought. *How badly I want to pick you up and throw you onto my bed and get you so twisted up in my sheets you’ll never get away. About how badly I want to rip off your clothes and kiss every inch of your skin until you’re panting for breath.*

Cali gasped, and her eyes widened.

*Shit. Did I just mind link that to her?*

Her cheeks were flaming, so I guessed that I had.

I nodded down at the sheet I’d wrapped around my waist. “At least I covered myself this time.”

Cali smiled, but the smile was sad and tired.

I took her hand. “I know how hard this is for you, Cali. It’s hard for both of us. I do wish that dream were real—just like I wish all of them were. I want to build that life with you so damn bad. But I understand that you have a lot of mixed feelings about everything. Of course I understand. I just wish… I don’t know. I wish there were something I could do or say to make things better for you.”

Cali was quiet for a moment. The night was quiet around us, and the darkness seemed close, like it was pressing in from all sides. She looked at up me, her dark eyes sparkling with tears. When she blinked, the tears traced down her cheeks.

“I can’t do this anymore,” she whispered, shaking her head.

My stomach clenched painfully. “You can’t do what, Cali?” I asked, though part of me was terrified of her answer.

She looked up at me again. “I can’t stay away from you, Greyson.”

And she pressed up on tiptoe to kiss me.

Her kiss was whisper soft. Tentative, like she was asking permission, which I supposed I understood. She’d been so certain that she wanted space, and—as excruciating as it had been—I’d been willing to give it to her. But now, with her here, in my room, in my arms, I was ready for more.

So I wrapped my arms around her and drew her closer, pressing our bodies together. I pressed my tongue to her mouth, and her soft lips parted, ready for me. She opened herself to me and I entered, claiming her.

*Mine*, my heart thumped. *Mine, mine, mine…*

She was ready for me, eager and willing, and I was completely intoxicated by her. It had been so long since we had been together, and every nerve in my body was screaming for her. I laced my hand into her messy hair, grasping tight as I pulled her close. I pulled her head back so I could kiss my way down her neck, and she moaned with pleasure. I bit her ear a little harder than I should have, and she sucked in a breath, but her fingernails dug into my bare back and she whispered, “*Yes*,” so I growled into her ear and bit again.

“I hope you’re not partial to these clothes,” I snarled, “because they’re not making it through the night.”

“Take whatever you want,” she said breathlessly.

Every cell in my body burned like fire at her words. “What are you fucking doing to me, Cali?” I murmured, dropping my head to her shoulder.

“I know exactly what I’m doing to you,” she said, and I thought I could hear a smile in her voice.

I looked down at her, at this woman in my arms, her face so beautiful in the shadows of my dim bedroom that my heart felt like it might burst.

“Do you know what the worst thing is?” I asked.

She looked up at me. “What?” she asked, the word nothing more than a breath.

“The worst thing is not being near you, Cali.”

All traces of a smile left her face, and her eyes widened. “I know,” she whispered. “And I can’t stand not being near you either, Greyson. So take me to your bed.”

My heart pounded so hard I thought my ribs might crack. I would have moved a mountain in that moment if she’d asked me to, but I wanted to be certain. She had been so adamant that we remain apart, so she couldn’t hurt me or Xavier. I knew she wasn’t casting aside that choice on a whim. I had to be certain. I took a deep breath and asked, “Are you sure you want to do this?”

**Episode 1363**

CHARLIE

I dove for the bloodsucker and knocked them straight to the soggy, leaf-strewn ground, landing hard on top of them. My heart felt like it was going to pound out of my chest as I raised the stake, but just as I was about to drive it straight through the vampire’s heart, I heard a tiny squeak.

“Stop! Please! *Stop!*”

I hesitated, confused. The vampire’s eyes were wide and—*hang on*… There were fangs lying in a pile of soggy brown leaves beside us.

I frowned. *What the actual hell?*

Then the vampire spoke, and it was in a voice that shook with fear. “Relax man, I’m not a real vampire. Put down the stake!”

“*What?*” I asked, baffled. I looked around. “What the hell is going on?”

I looked down at the vampire—or, *not* vampire—beneath me. He had dark hair and dark eyes and his skin glittered in the moonlight. Wait a second—vampires didn’t *glitter*. I knew that. And they definitely didn’t have plastic teeth that fell out when they got tackled. And I’d never seen one cry, which this one looked like he was about to do.

“Hey,” Zachery said, stepping away from the tree and looking closer at the guy on the ground. “I know you. You were in my archery class, weren’t you?”

The guy beneath me squinted up at Zachery, then nodded. “Yeah, I think so. Could you tell your friend to uh… not stake me, please?”

I looked up at Zachery in disbelief. “Wait, you *know* this guy?”

But before Zachery could answer, another whistle sounded in the trees behind us and Chad, along with about two dozen other campers, converged on our clearing.

Storming into the clearing, Chad looked around, taking in Zachery first, then his eyes fell on me, still straddling the fake vampire. His eyes widened when he saw the stake in my hand. “What the hell is going on here?”

“This lunatic’s trying to stake me!” the fake-pire squeaked from underneath me.

Chad rounded on me. “I *said*, what the hell is going on here?”

I lowered my stake and glared. “You tell me.”

Chad took one look at the intensity of my glare and rolled his eyes. “Give me a break. It’s a joke. Relax. We’re just messing with you newbies.”

“A *joke*?” Anger flooded through me, and I stood up, shaking with rage. “You think this is a *joke*?” I hissed. “You think this is *funny*? Vampire hunting isn’t something you go messing around with. I could have killed him,” I said, pointing my stake at the fake-pire, who went scuttling backward along the forest floor like a squirrel.

Chad rolled his eyes again. “God, *chill*, man. Can’t you take a joke?”

I could feel dozens of pairs of eyes on me, but fury was still making my heart pound so hard I could hear the pulse of it in my ears. “Yeah, I can take a joke, when the joke is funny.” I kicked the plastic fangs at Chad and pointed my stake in his direction. “Don’t you *ever* try that again.”

I had gone too far, but then again, I thought getting hazed into nearly killing some poor hunter was *also* pretty damn far.

Color flushed into Chad’s ruddy face, and he stepped toward me. “I don’t know who you think you are, newbie, but you don’t talk to me like that. You got me?”

If Chad was trying to intimidate me, it wasn’t working. I took a step toward him, so we were practically nose to nose. “You ever been on a hunt? A real one? You ever staked a vampire?”

Uncertainty flashed across Chad’s eyes. This close to him, I could see it, clear as day. “Sure I have,” he blustered. Then, with more force he added, “I’ve been on plenty of hunts.”

Oh, yeah, sure this guy had. I shook my head. “No, I’m not talking about training runs. I’m talking about *real* hunts. The kind with real vampires, really chasing you. The kind where your life is on the line. Have you ever staked a vampire? Finished the job? Driven the wood through the bloodsucker’s chest, into its cold, dead heart, and watched as the thing turned to dust under your fingers?”

Chad’s uncertainty turned to fear. He made a guttural noise and looked away, unable to meet my gaze.

I smirked. “I didn’t think so.”

When Chad looked back the fear was gone, replaced with anger. “Oh, like you have. Like you know what you’re fucking talking about.”

Furious, I stepped closer, closing the last of the space between us. “I know enough to know that this isn’t something you mess around with.”

The words felt like acid in my throat. I thought of the first time I’d seen a vampire, and my stomach clenched with cold fear. I thought about how terrified I’d been when Violet and I had been attacked. How hard my heart had beat, how I’d thought I was going to throw up, how petrified I’d been that something was going to happen to Violet, or to me, and that I wouldn’t be able to protect her. And this guy—who’d never even *seen* a vampire, never seen how fast one could move, or how sharp their fangs were, how dead their eyes were—wanted to play hunter in the woods to make himself look cool in front of the new campers? Screw him.

Chad looked like he was guessing at least some of what I was thinking, and his eyes narrowed, like he was going to do something about it. But before he could say a word, I heard running feet, and we both spun around as another kid sprinted toward us from the trees.

“Run, everyone! Sergeant Pepperdine is awake. Everyone get your asses back to the dorms! *NOW!*”

The crowd of campers screamed and darted away in every direction. Fake-pire leapt to his feet and scampered into the trees with a squeal. I was turning toward Zachery when Chad reached out and grabbed a handful of my sweatshirt.

“This isn’t over,” he snapped. “You’ve pissed off the wrong guy, newbie.”

He shoved me backward and stormed off into the trees, leaving me staring after him, fuming.

“Don’t worry about him,” Zachery said, walking over to me. He kicked at the fake vampire teeth on the ground. “Chad’s a douchebag if there ever was one.”

I shrugged. “Whatever. Let’s go before Sergeant Pepperdine catches us out here and makes us do pull-ups over a volcano or something.”

“Sorry about freaking out back there,” Zachery said, after we’d walked a few hundred yards.

“It’s fine. Forget about it. I don’t think anyone knows what was really going on. Chad’s a jackass for trying to scare us with a vampire attack.”

Zachery was quiet for a while longer. “You were pretty badass back there.”

“Thanks,” I muttered.

“The way you were all over that vampire…” Zachery said, warming to the subject. “I mean, sure, it wasn’t a real vampire. But, if it had been, you would have staked him, wouldn’t you?”

“I guess.” I figured it was best to downplay it. Zachery seemed like the sort to get a bit squeamish about these things.

“Like, why are you even here?” Zachery asked. “You seem so good already. And all that stuff you were saying to Chad—you *know*. You’ve been out there. I can tell. He could, too. That’s why he got so mad.”

“Yeah…” I mumbled.

“So, why *are* you here?”

I shot him a sidelong glance. “My parents. They wanted me to come. Insisted, actually,” I added, trying not to sound too bitter about it.

Zachery grinned. “Well, I’ll bet they’d be pretty proud of you right now.”

After a moment, I smiled back. Zachery’s praise was nice to hear. I *had* been kind of a badass back there. But I wasn’t wishing my parents could have seen me—I was wishing Violet could have.

“Do you think that Chad guy’s going to be a problem?” I asked.

Zachery shook his head. “I hope not. It’s hard enough being a newbie without having a douchebag like that on your ass. I wish someone had warned us about that. Like, what even *was* that? Some kind of hazing, hunter-style?” He shot a nervous glance over his shoulder, like he was worried someone was listening.

I couldn’t help but laugh at how jumpy Zachery was, but when we made it back to the dorms, the smile on my face disappeared. We had a visitor, and she did not look happy.

“Do you know that person?” Zachery asked warily, eyeing the glowering figure standing at the cabin door, blocking the entrance.

“Kinda,” I muttered.

It was Romilly, and she had a rake clutched in her hand like a spear. She narrowed her eyes at Zachery and motioned for him to go inside.

He shot me a nervous look and walked into the cabin, leaving me alone with Romilly. She didn’t look pleased, and I ran through the night’s events, wondering which part was the most offensive. I *was* out after curfew. But Romilly didn’t leave me much time to wonder.

She pointed her rake at me. “Your first day, Charlie, and you’ve already fucked up.” She raised her eyebrows. “Is this how you keep a low profile?”

**Episode 1364**

As I looked at Greyson, the calm, steady, reasonable part of my brain knew I should at least *try* to be rational, but I also knew any expectation was kind of a hopeless one. I was about as far away as one could get from rational when it came to my mates. And right now, I was so aroused, I didn’t know if I could have made a truly logical decision if my life had depended on it. I was here, with Greyson, in his room. And he was here, naked beneath that sheet, and we were *so* close to his bed.

It would’ve been so easy to be with him right now. He wanted to be with me, and—if I were being totally honest with myself—I wanted to be with him. *So much*. It had been absolute torture trying to stay away from both of them, when they’d both been so near—talking to me and touching me and kissing me. It was exactly *why* I’d wanted space, but that had been harder to come by than I’d expected.

They weren’t kidding when they called *due destini* a curse, and this was the worst part of it. The *wanting*. The never really being satisfied, the knowing that I was always hurting someone, no matter what I did. The constant dissatisfaction. And now—more than ever, with everything going on—I wanted some comfort. The kind of comfort only a mate could provide.

“Cali,” Greyson murmured, brushing his fingers along my cheek so softly that it sent a delicious shiver down my spine. “Where’d you go?”

A blush stole across my face. I must have looked so silly staring off into nothing as my thoughts ran away from me.

He smiled down at me. “You disappeared on me.”

“Sorry.”

The smile slid from his face. “You seem lost, love. What are you thinking?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but no words came. *Were* there any words to describe the pain and confusion I felt? The certainty that he could fix it, if I let him try? I looked at him in the darkness. The moonlight played across his face, making his grey eyes shine even in the dim light. My eyes roamed down to his lips, which looked so soft and kissable my mouth began to water. I swallowed hard. What was I thinking? *I want you.*

The corners of his mouth turned up. *I want you, too, love*,he mind linked back to me.

My face flamed hot. *Holy shit.* I hadn’t realized I’d mind linked that to him. It was meant to be a private thought, but it was too late to go back now. Not that I wanted to. I didn’t even think my legs would be capable of taking me back to my room, or moving at all.

He leaned down and pressed his lips to mine. This kiss was like the one from the dream—hungry and pushy. It wanted and it took. But I was ready for it, and I pressed myself against him, ready to give.

“I’ve been thinking about this for so long,” he murmured against my lips, yanking at the sheet wrapped around his waist until it fell away. “I go to bed thinking about you, I wake up thinking about you. Damnit Cali, I want you *now*.”

The only problem in the world at that moment seemed to be my clothing, and Greyson made quick work of it, ripping it away as he pushed me into the room and then onto the bed. In just a moment, my black lace panties were all that separated us as he stretched over me. I arched up, pushing my body against his, ready for the pressure of him, absolutely *aching* for him to lower himself onto me and press me into the mattress. There was a tiny, distant voice inside my head, asking over and over and over if I should be doing this at all, if this was wise, if I’d be able to just get up and walk away from this, but I ignored it. Desire was a powerful thing—a roaring tiger deep within me—and it was so much louder than that little voice. I wanted everything about this too much to even try to stop now.

I propped myself up on my elbows and slipped my hand around the back of Greyson’s neck, pulling him down, and kissed him again. My lips parted as our mouths met, and that fiery point of contact sent an electric shockwave through me—through us both. Skin-to-skin, it lit some kind of fire in Greyson, and a growl rumbled from deep in his throat as he pressed down, grinding his hips into mine.

Gasping, I pulled back from our kiss. “*Greyson!*” I was so aroused that just the pressure of him was almost bringing me to climax.

He pulled back slightly and, with a slow, teasing smile, reached down and ran a finger up the center of my panties.

I screamed and fisted the sheets. Then, gulping down a breath, my eyes steady on him, I reached for him, running my hand gently up his rock-hard length. “You know, two can play at this game, Greyson.”

“Fuck,” he breathed, his eyes glazing over.

He took a deep breath and pulled away from my grip, then kissed the inside of my knee, making me suck in a breath. He moved his mouth upward, kissing his way up my thigh. He made it to my panties, where he breathed into my core, filling it with his heat.

I felt my heart skip several beats.

He kissed his way up my stomach to my breasts, and I threaded my fingers through his light hair. I was lying down, but I felt lightheaded, like I needed to hold onto something steady. As his kiss reached the base of my throat, he reached down and dug his fingers into the lace of my panties and pulled, ripping them to black lacy scraps before he dropped them to the floor. Then he buried himself deep inside me.

“*Greyson!*” I screamed, raking my fingernails down his back, leaving tracks. I’d known I was close, but the second he entered me I tossed my head back as stars exploded in my vision. “Oh my god! *Yes.*”

The climax shook my body like an earthquake, and every muscle clenched around him.

Greyson panted. His back was slick with sweat as he clutched me to him. He gasped as the climax of his orgasm hit and he shuddered into me, groaning my name into my ear.

The aftershocks of my own pleasure were still coursing through me, and they built again, leaving me shivering and moaning. “Oh, *Greyson*,” I breathed, closing my eyes as I fell back onto the pillows.

Breathing hard, he leaned his forehead against mine. “Cali,” he murmured. “Do you have any idea what you do to me?”

I smiled. “If it’s anything like what you do to me, I have some idea.”

After we’d both made trips to the bathroom to clean up, we slipped beneath the sheets and curled up together. I figured the damage had already been done, and spending the night couldn’t make things any worse. But when I closed my eyes, my mind felt wide awake. This was different than before, however, because—weirdly—I felt really good. Not scared or anxious or unsure. Just really happy and loved and content. Maybe that was why my brain wouldn’t let me go to sleep—it knew the feeling was fleeting and wanted me to savor the moment for as long as I could.

I looked over at Greyson, smiling when—half-asleep—he reached for me and pulled me closer to him, tucking me into the hollow his curved body created. It felt amazing to curl into him, and I cuddled up, warmed by the love I felt as much as the heat emanating from his body.

My mind was actually starting to relax a bit when something over his shoulder caught my eye, and suddenly I was wide awake once again. It was out the window—just a tiny flash in the upper corner.

I propped myself up on my elbow, squinting hard, waiting to see the flash again, but nothing came. What the hell had that been? Or… had it been nothing?

Quietly, so I wouldn’t disturb Greyson, I slipped out of bed. When he shifted as I got to my feet, I froze, but he just turned over, keeping his eyes shut. I peered out the window, pressing my face to the glass to try and get a clearer view of the spark I saw. The moon was nearly full, and bright enough that the trees cast long shadows on the dried grass. Maybe that had been what’d I’d seen. Maybe it had just been the moon.

*It must have been*, I thought with a firm nod. *What else* could *it have been?*

I’d just reached up for the cord for the blinds when I saw it: the flash. But it wasn’t a flash, and it certainly wasn’t the moon. It was a wisp, and, as I watched, it called my name.

“*Calliope!*”

**Episode 1365**

AVA

I rolled over in the bed, unable to get comfortable. The room was stuffy, but also damp and clammy, like rain was on the way. The pillow was too soft and the bed was too hard. I punched the pillow, wrapped the sheet around my shoulders, and squeezed my eyes shut.

It was no good. I rolled over, kicking off the sheet with a massive sigh. I just couldn’t get to sleep. My mind was spinning with a thousand thoughts, and every last one of them was about Xavier. The pack house stank like every werewolf here, but somehow all I could smell was Xavier. Everywhere I turned, there he was. I couldn’t get away from him. It was torture.

It probably didn’t help that I’d snuck into his room and stolen a T-shirt to sleep in.

Pressing it to my nose, I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, letting his scent overwhelm me. His face swam in my mind’s eye, but it wasn’t the angry face I’d been seeing lately. The face I saw when I closed my eyes was the face of the Xavier who’d loved me as his childhood crush, and as his mate. It was never hard for me to remember what it had been like for us, *before*. Before Silas had driven a wedge between us and the pack wars had torn us apart. We’d been so happy together then. We had been one—finishing each other’s thoughts half the time. It had driven Colton crazy, but that was just how we were—*connected*. In every possible way.

And we could be like that again. I knew we could. I could feel it. Every now and then, even though I know he didn’t want to admit it, I knew Xavier could feel it, too. I could see it in his eyes. He’d let his guard down, smile a little, before he remembered that he was supposed to hate me now.

But I knew he didn’t hate me. He couldn’t. It wasn’t possible. Not for the Xavier I knew. Not for the one who’d loved me like he’d loved me before. If only he would just let himself feel it. If he would just let himself feel *me*.

I closed my eyes as heat began to pool within me. I’d never been with anyone like Xavier. Even Iñigo, for all his charms, didn’t turn me on the way that even the *memory* of Xavier did. I traced my fingers up the inside of my bare thigh to my panties. If I tried hard, I could imagine it was Xavier’s hand touching me, and not my own.

He was everything I’d ever wanted—hot as hell, pushy, and absolutely *insatiable*.

I dipped my finger into my panties—I was wet just thinking about him. I remembered the way I used to wake up in the middle of the night, wild for his touch. How I would stroke him until he grew hard as steel in my hand. He would wake up, so softly at first before he’d pull me down to him, devouring me. He would rip my clothes off and drive himself into me so hard I would scream with the pleasure and pain of it.

I gasped, my body shuddering as I neared climax.

“Xavier,” I murmured, pushing my fingers deep inside myself. “Oh, Xavier.”

The feel of his name on my tongue sent me over the edge. I shuddered, my whole body coiling as the orgasm crashed through me.

Breathing hard, I lay still, letting the last of the delicious aftershocks fade. I could have stayed like that for hours, but a short, sharp rap on the window jarred me out of my bliss.

I sat up quickly, horrified to see a figure on the other side of the glass. I stared for a moment, trying to make sense of what I was seeing. The figure was upside-down, and it was—my stomach flip-flopped—Iñigo. Heat rushed to my face. How long had he been out there? Had he been watching me?

When he knocked again, I jumped out of bed, worried he’d wake someone up. I was about to close the blinds when Iñigo flipped right-side up and smirked at me. He gestured for me to open the window.

I shook my head. “No way.”

Iñigo’s smirk grew, and I felt that strange pull he had over me, deep in the pit of my stomach. But I wasn’t going to fall for it. Not this time, anyway. But… I *did* wonder what he was doing here.

I cracked the window open, just an inch. “What the hell do you want?”

“I wanted to see you.” His gaze drifted down and then he raised his eyebrows suggestively. “And I certainly got my wish.”

Heat rushed to my cheeks. He *had* watched me. I rolled my eyes, trying to cover my embarrassment. “Pervert.”

He waved aside my taunt. “Come outside, Ava. We have to talk.”

I eyed him warily. “Okay,” I finally said. “Go down to the lake—I’ll meet you there. I’m not going to risk letting anyone from the pack see me with you.”

Iñigo nodded, and I drew the blinds shut, taking a moment to gather myself. I was… *embarrassed* that he’d seen me pleasuring myself, but I was also strangely turned on by the fact that he’d *wanted* to watch me. Had it been so long since I’d been desired by anyone that even a damn vampire wanting me made me feel good? I glanced into the mirror over the dresser and brushed my dark hair back, smoothing it away from my face. Then I pulled on my jeans and a sweater and slipped out of the room.

Thankfully, I didn’t meet anyone on my way out of the house, and the grounds seemed to be empty as I made my way down to the lake. Iñigo was waiting for me, standing at the water’s edge, silhouetted by the moonlight.

When he heard me approaching, he turned to look at me, and his smile was so intimate and seductive, my breath caught.

“I knew you’d come,” he murmured.

This statement filled me with fury. “Cut the cocky routine; it really isn’t as much of a turn-on as you think,” I said coolly. “I hope you realize what a risk I’m taking here, coming out here to talk to you.”

“Relax,” he said easily. “I’m not planning on keeping you long.” Then he smirked. “I’d hate to keep you from whatever you were doing.”

I pressed my lips together, wishing—not for the first time—that I could just knock that smirk right off his face.

“I just wanted to make sure you haven’t forgotten our deal, little Ava.”

I rolled my eyes. “How could I? You never give me a chance to forget. You’re always bringing it up.”

His gaze roamed over me for a moment, then he reached over and slid his cool fingers across my neck, grazing the spot where the wound was. “Did they believe you?”

I shivered beneath his gentle touch. “If Greyson hadn’t believed me, I’d be dead right now.”

Iñigo smirked. “That’s good to hear.” He leaned closer and breathed deeply, taking me in. “Though I did enjoy biting you quite a lot, so death is still an option.”

I gritted my teeth. “I don’t appreciate threats.” I took a step back and looked up at him, my gaze hard as steel. “Is that why you came here? To threaten me?”

He shook his head, not looking the least bit ashamed. “I just came to make sure you remember your promise, little pup. Six Fae, remember?”

“I remember,” I snapped.

“And I want to know what you’re doing to make that happen.” His eyes flashed dangerously.

I looked around nervously. “I don’t think we should be talking about this here.”

But Iñigo just shrugged, looking unbothered. “Here’s as good a place as any.”

I thought of Greyson’s hourly perimeter patrols. “It’s really not, though—”

“I’m a patient man, Ava,” Iñigo interrupted. He took a step back and planted his feet in the soft, muddy ground. “I wasn’t always, but when you get to be my age, you start to realize the true value of patience. It’s a virtue. But,” he added, raising an eyebrow, “like everything else, it has its limits. I’d hate for you to test mine.”

I caught his meaning. “I can’t rush this,” I warned. “I can’t give you *some* of the Fae—they won’t give me another chance to get the rest.”

He gave me a long stare. “Then I’m going to need some assurance that this thing’s going to get done.” He smiled. “Make that *in*surance.”

Immediately, alarm bells went off in my head. “What do you want from me?” I asked, my heart pounding.

Iñigo’s gaze ranged down to my toes, then up, taking his time, his gaze so proprietary it felt like a physical touch. When his eyes met mine again, he took a step forward so we were close—nearly eye to eye. “I want you to invite me into the house.”

**Episode 1366**

XAVIER

“You have got to be fucking kidding me,” I muttered to myself, watching the door to the club close behind Kira’s retreating form. Why were all the women in my life so damn impulsive?

With an impatient groan, I threw the door open and stared into the gloom of the club. I caught a glimpse of Kira as she whipped around a knot of vampires, who all looked up curiously as she passed. I stepped after her, grateful—not for the first time—that I was fast as hell, and caught her easily.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” I snapped, grabbing her wrist.

When Kira looked up at me, her eyes were blazing with anger. “You have to let me do this, Xavier.”

“We’re getting out of here,” I said, keeping my voice low. “You’re not thinking clearly, and not in any state to be doing this—”

“I want him *dead*,” Kira sobbed, trying to pull her wrist from my grasp. “I want to kill Garren—right here, right now. I can’t take it anymore. Watching that bastard walk around, alive, breathing, *speaking*, when Geoff is dead… It’s not right. I can’t live with it. I can’t.” She shook her head as angry tears fell down her face. “Not for one more minute.”

It was obvious she was hurting, and I felt for her, but I stayed strong. “I’m going to say it again, Kira, in case you didn’t hear me the first time: I know you want to kill Garren, but this isn’t the time, and this isn’t the place. The odds are against us, and we’ve got no friends here.” I glanced around, hoping that Garren hadn’t seen us coming back in. He was an idiot junkie, but I had no doubt he’d make good on his threat to attack if he spotted us in here. “Let’s go.”

Kira pulled, trying to resist as I towed her toward the door, but she was no match for me, and I got her outside without too much trouble.

Back on the street, she ripped away from my grip and rounded on me. “I thought you were going to *help* me. I thought you were here to *kill* Garren. Don’t you want to see him dead?” she screamed, her eyes filled with pain and seething rage. I knew, all too well, the depths of this kind of anger. I had felt it when Ava had killed my mother, and again when fighting my father.

I grabbed her arms and pulled her close, tucking us both closer to the building, shielding us from anyone who might have been walking by and also—hopefully—comforting Kira, who had started to shake. “I said I’ll help, and I will, Kira. I *will.* But only when the time is right, and not when you’re so blinded by your anger that you can’t even think straight.”

“What are you talking about? I can see just fine,” Kira said, dashing tears from her eyes. But she’d stopped fighting me, at least.

I shook my head. “With a guy like Garren, you can’t make a mistake. Trust me, if you do, it’ll be your last.”

Kira didn’t say anything, but she didn’t resist when I pulled her toward the car, either. I kept glancing over at her as we walked, trying to take her emotional temperature. I suppressed a sigh as I opened her door and watched her climb in. This whole thing was harder than it should have been, but it was my own fault. I should never have let her come. That was the first rule of bounty hunting: you never let the client come along. But I hadn’t known what else to do. It wasn’t like she’d approach me with a brief. How else would I have been able to identify Garren?

I walked around to the driver’s side. Now that I’d seen him, however… did I really need to keep dragging Kira along? Maybe I could talk her into going back to the pack house and waiting for me there. She was a smart witch, she’d probably guess she was going to be abandoned, but her annoyance with me was better than her death on my conscience.

Turning on the engine, I pulled out into the street.

“I didn’t know it was going to be so hard.”

I looked over at Kira, surprised that she’d broken the silence. “Which part?”

She shrugged, her face pale as she looked out onto the street. “I’ve been imagining seeing Garren again—I’ve been picturing it every day since he killed Geoff. But it was so much harder to see him than I thought it was going to be.”

I looked out at the street for a moment, then shrugged. “Killing isn’t for everyone. That’s why people like you hire people like me.”

Kira looked at me for a long moment. “Maybe it’s easier,” she mused, “if you’re removed from… *feeling*. What would you do if something happened to that woman—the one you love? Cali, isn’t it?”

Instantly, my body tensed. The thought of anything happening to Cali kept me up at night, but the thought of *losing* her—the way Kira had lost Geoff—rocked me, and my fight-or-flight instinct flared, with the fight impulse winning out by a longshot.

“I’d want revenge,” I growled. “And I’d get it.”

Kira nodded. “That’s why I wanted to kill Garren when I had the chance.”

I breathed deeply, trying to return my heart rate to its normal rhythm. “I get that, but you have to understand, I’ve killed before. It can change you. Some people handle it better than others.” I looked over at her pale, stricken face. There was so much pain there. Even without the deal we’d struck, I wanted to help her. I put a gentle hand on her arm. “You should leave Garren to me.”

“No, I—”

“Let me do this,” I interrupted. “I made you a promise. Let me fulfill it.” I gave her a half-smile. “Let me save you from yourself.”

Kira frowned and didn’t answer.

“Don’t do this, Kira. Don’t be stupid for the sake of pride.” I ignored the fact that this was advice I’d never taken myself, and continued. “Once Garren is dead, the results will be the same: he’ll be gone, and your ghosts will be gone. It doesn’t matter who kills him.”

She bit her lip, her eyes out on the road again. Then, after a long moment, she nodded. “Okay.”

I smiled and breathed a sigh of relief. “You just made my job a hell of a lot easier.”

Now I could deal with Garren on my own terms, without having to worry about tracking someone else—especially someone made unpredictable by grief. Now it was just me, and I liked those odds. They’d always favored me in the past.

“Okay,” I said, looking around the unfamiliar intersection we’re I’d stopped. “We’ll find a motel and then we’ll start making some plans to put an end to your nightmare. Sound good?”

Kira nodded.

I was just about to pull the car forward when something in the rearview mirror caught my eye. It was a single headlight, and it was bearing down on us. There was something about it that set off alarm bells in my head. This wasn’t the first time I’d seen it—it had been following us for a while.

“Hang on,” I muttered, throwing the car into park. “Stay put.”

I stepped out of the car onto the silent street as a motorcycle came to a screeching halt a few feet away from my car. I slammed the car door shut, praying Kira would do as I said and stay inside. Had Garren sent someone after us? It wouldn’t have surprised me—he was the type. I was just angry at myself for not having noticed that we were being tailed.

The rider of the motorcycle stepped off the bike, wearing a darkly tinted helmet and holding a length of chain.

I waited, tense, and when the rider stepped close enough, I sprang forward and hit them hard in the chest with my shoulder, sending them stumbling back. The rider caught themself and spun around, bringing the chain whipping around with them, but I ducked as the heavy chain sliced through the air just above me.

This close to the ground, I had the advantage of gravity. I reached my leg out, sweeping it low and knocking both the rider’s legs out from under them so they fell to the ground with a grunt. I reached forward, pulling the chain from their hand, then ripped the shining black helmet off, revealing the rider’s face.

I’d been expecting to find one of the ugly Blood Moon brutes from the venom den. What I *hadn’t* been expecting was a woman, only a little younger than Cali, with dark hair and a pretty face I didn’t recognize.

“Who the hell are you?” I demanded.

The woman looked back at me without a trace of fear on her face. “The name’s Tallis.”

“Okay, Tallis,” I said. “Why were you following me? What the hell do you want?”

“I want Garren’s place on the Blood Moon council.” She raised one elegant eyebrow. “I think we can help each other out.”

**Episode 1367**

My name echoed in the night, removing all thoughts of rest from my mind.

I looked away from the window and back over at Greyson, who was still sleeping peacefully. It made my heart ache to think of leaving him—even if I would come to regret it all in the morning. I loved watching him sleep. He was so big and strong and tough, but he looked so sweet and peaceful when he slept. Almost boyish. And… Was that a smile curling his lips?

My gaze flickered back to the window. I hated to go, but knew I had little choice. When a wisp called, I knew I had to answer. I felt around in the darkness until I found the dresser and pulled open a drawer. I found a hoodie and tugged it on as I headed out of Greyson’s room, shutting the door silently behind me. The smell of Greyson surrounded me, which provided some comfort as I slipped quietly out of the house. I wasn’t sneaking, exactly, but I was glad not to meet anyone on the way.

Outside, I peered through the darkness, looking for the wisp, and found the tiny creature in the sky, hovering over the woods.

I heaved a sigh. “*Great*.”

Just what I’d been hoping for. Another trip into a dark and potentially dangerous forest. But I squared my shoulders. I was going to be fine. I wasn’t completely without defenses. I had my Fae magic, and I no longer had to rely on kitchen utensils to defend myself. I was *fine*.

I mean, Greyson probably wasn’t going to be *thrilled* if he woke up and found me gone, but hopefully I’d be back before he woke up. Then he’d never have to know. In any case, the wisp wasn’t going to hang around all night, so I gritted my teeth and headed toward the woods.

I didn’t get very far before I heard something that stopped me in my tracks. It was a voice, carried by the wind. It was hard to discern, but there was something familiar about it, and the sound of it made my hackles rise. I paused to listen—wishing my heart would stop beating so damn loud—and then nearly gasped. I covered my mouth with both hands to silence my heavy breathing.

Was that *Ava*?

I looked around, alarmed. Where was she? And then I heard an answering voice, one far deeper and less familiar. Who was she talking to?

Turning toward the lake, I caught a glimpse of a figure, and I dropped down into a crouch. I could only just make them out from this distance, but it was Ava all right, only she seemed to be standing alone. That was strange. I could have sworn I’d heard her talking to someone.

*Did Greyson know she was out here?* I doubted he’d just let her wander the pack house and the woods beyond without supervision.

Close to the ground, I inched closer to where she was standing near the lake’s edge. Whatever she was doing, it wasn’t good—of that, I was absolutely certain. I was still pissed at Greyson for bringing her back here—even if his reasons were rational. And I knew that when Xavier got back, he was going to be furious, *and* he’d blame Greyson, which meant even more strife between the brothers. Which was something I did *not* need.

I was moving slowly and as carefully as I could, but when I stepped on a twig, the crack echoed through the quiet night. I froze as Ava looked up, her head cocked, listening. I held my breath, my heart pounding. *Holy shit.* What the hell was I *doing*?

Considering I hadn’t been pinned to a tree yet with a werewolf’s claws about to rip out my throat, maybe Ava hadn’t heard me. I peeked over just as Ava turned sharply in my direction, her own eyes narrowed suspiciously. *Spoke too soon.*

In a flash, I leapt behind the storage shed, trying to avoid crashing directly into the trash cans in my haste. I pressed myself against the wall and held my breath so I wouldn’t gasp like a winded buffalo.

Had Ava seen me?

But… *Wait a damn second!* Why the hell was *I* hiding?! Ava wasn’t even meant to be here! It wasn’t fair that *I* was the one squished between the garbage cans in back of the shed.

“Oh my god,” I groaned, dropping my head into my hands. Why was I always finding myself in messes like these? Then another thought occurred to me. What if Ava could smell me here? Ava was a werewolf, so she had super senses—she could smell things that I couldn’t.

I concentrated, listening for approaching feet, but I didn’t hear anything. If Ava *had* seen me, she wasn’t coming after me. My heart slowed a little, and I peeled myself off the side of the shed and peeked out. There was Ava, in the darkness, heading back toward the house.

For a moment, I watched her, wondering if I should follow her and warn Greyson. But… warn Greyson about *what*? That I had snuck out to follow a wisp and I’d seen Ava standing alone, talking to herself?

Yeah, definitely not worth waking Greyson up for. Knowing him, I’d probably be the one who’d get the talking to for leaving the house in the middle of the night.

I turned back toward the trees and the wisp.

The wisp was like a little spark of light, so it was easy to spot in the darkness, and I followed it into the crowding tress. The problem was that the wisp wasn’t constrained by little things like forest paths and just flew blithely through the air, leaving me blundering along after it, crashing through the underbrush in pajama shorts and the beat-up Converse All-Stars I’d found next to the door.

“Slow down!” I called, but—unsurprisingly—the tiny sprite didn’t listen and flew onward, leaving me chasing after it.

After about twenty minutes of this nonsense, I emerged from a thicket of trees and into a clearing that revealed a dark, shimmering pond. It was smaller than our lake, and the moon was reflected perfectly in the still, black water.

I frowned at the pond, then up at the wisp. “Am I supposed to understand what this means? Is stagnant water supposed to mean something to me? What am I supposed to do here?”

The wisp didn’t answer, just flew over the water, its tiny light reflected on the surface.

“Yeah, still not getting it!” I shouted.

Then, though there wasn’t a breath of wind, the surface of the water began to ripple.

“What the hell?” I muttered, as, to my complete astonishment, a spot in the middle of the pond went smooth again. But in a strange way, it wasn’t water I was seeing in the depths—it was like I was looking through a window to another world. Or through a looking glass. And through it I could see the beautiful field where I’d gotten the moon buttercup flower—the one that had saved my mother.

I smiled as I looked at the sun-dappled grass and flowers, thinking of the funny little mouse-bear. I’d found it with Xavier—and how thrilled I’d been when I finally found the prize I’d spent so long searching for. I’d been so tired and so frantic, but so, so happy, knowing that my mom would be saved. But the smile slid off my face as—before my eyes—the moon buttercup began to wilt, its edges browning and curling inward.

“Wait!” I called, my heart thudding. “Stop! What’s happening?” I took a step forward, feeling panicked, and my foot splashed into the still water. I jumped back. “What the hell?” I gasped as a wet hand stretched out from the blackness, reaching toward me. “What… what *is* that?”

There was no one to hear me, which meant no one was going to answer. Instead the water in the pond began to churn.

Every instinct in my body told me not to, but I took a tentative step toward it to look below the surface.

*Hands.*

Hundreds of them. Reaching up, grasping, trying to push out, trying to break the surface of the water.

My scream echoed off the trees, and I fell back onto the damp bank. I scuttled backward like a crab, desperate to get away. They were the hands of the dead. I didn’t know how I knew it, but I did—deep in my bones, I knew it.

*Revenants*. *These are revenants*. That was my last coherent thought before an ice-cold hand wrapped around my ankle and began to drag me into the brackish pond.

“*No*!” I screamed, reaching out for the reeds on the banks, gripping as hard as I could. But it was no use. My feet were dragged in the fetid water, soaking my shoes. I held out my shaking hands, trying to concentrate, trying to marshal my thoughts to use my magic, but there was nothing to aim at. More hands grasped my calves as the water went over my knees.

“Help!” I screamed, sending a flaccid burst of energy skipping across the surface of the pond like a smooth stone. “Someone! Help!” No one was going to come. Everyone was safe inside the pack house, like I should have been. I thought of Greyson, asleep, who would have no idea what would become of me.

I had to get out of here.

I tried kicking myself free, but there were so many hands now. They had me around my waist. I flipped over, dragging my fingernails through the muddy bank. “No! Please! *No!*”

The hands wrapped around my arms, then my shoulders, then my mouth, and I was pulled beneath the surface.

**Episode 1368**

After having spent a wonderful night with Greyson, I was now being punished by drowning, because I just could NOT catch a break. Perhaps I deserved it, since I felt horrible and like I had betrayed Xavier, but *still*. Fighting panic, I looked down to see the ghostly hands clutching at my ankles as I was pulled underwater. I was kicking, struggling to get back to the surface.

I could still see it, a few feet up, which meant that I wasn’t even that deep. *Thank god.* But now I wasn’t sure if that was a good thing, since these creatures were not letting me go, no matter how hard I fought to free myself.

What the *hell* was happening?

What were these ghostly beings trying to do with me, anyway? Did they want to kill me? Because that would’ve been incredibly rude. And if they weren’t trying to kill me, maybe they were trying to drag me down through some kind of portal to hell?

Even though I was a relatively good swimmer, holding my breath underwater for this long was *not* fun. Why on earth would the wisp have led me here? I’d always thought of the wisps as helpful, but clearly that was a thing of the past. I’d been so naïve—especially after that wisp had shown me the Orb, and with everything going on at the pack house at the moment.

I should have been much, much more careful around the wisps.

*And now look!* I thought wildly. *Look what being careless has gotten me! Drowning is one of the worst ways to die!*

My lungs were starting to ache. I had a little flashback to when I was bobbing for apples—the moment I’d been yanked under the water. But now I was all alone out here in the woods, and there was nobody to help me. My lungs kept burning, and the nightmarish sensation spread throughout my chest as I held my breath. I kept kicking, making a superhuman effort to swim upward. My powers didn’t seem to be working, but *finally*, with one hard kick, I managed to break free from the grip around my ankle.

Frantically, I swam to the surface and breached it five seconds later, taking a huge gulp of air. I was about to scream when suddenly, I felt pressure around my calf, and then—

I was yanked back down again.

*No no no no no.*

I was screaming inside my head, fear overpowering every other emotion. Submerged once more, I kicked at the ghostly enemy while at the same time I realized that I could hear murmuring voices. The adrenaline coursing through my veins was mixed with terror. At first the voices were too whispery, too quiet and weird for me to make out what they were saying.

But then, as I peered down into the murky water, I made out figures in the depths.

Potent horror crawled up my spine. The ghosts, pale and almost transparent and yet somehow not, reached out their spindly creepy fingers toward me. Their hair waved around in the water, wrapped up in seaweed, slithering through the current like snakes.

My head was swimming, dizziness overcoming me. My lungs ached for oxygen, and I felt like I was in a nightmare… Maybe I was.

*Please, god, let this be a nightmare…*

I closed my eyes and realized that if I concentrated, the sounds around me became actual words. I could make out sentences. They spoke one after the other, calling for me, before speaking all at once in a cacophony that made my ears burn.

*Join us…*

*Give in…*

*Come to us…*

*Join us, give in, come to us*—the same sentences on an endless loop that made my head pound. I needed to breathe. I needed air, but they wouldn’t let me go. I stopped struggling, just to preserve what was left of my strength, and then one of the ghostly figures drifted up from the depths.

It looked like it was dancing.

It looked joyful, and I had never been more terrified.

As it approached me, I stretched out my hands. I tried to shoot some magic at the figure, but my fingers… My fingers were limp, broken. And yet I couldn’t feel any pain. The ghost approached, getting closer and closer, but the bolt that sprang from my fingertips went directly through it.

The ghost didn’t even seem to notice it.

The bolt of magic, a part of me, continued to descend. I watched, heart racing, as the bright light went down down *down*… The pond didn’t seem to have any kind of bottom.

The pond didn’t end.

The grip on my ankle suddenly got tighter, and I felt myself being dragged even deeper. I looked up at the surface. The moonlight was farther away now, dimming. Darkness started to surround me. I kicked my legs in desperation, struggled to keep what little oxygen I still had, but it wasn’t working.

I couldn’t get free.

I was trapped.

I felt doomed as the air that was left in my lungs ran out, and I could no longer struggle. My chest was burning, my head was pounding, and it all got worse with every sudden movement I made to escape. I needed to do something to get out of here.

The grip around my ankle didn’t loosen in the slightest.

*Please, don’t let me die like this…*

*How did I survive so many things just to die like this?*

Everything was starting to dim around me. Not only because I was being pulled deeper into the pond, but also because I couldn’t keep my eyes open. I couldn’t keep fighting. I was exhausted, and my entire body felt numb, ready to surrender*. Ready to…*

Suddenly, I felt hands on my shoulders.

Strong hands reached down and pulled me up, like I weighed nothing. Moments later, I was gasping on the forest floor, choking and sputtering, trying to breathe again. Trying to live.

*Am I alive? Is this real? What the hell is going on?*

This couldn’t be hell, because Xavier was here.

Xavier had saved me, and my heart was overwhelmed with emotion. He leaned down over me, watching me with thoughtful, worried eyes. He brushed the wet hair back from my forehead. He hadn’t spoken a word, and that scared me somehow.

“Are you…” I choked out, my voice sounding rough. “How are you here? How did you get back so quickly? Weren’t you going to Spokane?”

Everything was still hazy. My skull and lungs were still aching, but the sight of Xavier made me feel ten times better. Still silent, he bent down and gave me a gentle kiss on the forehead. His lips brushed over my cool skin, warm and comforting.

*It’s okay*,I told myself. *Xavier is here. Xavier saved you, Cali.*

I closed my eyes in relief, feeling luckier than I ever had. When I opened them a second later, though, I was shocked to see that it was no longer Xavier’s face hovering over mine.

It was Greyson’s.

*Greyson?*

He stared down at me with an unreadable expression. It was almost spooky, different to his usual concern or kindness or sarcasm, or even his anger. I shook my head, shivering, and tried to push myself up on to my elbows.

“How did you find me out here?” I asked Greyson.

But my mate didn’t answer. He just stared at me, long enough that I started to wonder if something was wrong with him. Something felt off, but I didn’t know what.

“You look like a corpse, Caliana,” he finally said.

The words were so horrible, so unlike him.

To my terror, I realized that this *wasn’t* him.

This wasn’t my Greyson.

No. This wasn’t the man I’d shared so many wonderful moments with.

It wasn’t Xavier either.

This was something dark and sinister, set on torturing me.

How had I gotten here? And, more importantly, how did I get *out*?

I opened my mouth to scream, opened my eyes wider, and when I did, I realized that it had all been a lie. I was still underwater, gulping down water that I wasn’t supposed to inhale. But then a sudden burst of energy erupted inside me. I kicked free from the hold on my ankle and tried to push to the surface, desperate, overwhelmed, stretching my hands toward the air that I desperately needed.

*I can do this! I’ve been through so much worse—this is NOT going to stop me!*

But when I finally reached the surface, something was wrong.

It was hard. No. This couldn’t be happening.

The surface was hard, but it didn’t even look like it. I pushed my hand against it again, thinking—*hoping*—it would give. I began to beat my fist against it, hoping it would break away. Hoping that maybe, somehow, this was all still going to be a dream. I pushed once more against the surface.

I was trapped *under ice.*

**Episode 1369**

CHARLIE

Romilly dragged me toward a gardening shed, looking furious. It was like dealing with my mother. But, like, a more obviously angry version of her. My mom was the queen of passive aggression, while I doubted Romilly had any problem with speaking her mind.

I was feeling a little guilty already after she’d confronted me. *Is this how you keep a low profile?* she’d said, with all the tone and attitude required to make me nervous and defensive. Okay, maybe I’d messed up a little, but that didn’t mean I needed a babysitter. Did my parents seriously think that? It was ridiculous.

I did not need Romilly looking after me. Not now, not ever.

I was clearly a natural at this hunter stuff, and I didn’t think I needed to apologize for trying to stake a vampire at a *vampire staking* camp. That was like blaming someone for eating pizza at an Italian restaurant. It wasn’t my fault that Chad was a fucking douchebag who liked to mess around.

Of course, it wasn’t exactly easy to say everything that was in my head with Romilly glaring at me.

“Do you realize that you almost just killed a fellow hunter?” she said sharply.

“I wouldn’t have killed him,” I said. “I was just trying to protect my friend from what I thought was a threat. How can you blame me for that?”

Romilly looked annoyed. “That wasn’t about protection. That was about your instincts taking over, when we have specifically discussed you getting more in touch with your human hunter side. *Not* your werewolf side.”

“What was I supposed to do?” I demanded. “There was obviously a threat!”

“Only it *wasn’t* a real threat. And the way you moved, it was so fast.” She shook her head, looking disappointed. “If *I* noticed, you’d better believe that others did as well.”

“What was there to notice?” I said. “It’s possible for a human to move just as fast as I did.”

She scoffed. “It was barely at the edge of plausible. Maybe if you were some sort of martial arts expert or a track gold medalist. But at least it’s dark out here, so we can play it off as people’s eyes playing tricks.”

I got where she was coming from, but that still didn’t mean that this entire thing wasn’t ludicrous. Hell, she should’ve been talking to fucking *Chad* right now, not me.

“These kids are here to learn how to stake vampires, right?” I demanded. “This is vampire camp, isn’t it?”

She glared at me. “You are not going to use that tone with me, young man. I am putting my ass on the line for you here. You’d better respect that. I have things to do other than babysitting you, you know.”

*Oh, Jesus.* She was “young man”-ing me.

At least my mother had never done that.

“I don’t need a babysitter,” I said. “And I just don’t understand why you’re yelling at me for doing exactly what we’re supposed to be doing here.”

Romilly shook her head again. “I’m not yelling at you.”

*Could have fooled me*, I thought.

She took in my dubious expression and rolled her eyes. “Okay, *fine*. Maybe I’m yelling at you. A little.”

“At least you admit it,” I said, huffing.

She did not seem amused. Or pleased. “I think you’re looking at this from the wrong angle. You are here to learn how to stake vampires and take down supernatural creatures. But you cannot forget that it’s of the utmost importance that you hide that you are, in fact, a supernatural creature *yourself*.”

“But—”

“Showing off that you’re so much better than the rest of the hunters is only going to make you stand out. In a bad way,” Romilly added.

“I wasn’t the one who wanted to show off. Chad was. He’s the one with the issue here—he’s the one you should be talking to,” I declared. That guy was such an asshole.

“I’ll deal with Chad later,” Romilly said. “Right now, I need to do damage control with you, because your life could actually be in danger. Do you understand? Nobody here can know the truth about you.”

Her words finally gave me pause.

She raised an eyebrow. “Besides, shouldn’t you have known that the person wasn’t a vampire? You are a werewolf. Maybe you should use that nose more often.”

I couldn’t believe this lady. She sure had a way of twisting things up. Bristling, I said, “I was doing what I know best. Using my nose would’ve been a waste of time—I’ve fought vampires who’ve masked their scent.” And they’d gone after my mate.

The bitterness I felt at that thought was overshadowed but Romilly’s still frustrated expression.

“I understand that. But I can’t protect you if you’re going to keep showboating,” she said.

“But I really thought there was danger. I hate the idea of pretending that I know nothing about this when I know more than anyone else, and I’m not saying that to be cocky or arrogant. It’s just a fact,” I said.

Romilly took in my expression, and hers softened a little. “I’m not saying that you have to pretend that you’re terrible at hunting. I just need you to be careful. This isn’t a game, Charlie. If the truth came out, it could be deadly for you.”

I took a deep breath, my anger deflating slightly. Romilly was right. And she looked like she truly cared about me. I knew how dangerous my true identity was for me, especially around a bunch of hunters. I suddenly felt homesick, wishing I were back with Violet at the pack house. I’d never been anywhere else where I’d felt so accepted. Where I truly belonged.

I didn’t feel like I belonged here.

I looked at Romilly again and noticed that she seemed almost worried now. She was looking at me kindly, and that definitely worked a lot more than scolding me. I even felt a little guilty for snapping at her earlier.

“Sorry,” I said. “I’ll be more careful. I promise.”

Romilly broke into a smile. “Thank you, that’s great. It will do wonders for my blood pressure.”

I snorted. She really was something.

She patted my shoulder. “You’d better go get some sleep. It’s a big day tomorrow.”

She ushered me out of the shed, exactly like my mother did when she wanted to clean a space and I was in the way. I took a deep breath, feeling the night breeze hit my face, before I started to head back to the dorms.

I looked out into the woods with the feeling of longing. I was almost overwhelmed by the urge to shift. To run through the woods and feel the wind in my fur. To take in the sights and sounds of the forest.

I turned my back on the trees, shaking my head. I felt so out of place here. I was living a lie on all fronts—I was hiding my true identity, and I was pretending to be broken up with my mate, who I adored. And I was obviously way ahead of everyone else at this camp. No one else had ever even faced down a vampire before, let alone fought in the kind of blood baths that I’d been in. If these kids had even caught a glimpse of Silas, they would have been paralyzed by terror.

Why was I even here?

I felt another wave of intense homesickness. Violet *was* home to me. I missed her so much that it made my chest physically ache. It felt like I hadn’t seen her in years, even if it had only been days. I needed to put my arms around her, to take in her scent, to kiss her. I needed to feel grounded by my mate’s presence. Violet and I were meant to be, the two of us together as one, so with her missing, it felt like part of me had been sliced away and thrown into the gutter.

The loneliness I felt was so intense and overwhelming. I couldn’t talk to Romilly about this. Or my parents. Or Zachery. The only person I could be completely honest with—completely myself with—was my mate. My phone was burning in my pocket, and I pulled it out and dialed Violet’s number.

“Hi, Charlie,” Violet said, and the sound of her voice was like ointment for me. Soothing and soft and perfect.

I needed her here with me now. The feeling was so overwhelming, unlike anything I’d ever felt. I couldn’t shake wanting to feel her skin on mine, the taste of her lips, and the smile on her face when I called her Sunshine. I needed my mate, and I was pretty sure she needed me too.

Without thinking about it much, and definitely unable to stop myself, I blurted out the first thing that came to mind. “I miss you so much, Violet. Can you come out here on the next flight?”

**Episode 1370**

LOLA

I glanced at my phone again, scowling. Why wasn’t Jay getting back to me? I’d called and texted him loads of times. I knew that he was probably just out on a run or something, but I was starting to get a little worried.

I knew that there was a lot going on back at the pack house, so I really hoped that everything was okay with him. I shot Cali a quick text, just to casually ask if they were all alive and well; at least as well as they could be with the Orb and all that bullshit hanging over their heads. I waited a couple of beats for a response, but, surprisingly, Cali didn’t text me back.

The pack had to be in some sort of meeting, then. Greyson loved those. He loved going on about things that had gone wrong or that could go wrong. That, or Cali was with one of her two mates. I would’ve just liked to be with *my* mate under completely different circumstances.

Huffing, I plopped back down onto my bed, looking at the ceiling.

I hadn’t even taken a minute to process all the madness that had taken place tonight. I’d gone to an *actual* vampire orgy. My professor had taken me to an orgy. How *scandalous*. It was unbelievable, really. My stomach still felt a little queasy, and it was both because of guilt—I hated the pull I felt toward Emmett—but also because of that vampire drink I’d tasted. What had it even been?

If I’d known what it was going to be, I never would’ve gone.

Groaning, I wondered if I should drink some water. Would water work on magic? Like, could I pee magic out? Was that a thing?

Grumbling to myself, I checked my phone. Cali still hadn’t responded. Even if they were having one of their meetings and Greyson was on a rant, she should have responded to her best friend’s text! Glaring at the screen, I shot Cali another text.

*Caliana, emergency! I really need to talk to you!*

And I did, for real. I couldn’t shake the intense pull I felt toward Emmett, even though I had to admit that he was a little weird and a little shady. Like, who took their student to an orgy? Not a very good or ethical professor. But still, when I looked at him, my brain turned into mush. His whole orgy idea definitely hadn’t gotten rid of my attraction to him. If anything, it had made it more intense, while at the same time pissing me the fuck off.

I was mad at him, I was mad at myself, I was mad at Cali. The only person I wasn’t mad at was Jay. He was an innocent cinnamon bun, and I was a horrible mate who was thinking about another man.

My impatience skyrocketing, I checked my phone again—no response from Cali. I was starting to worry about everyone in the pack. What if something had happened? For real? The house was randomly attacked by supernatural beings all the time.

Sitting up on the bed, I started to type out another message for Cali. She needed to know about this Emmett shit ASAP.

*Remember that dude I told you about*

But as I was texting, my phone rang. Finally, it was Jay!

*Thank goodness!*

I squashed the guilt that bubbled up at seeing his name while I’d been thinking about Emmett. I should *not* have been thinking about Emmett; I should have been thinking about Jay. *Always*.

I immediately picked up the phone, anxious. “Is everything okay? You said you were going to call me right back! I was getting really worried.”

*And restless and jumpy and all the bad things*, I added in my head.

Jay’s voice sounded even. “Everything’s fine… Well, at least for now.”

That did not sound promising. Jay’s calmness was normal, but that didn’t mean that something wasn’t seriously wrong.

“Oh no,” I said, alarmed. “What’s going on?”

Jay kept his tone casual. “There’s some looming danger with dark magic and all that. But what else is new?”

I straightened, frowning. “It sounds like I should come back to the pack house. I’m a vampire now, new powers and all that. Maybe I can help you guys.”

The truth was that by staying away from my friends and my mate, it felt like there was nothing I could do to help them. I hated the feeling. I hated feeling useless and isolated. Especially when the only person I felt a connection to here was someone I shouldn’t have been thinking about in the first place.

“Maybe I should just come home now—”

“No!” Jay said, a little more intensely. “You’re much safer where you are.”

That was debatable. And frustrating—the way he said those words was *so frustrating*. “I don’t want to be safe if my friends are in danger!”

Jay was back to his usual calm demeanor. “Lola, this is nothing new. There’s always drama going on around here. Don’t worry about us, we’ve got it under control.”

“Do you, though? Maybe I could—”

“We’re still not even sure what to do, and it’s all magic related, which isn’t exactly your specialty. There’s nothing that you could do, even if you were here,” Jay said.

He was so logical and levelheaded. One of the things I loved about him. There were so many things that I loved about him. *Adored* about him.

“Okay.” I sighed. “But I miss you, so much. So, so much.”

“I miss you too, Lola,” Jay said softly.

There was a sad little beat of silence between us, and I could feel his longing through our mate bond. I wanted to wrap my arms around him and tell him that we would always be together. I believed that with all my heart, despite all the vampire madness.

“Anyway,” Jay said, his tone a little more upbeat. It was obvious he was trying to perk up the mood again. “What did you get up to today? I want to hear everything!”

I grimaced. *Everything?* That would’ve been a bit much. Especially considering the position that I was currently in. I hated myself right then. Hated this entire situation. I’d never lied to Jay before. There had never been any reason to do so. I’d just never felt the need. I trusted him wholeheartedly, so truthfulness was just our normal way of communicating. My current desire to lie was bad—I could feel that in my gut.

But I was pretty sure that hearing the truth about my day would hurt him, and that was the last thing that I wanted to do. And how could I casually mention that I’d just gotten back from a magical drug-fueled orgy? How did one bring that up in everyday conversation without sounding like they had lost their mind?

Had I really lost my mind? That was definitely up for debate.

“It’s just been a really long day,” I finally said. That wasn’t technically lying, was it? *Oh, fuck*. Even though I felt supremely guilty, I kept talking. “Not sure I’ve gotten that great of a start at class. And some of the others think I’m some sort of freak because I used to be a werewolf.”

There. That was all true. I wasn’t technically lying!

*Keep telling yourself that, Lola.*

Just to make matters worse, Jay stayed perfect by sounding concerned. “Wait, is everything okay? Are people being mean to you?”

He sounded alarmed, and so protective that it almost made me swoon. I rushed to reassure him. “No. They just don’t understand some things about us. Like the mate thing.”

Jay sighed deeply. “If they don’t understand our connection, it’s their loss. You know that.”

I grinned to myself, feeling a little bit better about everything.

“The good thing is that it’s not all bad here. Some of the people really seem like they want to help me. Like Emmett…” I trailed off, stopping myself. I wished I hadn’t said his name to Jay. The whole thing was making my heart race.

“Who’s Emmett?” Jay asked, sounding curious.

Clearing my throat, I said, “Just a professor here.”

*Who’s nice but still weird and shady, and there’s also the thing about me wanting to fuck him because of vampire heat! ARGH!*

There was a long pause, and then Jay said, “What’s going on? I can tell from your voice that something’s bothering you. Is it more about those mean girls?”

I was feeling so guilty that my stomach convulsed. I’d gone back and forth on telling Jay about Emmett so many times, and even though I’d ended up deciding not to say anything, it still felt unbearable to keep the truth from him. To lie to him.

This was plain old lying. And mates did not do that.

Mates were perfect for each other, exactly because they clicked.

Or at least, Jay and I used to click.

I missed that. I needed that.

I couldn’t lose that, and lying would only make everything worse.

I took a deep breath. “Actually… That professor, Emmett?”

“Yes?” Jay asked.

“I almost kissed him.”

**Episode 1371**

I looked up at the ice, fighting the urge to scream. That would’ve been counterproductive, seeing as I was still *under fucking water*. To make matters worse, this thing had to be a force field, because it didn’t look like ice. It just felt like it—cool and indestructible.

Utter panic overwhelmed me. *Where the hell did this thing come from?*

My lungs were still burning, my head was pounding, and my entire body was protesting, knowing that death was closer. And if all that wasn’t enough, my terror was coexisting with confusion. What was that vision of Xavier and Greyson? Greyson would never have spoken to me that way, would never have been so cold. And Xavier… He’d seemed so subdued, so unlike himself.

The whole thing only made me fear for my life even more.

I glanced down… *Uh oh*, that was a bad freaking move! The ghostly creeps were still swirling around like jellyfish—the deadly kind—and they kept on beckoning to me with their bony fingers. Could they not see that I was NOT in the mood to stay with them and die?

I turned back to face the ice—which was not ice, it was magic, and that made it a million times more dangerous. In vain, I tried to pound against the barrier. I knew I needed to break it, or I was going to pass out. My body was sending me all the warning signs—alarms going off, my lungs feeling like they were about to give out…

I kept fighting against the barrier, kept trying to penetrate it with my magic, but my powers were abandoning me. My vision was starting to get spotty. I was getting weaker and weaker, and as the seconds ticked by, the barrier remained as strong as ever. No cracks, no signs of giving in. And I felt like I was ready to fall asleep.

As my vision dimmed, I brought an image of Xavier and Greyson to the forefront my mind. Longing and sadness overwhelmed me, along with regret that I wouldn’t get to see them one last time before I died. I thought about Greyson and our shared visions of the future… Clearly, they hadn’t been real.

I could see that now, as the life slowly left me.

I was too exhausted to fight. Too broken.

Giving up felt like a relief, in a way. As much as I could feel anything with my senses slowly abandoning me. I let my arms sink down to my sides and closed my eyes.

The second I did, the ghostly whispers were back.

*Yes, yes!*

*Join us…*

*Come to us…*

*Become one with our world…*

*Now, you are ours.*

*Is she breathing? She’s not breathing!*

The voices had changed. They didn’t sound ghostly at all. They sounded pretty anxious and irritated and like they were freaking the hell out. They sounded human. *Familiar*.

Suddenly, air invaded my senses, coursing through my system like a lifeline. I jolted upright and started to cough up water, heaps of it. I was choking, confused, wondering where the hell the creepy little ghost bastards had gone, and still fucking *horrified*.

“Thank god, she’s okay! That’s it, get it all out!” someone said. A girl.

Someone else was patting me on the back. “Stay with me, Cali…”

“Should we do more compressions? CPR?” another female voice anxiously asked.

Right then, my eyes fluttered open.

My head was absolutely killing me. My chest was tight, and my lungs felt like they’d been all scratched up inside. I was still coughing and spitting up water… How much had I swallowed? It felt like buckets.

*Thank god I’m not spitting up blood or something…*

Hovering over me were Greyson, Violet, and Marta. All were wide-eyed with concern. My chest still heaving, I stared up at them. I felt weak. I felt like I wasn’t sure what was real, not after I’d seen that vision… But at least their reactions seemed normal—not like the way the fake Greyson and Xavier had acted.

It felt like the entire thing had been a nightmare.

“What happened?” My voice sounded unlike my own. It was scary to hear, but Greyson sagged with relief.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he exhaled, wrapping me up in a crushing hug. I wanted to tell him, *I’m glad to see you too, buddy, but maybe you shouldn’t squeeze me so much?*

Before I could even speak, though, he pulled back to face me again, his hands on my arms. “*What* *happened?* I’m the one that should be asking you that!” He pointed at the pond. “I was fucking terrified. I thought you’d drowned!”

“I—”

“What on earth were you doing out here in the woods?” Greyson sounded angry and desperate and worried, all at the same time. He really had a lot of feelings. It was flattering, and a little worrisome, because he looked very pale, like he was the one who’d almost drowned. He really needed to ease up. I was okay, wasn’t I?

*I mean, that’s debatable. I’m probably traumatized forever, but let’s not talk about that*.

I cleared my throat as Greyson stared at me. “I was…”

But Greyson wasn’t done ranting. “You know how dangerous things are right now! And you decided to just wander off in the middle of the night? *Seriously?*”

“Greyson…” Violet squeezed his shoulder, her tone calming. “Maybe we should let her speak.”

Greyson didn’t even hear her. “Do you want to give me a heart attack, Cali? Do you want me to die? Because if that’s the goal here, you’re getting closer to achieving it every day!”

“Greyson!” Violet said again, louder this time. “Let her speak, okay?”

“Yeah,” Marta piped up. “That would probably help.”

He took a deep breath and shook his head, moving his hands from my arms to my face, stroking my cheeks. He stared at me with a haunted expression. When he spoke again, his voice was low and shaking. “Okay, I’m sorry. I just—” *Don’t know what I’d do without you, love. Forgive me*, he mind linked to me. “Tell us what happened, Cali. Please.”

I swallowed. “I’m sorry.” I glanced at the pond. I was feeling so shaken. “How did you guys find me here?”

Marta stared at me. “I got this weird feeling,” she said. “And Lilac could feel something as well. Like he was being pulled here. We had to find out what was causing the feeling, and I’m really glad we did.”

The dread was still obvious on Marta’s face. What she’d described sounded weird, but not any weirder than getting trapped in a death pond full of ghosts. That took the cake.

Marta shook her head. “All we found was you, though. That’s about it. As soon as we pulled you out of the pond, the feeling stopped for both of us.” She nodded to an empty space. “Lilac agrees.”

I felt so grateful for Marta suddenly. What would I have done without her?

*You would have died.* The answer throbbed inside my head, making it ache even more. *If Artemis had actually managed to kill Marta, you would have died…*

“Thank you, Marta,” I whispered.

She nodded seriously.

“Let me help you up,” Greyson said gently. I swayed when my feet touched the ground, and he scooped me up into his arms. He felt so steady against me, so strong. I was grateful to have him here. He kissed the top of my head, the relief coming off him in waves.

We all started walking back to the house.

“What did you see under the water?” Marta asked.

I glanced at Violet, who nodded at me encouragingly. Greyson remained silent, but I could feel his grip on me, safe and secure. I started to explain to all three of them about the spirits, the voices, how they’d tried to pull me deeper. How freaking creepy they’d been.

“What could that have been?” I asked Marta. “They had the same eyes as the revenants. Ghostly. Empty.”

Greyson reached to squeeze my hand gently. “You need to rest right now. No more detective work.”

I shook my head. My mind was racing—especially after I saw Marta and Violet exchange an alarmed look.

“I mean it, Marta. Do you know anything about the creatures?” I asked shakily. “Can you tell me more about what you and Lilac felt?”

Marta paused. She glanced at the air to her side and then murmured, “Lilac says that it felt like a door.”

I felt Greyson go rigid against me. Violet shivered.

It was pretty obvious that nobody liked the sound of that. I swallowed thickly. “A *door*? To the spirit world?”

Marta glanced at the air next to her, then nodded. She seemed worried as well. Her eyebrows were furrowed, her lips a thin line. This was *bad*. “But it’s closed right now,” she said, as if that fixed anything. “All the portals are still shut.”

Fear gripped at me as a realization clicked inside my head. “If the portals do open, though… Will our world be overtaken by revenants?”

**Episode 1372**

XAVIER

Kira, Tallis, and I were sitting at a Greek diner, drinking coffee in the middle of the night.

“This is actually really tasty,” Kira said, pointing at her cold drink.

“It’s kind of like a whipped coffee thing from Starbucks or whatever,” Tallis said. She glanced behind the counter, where an old man was smiling and chattering with his employees instead of working. “But don’t tell that to Mr. Apollo. He’ll go on a rant about Greeks inventing this beverage decades ago. He also thinks his recipe is the best ever, and doesn’t react well to comparisons.”

All three of us turned to look at the old man. He had to be at least seventy, which was interesting, since he was clearly not retired. He seemed harmless, but there was definitely a weird, menacing edge to the way he was chopping apples.

“*Anyway*,” Kira said breezily. “Let’s focus on the matter at hand.”

Taking a sip of the fluffy coffee that the very weird old man had made, I cleared my throat. “Yeah. What exactly do you mean when you say that we can help each other?” I asked Tallis.

She looked between me and Kira and leaned forward. Her voice lowered. “I’m an… *associate* of sorts, in the Blood Moon.” She paused. “And I’m chomping at the bit to move up the food chain.”

I wasn’t sure I liked this.

If Tallis was part of the Blood Moon, she was inherently difficult to trust. Who was to say that this wasn’t some sort of ploy? But I’d play along for now, just to see where she was going with this.

“You’re interested in getting rid of Garren?” I asked.

“Why is that?” Kira added.

Tallis grunted. “Why wouldn’t I? He’s out of control,” she explained. “He’s taking too much venom now. Even for a group that revels in messiness, he’s over the top.”

That didn’t sound good at all.

“And to make matters worse,” Tallis went on, “he’s hoarding money, taking larger cuts than he should.” Her expression turned disgusted. “And he just killed someone at that venom den back there. He’s getting more out of control by the second.”

Kira was silent.

I snorted. “Isn’t that kind of the Blue Moon schtick, though?”

Tallis rolled her eyes. “Sure. But we try to keep a fairly low public profile. Garren is putting us all in jeopardy by acting so sloppy and bold out in the world.” She shook her head. “He’s not right for the job—*I* am.”

I nodded slowly. She obviously knew what she wanted. At least that was what it looked like. Appearances were a lie a lot of the time, though.

“I assume that’s where we come in?” I asked.

Tallis glanced at Kira, who was taking in the conversation with calculating eyes.

“Why should we trust you, though?” Kira asked. “If you want to double cross someone who’s supposed to be on the same team as you, how do we know you won’t do the same to us?”

Tallis shook her head bitterly. “The Blood Moon is no longer a team—not when Garren does whatever he wants and gets away with it. There’s no structure. There’s no respect. Even among creatures like us, there needs to be a balance. Otherwise everything turns to chaos. And within chaos, nothing works.”

“I told you he was terrible,” Kira said, looking at me.

“Never said he wasn’t.”

Tallis snorted. “He’s out of his fucking mind.”

“How did you know that you could turn to us?” I asked Tallis.

She glanced between Kira and me and shrugged. “I know you guys have been asking about Garren. Doesn’t take a genius to realize that your intentions aren’t to meet up with him for a friendly chit-chat.”

“Definitely not friendly,” Kira muttered.

Tallis smirked. “Exactly. Garren has made tons of enemies over the years.” She gestured between all three of us. “I think we can work together and accomplish both our goals.”

I glanced over at Kira to see what she was thinking. Her expression was unreadable. Tallis seemed genuine. She was displaying naked self-interest, which could very possibly be genuine. And if it *were* genuine, then she could prove to be a real asset for us. She was clearly close with Garren, and she could give us inside information on his vulnerabilities, his comings and goings, the rest of the Blue Moon gang, and how he interacted with them.

Kira’s eyebrows arched slightly then, and that was enough for me to realize that she was intrigued. I could feel Tallis’s eyes on us, and then she suddenly grabbed my phone.

“What are you doing?” I asked her calmly.

“Just adding my information,” Tallis said, sliding the phone back to me. She stood up from the booth, pulling her leather jacket back on. “Let me know what you decide. Just be quick about it. I want Garren gone—like, yesterday.”

With one final scoff and a wave at the old man behind the counter, Tallis was gone.

“Do you think we should…”

Kira cut me off with a sharp shake of her head. She glanced around, apparently paranoid about spies lurking behind the booths, eating gyros or something else with a lot of garlic. “Let’s talk about this in the car,” she said.

I threw a few dollars onto the table for our coffees, took one last sip of mine because that was some good stuff, and then we headed out.

The moment we got back in the car, I turned to Kira. Her expression was still intrigued, but cautious.

“So?” I asked. “Do you think this is a good idea?”

Kira rubbed her forehead. “I don’t particularly trust anyone who engages with the Blood Moon. I don’t want to make any of their members lives’ easier, or get drawn into any kind of deal.”

I nodded. “Fair enough.”

But Kira wasn’t done talking. After spending so much time with Cali, I should have been able to recognize when a woman wasn’t done talking.

“I wanted killing Garren to be the end of this saga, not the beginning of something else,” she said. “What if Tallis wants something from us in return? What if she ends up being more of a threat than we realize? What if this is all a trap and Garren kills us before we manage to attack him?”

I nodded. “All of that is true. But if she’s telling the truth, an insider might be helpful to us. Garren’s always surrounded by his goons, so if someone can give us information that will help us get him alone… Well, it could be the solution to all our problems.”

Kira paused, her expression thoughtful. “What if we don’t work with Tallis?” she asked slowly. “What if Tallis goes off on her own and kills Garren first?”

That sounded like a pretty good plan to me. We got the result that we wanted without having to do any of the work.

“Would that be so bad?” I asked Kira. “He would be dead, and we could fucking go home.”

As fun as it was to be back on this mercenary bullshit, I didn’t want to draw out this excursion any longer. I was missing Cali so fucking much that it hurt. I couldn’t wait to see her face again. To touch her, to hold her. If I let myself think about it, my chest started aching.

“No,” Kira declared. There was a fierceness to her gaze. “I want to kill him. I want to look in his eyes and make him pay for what he did to my husband.”

For a moment, the horrifying idea of something happening to Cali passed through my mind. I’d be overwhelmed by grief and vengeance. I could understand where Kira was coming from. But still…

“You said that you were brought up to be a healer,” I told her quietly. “Are you sure you’ve got what it takes to kill him yourself?”

Kira glanced outside, her gaze distant. “I choked when I saw him at that bar, but there’s no way I’m letting anyone else do this for me. He’s mine.”

She turned to me, meeting my gaze. I could see the fire in her eyes, all her determination and grit. I was impressed by it. There was a lot of strength inside this woman. It had been obvious from the moment I’d seen her flick away Iñigo’s vampires. I knew that if she was mentally prepared, she would be able to pull this off.

She would be able to look at Garren right in the eye and take the life out of him.

It was settled, then.

We would call Tallis. We would work on this deal, hash it out with our new partner. I was going to make Tallis understand, one way or another, that Kira would be the one to get the kill.

“We should—”

*BANG!*

All of a sudden, a brick came flying through the windshield of the car, sending glass flying everywhere.

**Episode 1373**

GREYSON

Cali was in my arms, light as a feather and shaking like a leaf. My heart hadn’t stopped pounding for the past few minutes. When we’d pulled her out of the water, she’d been so pale. So still. I’d been terrified. I’d thought I’d lost her for a few heartstopping moments, and it was like my entire world had come to complete standstill.

I hadn’t meant to snap at her; I hoped she knew that.

I glanced down at her face and held her a little tighter, so grateful that she was still alive. Alive and okay. Marta and Violet were walking next to me, and they were having a heated conversation about what all this could mean.

“But how did that portal in the pond even open?” Violet asked.

“And was it ever a portal before?” Marta added.

I pulled my attention away from Cali and back to the matter at hand. What the hell was going on with that spooky hell pond? Where had it come from? What the fuck was going on, in general? Cali’s question flashed through my mind. If it *was* some kind of portal, and it opened, would all those revenants pour out like soul-hungry worms?

I turned to Marta. “Do you know anything else about this? You know, from being a medium?”

Marta raised an eyebrow. “Seriously, I have no idea. This is dark magic, like Big Mac taught me to detect. It doesn’t make any sense to me.”

I nodded, my brow furrowing. “We need to talk to Big Mac again, then,” I said, shaking my head. It was so frustrating that I wasn’t able to do anything more to protect the pack. To protect Cali. What kind of Alpha was I if the entire group—including the woman I loved—was in danger, and I was helpless to do anything about it?

How could I live with myself knowing how much I was lacking?

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I gently put Cali down on the couch. We had made it safely back to the pack house, but she was still shivering. I brought her a new set of clothes to change into and covered her up with a bunch of blankets. Then I tucked her in gently, and she stared up at me.

“Thank you, Greyson.”

She was breaking my fucking heart.

“Go get me Big Mac,” I told Violet and Marta. Both of them nodded sharply and headed upstairs. As they left, Orla and Tom rushed over to Cali.

“What’s going on?” Orla asked. “We heard the commotion.”

Tom looked a little green with worry, but Orla seemed to have a much firmer grip on herself. Then again, this woman *had* lied to her husband and kid for years about being Fae—of course she could control her emotions much more easily than her husband.

“Seriously, what’s happened this time?” Tom asked, looking both agonized and aghast.

I glanced at Cali, wondering how much she was going to tell her parents. Knowing her, it could go either way—a sea of very scary information, blurted out all at once, or a vague non-answer.

Cali smiled weakly at her mom. “I’m totally fine now.”

“You are not fine, Caliana,” Tom said. “We can clearly see that you are *not* fine!”

Orla squeezed her husband’s shoulder, as if to calm him down. He narrowed his eyes at Cali suspiciously. That was probably what I’d looked like fifteen minutes earlier.

“Dad, I promise I’m okay.” Cali sat up slightly, wincing. Tom gasped as if Cali had just exploded, and Orla frowned at her.

“But what happened?” she pressed.

Cali glanced at me. *Should I tell them?* she asked through our mind link.

I arched an eyebrow. *It’s up to you.*

She pouted. *You’re not helping.*

I hid a snort as Tom said, “Can you two stop exchanging weird eye glances for a moment?” he said. “Cali, tell us what happened!”

Cali sighed deeply. Then she cleared her throat. “It’s no big deal. I just… fell in a pond, and some ghosts grabbed me. But I’m out now, all good!”

Not surprisingly, Tom gasped. “Ghosts? Real *ghosts*?” His expression couldn’t have been less thrilled. Cali’s mother was scowling, looking concerned but thoughtful at the same time. It was as if she could sense that Cali was keeping something from her.

“They were real, all right,” Marta said from behind us. She, Violet and Big Mac had just entered the living room. Big Mac looked severe, but I wasn’t surprised by that.

“You’re not telling us everything,” Orla told her daughter. “We need to know everything, Cali.”

Cali glanced at me again, and then meekly said, “Okay, and I kind of almost drowned. They tried to drown me. The ghosts.”

Tom looked like he was about to faint. Orla remained serious. Big Mac sat down next to Cali and stared at her gravely. “Talk me through everything that happened. Every detail matters. Do you understand?”

Cali glanced at me again.

*You can do this, love*, I told her.

Swallowing roughly, Cali nodded. She started to tell Big Mac the whole story. I couldn’t deal with hearing the whole thing again. It was like my worst nightmare, repeated on a loop. I headed to the kitchen to get a glass of water. I couldn’t help but feel responsible—not only as the Alpha, but also as Cali’s mate. She had been sleeping right next to me before she’d taken off. We had made amazing, fucking *incredible* love, and she’d been snuggled up in my arms. How the hell had I not woken up?

Had I been rendered completely unconscious by the endorphins?

I hadn’t been with her for what felt like ages, even though it had just been a few days, and I’d probably been in some sort of love and lust coma that had overwhelmed my every sense. I couldn’t explain it any other way. But still, how could I justify to myself—to Cali, or her parents, or fucking *Xavier*—the fact that I’d just let Cali wander off in the middle of the night?

I should have been there to protect her. We should have gone into the forest together, if that was what she wanted. If that was what she needed. I didn’t want to treat her like a child, but sometimes, her decisions were so reckless and questionable that the only way to keep myself in check was to keep an eye on her.

It was messed up but true.

And I was pretty sure she would do the same for me if the roles were reversed.

I started to pace, feeling a little claustrophobic. It was almost funny, the way I’d genuinely believed that after we killed Silas, all of the pack’s troubles would be solved. *As if*. Since then, there had been nothing but confusion and danger. And anger.

At least with Silas, there had been one clear enemy. But now, everything was so murky that I wasn’t even sure what we were really fighting. Was it the ghosts? The revenants? Was it Artemis and the dark magic around her? Was it the Orb? Was it Iñigo and his vampires? Was it all of those things, all at once?

The magic seemed to be the biggest problem. Dark magic that was closing in on us from every direction. But if I couldn’t physically see it, then how could I prepare everyone to deal with it? How could I make sure that everyone was safe and protected?

I returned to the living room and looked over at Cali. A group had gathered on the sofa around her, looking at her with worried eyes. She might not have been their Luna, but she was clearly something pretty close.

“… that’s how it happened,” Cali was saying, and Big Mac took a sharp breath.

“If a new portal has opened so close to the house, then the entire pack is in grave danger,” Big Mac said severely.

*No shit, Sherlock.*

“We need to get to the bottom of this before anything disastrous happens,” Big Mac continued.

That was another “No shit” moment right there.

All of this had been going on for a really fucking long time, and as the Alpha, I should have admitted to myself the ways I was lacking much sooner.

“But what should we do?” Orla asked. “What *can* we do?”

Big Mac was silent for a long moment.

The entire group stared at her, and I did the same. It felt like nobody wanted to voice the truth, which was that we really had no idea what we were dealing with.

*Fucking hell.*

This was getting out of control. It had been out of control all along. And I had way too much to lose. As much as I hated to admit it, I needed backup. There was no way that I could avoid it.

I pulled my phone from my pocket and hesitated for a long moment. A really long moment, because I did not fucking want to do this. I had no other choice, though.

I glanced at Cali.

Sighing, I dialed the number.

After a few beats, I heard a voice on the other end of the line. “Hello?”

**Episode 1374**

XAVIER

I hadn’t expected to hear from my brother, of all people, while I was off on a mission. I was kind of busy at the moment, though. I eyed the front of the car, and the broken windshield. The *shattered* windshield.

Greyson had been doing most of the talking so far. I just listened, kept my voice low, and tried to multitask by figuring out if there were any clues for the car attack problem that I was dealing with at the moment.

“… and then Cali almost drowned,” Greyson said.

I froze. My brother had been going on for a bit about dark magic, the Orb, revenants, Artemis, blah-blah-blah… This was the only thing that had shaken me up.

“She’s okay right now, though? Right?” I said. I could hear my pulse thudding in my ears. I’d been gone for like five minutes and catastrophe had struck. Couldn’t we catch a break?

“She’s fine, but the revenants were trying to drag her down into the pond. Which, like I told you earlier, might be a portal,” Greyson said. “And if it is—and it’s located so close to the pack house—then that means we’re in some very serious trouble.”

His tone was calm, but I could hear traces of anger and anxiety. Obviously. I knew I would have lost my shit if this had happened to Cali while I was around. I rubbed my forehead, exhaling sharply as I glanced over at Kira. She was huddled next to the car. We’d pulled over after the brick had gone through our windshield. I was supposed to be investigating what had happened, but all of my thoughts had flown out of my head now that I knew that Cali and the whole pack were in serious danger.

“What can I do to help?” I asked.

Greyson sighed. *Sighing* was not his usual style. “I wish I knew. But I get the feeling that this is all building up to something. And as much as I hate to admit it, I could really use your help back here.”

I snorted, barely believing my ears. For Greyson to swallow his pride and tell me something like that, things had to be a really bad. “Are you ordering me to come back, oh mighty Alpha?”

Greyson let out an irritated huff. “No, Xavier. I’m asking. I know you care about Cali, and I know you care about the pack, so I thought I’d let you know what’s going on.”

I realized that Greyson was actually right. If there was danger coming, I wanted Cali to have all the protection we could offer her.

I nodded sharply. “I promise I’ll be back as soon as possible.”

I hung up and turned to Kira.

She was watching me curiously, one eyebrow arched. “Bad news?” she asked, her voice low.

“There is trouble back at home,” I said. “My mate is in danger, and I need to be there.”

Kira swallowed. “What does that mean for us?”

“That we need to speed things along here,” I said. I realized that Kira had thought there was a chance I’d just abandon her. But that wasn’t the way I did things. I’d made a promise, and I was set on keeping it. I had a code of honor.

“Well, I hope we can finish up sooner than later as well. But I wouldn’t hold my breath.” Kira grimaced, holding up the brick that had smashed through our windshield. “Clearly someone’s not happy that we’re here.”

I nodded grimly, looking at my destroyed windshield. *Fuck*. This was the fourth car I’d ruined this year. My insurance rate was going to go through the roof.

“Do you think Garren’s trying to kill us?” Kira asked me, looking impassive.

“I can’t be sure.” I frowned. “But there’s something about the timing of us meeting up with Tallis and then being targeted immediately afterward. Can’t be a coincidence.”

“You think this was some kind of setup?” Kira asked me.

I shrugged. “Just saying. Mighty convenient that it happened like this.”

Kira shook her head. “I still think we should get in touch with her. Try to work with her to make sure that she doesn’t make any moves herself.”

“Okay,” I agreed. “But we need to make sure to keep a close eye on her. We can’t trust her.”

Kira nodded, then she gestured toward the windshield. “What are we going to do about this?”

I sighed, grumbling. “We’re going to leave the car here. If the Blood Moon knows what we’re driving, we’re better off on foot anyway.”

The two of us started making our way down the road. Luckily, the brick had hit when we were only a few blocks away from the crappy motel we’d been planning on crashing in. Small victories.

After we checked in and moved toward a room, Kira said, “You seem pretty upset. I mean, you’re always frowning anyway, but this seems like something more. Do you wanna talk about that phone call?”

I glanced at her. “Are you asking if I want to talk about my feelings?”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m just wondering.”

The truth was, I was worried sick about Cali. “I want this mission done tomorrow, Kira. Whatever it takes.”

“Damn. Things back home must be intense,” she murmured.

“My mate is in danger,” I said. “I can’t risk being away from her right now.”

Kira nodded solemnly. “I get it. Don’t worry, I’m ready for this. I’m ready to take out Garren.”

I was glad to see the determination on her face.

We got to our room, and I let Kira use the bathroom first, because I was a gentleman or whatever. I went in after her and contemplated taking a shower, then went back into the room to pick up some towels, because there were none in the bathroom. I found Kira pulling a bunch of cosmetics from her backpack and tossing them onto the bed.

“What?” she said defensively. “Have you never seen a woman with a skin care routine before?”

I was about to—probably naïvely—ask why she even needed a skin care routine, being gorgeous and also a witch who could probably make some sort of potion and all, but then there was a knock on the door that startled both of us.

“Must be the cleaning person,” she said. “We don’t have any towels.”

Kira made a move to answer, but the second she touched the knob, the door burst open.

I found myself growling as three goons shoved their way into our room.

Kira looked bewildered. “Jensen?”

She recognized one of them.

This was really fucking bad.

The man pointed at her with menace and said, “No matter where you try to go, Iñigo will always find you, Kira. He wants your magic back.” He glanced at the other two guys and then pointed at me. “Kill the dog.”

I roared, shifting instantly. The vampires were set on biting me, the venom in their teeth the only thing that would be able to weaken me. But I was too strong for them, too fast. My paw was the size of a vampire’s head, and that came in handy when I literally cracked their necks and clawed their heads off. Who needed a stake when you could kill a vampire like that?

The stench of death was now evident in the room. I realized that they’d masked their scents to reach our door, but now that their blood was running freely, it had nowhere to hide. I looked up and saw that Kira was defending herself against the vampire she’d called Jensen.

She was only working defense, though—she wasn’t fighting back. Not like she had when we’d first escaped the compound. I shifted back to human just to speak to her. She needed to do this herself.

The vampire snarled at her and reached for her neck, but she flipped him over onto his back, straddling his chest as she used her magic to pin his hands down. He was growling at her like a hyena, but Kira still hesitated.

This would not fucking do.

“The man’s trying to kidnap you, Kira! *Kill him*!” I shouted, gaining her attention.

She was panting. She looked between the roaring vampire, who was snapping his teeth at her, and me. She looked so uncertain that I started to wonder what the hell we were even doing here. I had to push her.

“Kira, you say you want to kill Garren yourself—prove that you have it in you!” I said, and just then, the vampire escaped her magic. He pushed her away and whirled around to attack. He was about to claw at her when I grabbed him.

He was hissing like a snake when I pinned back his arms and presented him to Kira.

She was breathing heavily, looking sick.

The woman I’d seen blow people away with a flick of her wrist was hesitant once more. She could use her magic to defend herself, to sustain someone, to injure. But obviously, murder was a whole other thing.

“Prove to me you can do this, Kira,” I said. “*Kill. Him*.”

**Episode 1375**

I woke up in bed, curled up next to Greyson. His strong arms were wrapped around me, as if to make sure I wouldn’t wander off again. Which was, admittedly, something I did pretty frequently. It hadn’t brought me any good results so far, so I had to ask myself why I kept doing it. They said that doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different outcome was… not the smartest thing to do. But hey, I was allowed to make a few mistakes here and there, wasn’t I?

*Thankfully this one didn’t end up being a deadly mistake…*

Greyson had been so worried about me last night. He’d refused to leave my side, and had kept trying to bring me more blankets and hot tea. I glanced at him and saw that he was still sleeping. There were dark circles under his eyes. I cuddled in closer to him, closing my eyes. I allowed myself this little indulgence—to feel how safe and happy he made me.

I’d been denying myself these simple pleasures for so long, but after almost dying a few hours ago, I decided I deserved just a little bit of this decadence.

*Right? I mean I could have drowned. Can’t I have this one nice thing?*

I decided that I could. This was my decision, and I was sticking to it.

Greyson stirred right then, and I smiled up at him. He rubbed his face and immediately asked, “Are you okay? Do you need anything?”

I snorted. “Stop fussing. I’m fine.” I wrapped my arm tighter around his torso. “All I want is to stay like this, together.”

Greyson stared at me for a beat. He leaned forward, kissing my forehead, my cheeks. It was so tender, everything about this, that I felt my heart and stomach flutter.

“Thank you,” I mumbled, for probably the tenth time. “Thank you for coming to save me. I’m sorry I went off without telling anyone.”

Greyson gave me a pained look. I could see that he was still struggling with what had happened last night. Then he sighed. “I’m just glad I was able to get there in time.” He swallowed roughly, tucking my hair behind my ear. “I don’t know what I’d do if I lost you.”

He pulled me in even closer, if that were possible, and kissed the top of my head. He felt like a cocoon, and I was surrounded by him, safe. I could feel the surge of closeness and emotion between us as we silently embraced for a long moment.

*This feels like heaven*, I thought.

I finally pulled back just a smidge, still attached to him like a koala. I looked up at him and our gazes met. Without even thinking about it, I leaned forward, closer and closer, until our lips met in a soft kiss. Just a brush, but it lingered. It made me feel alight from the inside out.

Greyson pulled away. “I’m going to get you a white chocolate mocha. Something sweet and warm to make you feel all cozy.”

“You’re babying me way too much,” I told him, even though my stomach fluttered.

He snorted. “And you love it. You know you do.”

I rolled my eyes, waving him off, and he laughed, walking out.

I missed his touch instantly. I wanted him back in bed right away, even though at the same time, the ever-present guilt of longing for two men at once rolled around in the back of my head. I allowed myself to ignore it for the moment.

*You deserve this moment, Cali*, I told myself once more.

I lay in bed, looking up the ceiling. I felt momentarily safe and secure. Like nothing could go wrong. But reality quickly settled in. Familiar worries began to creep back into my head. Everyone at the pack house was tense with all of the confusion and dark energy swirling around. And then, of course, there was that whole thing with Artemis…

If Artemis had hurt Marta, nobody would have realized that I was in that pond.

Greyson wouldn’t have saved me if it hadn’t been for Marta.

And Artemis, my own sister, had almost harmed the medium irreversibly. That was the reality of it all. I had to face the facts.

My own sister had been overcome by dark magic and had almost killed someone in our very own house. A house that I considered my home. I shuddered at the thought and pushed back the covers, then headed to the bathroom for another hot shower, got dressed, and walked out of the room. I needed to check on my sister.

*This is going to be fine! It’s not like Artemis could suddenly change her entire personality and attack me! Like, try to strangle me or something. It’s fine*, I told myself.

I was in so much denial, though.

I had to fix this. Sooner rather than later. I needed to explore every potential solution.

I knocked lightly on Artemis’s door, then pushed it to see my sister lying in bed.

She wasn’t sleeping. She was just staring at the ceiling. It was a little spooky.

Artemis had been spooky for a while now.

“How are you doing?” I asked, walking across the room. I gingerly sat down on the bed.

At least she looked calm. She looked like herself, not like someone or something was about to claw its way out of her. So that was positive.

“I’m feeling fine,” Artemis said. “Maybe a little tired, but okay.”

I instantly felt better. “Well, that sounds good!”

Artemis shot me a look. Probably wondering why I sounded so cheerful. I cleared my throat. “I actually have been meaning to talk to you about something.”

She arched her eyebrows at me. I took that as a cue to continue.

“You know how the whole pack house is awash with dark magic and the dead are rising, that whole thing?” I asked her casually.

Artemis kept staring at me.

Her gaze was a little unnerving. I felt slightly nervous to breach the subject with her, but I powered through. “I know that you’ve been worried about being… influenced or whatever, and I actually had that witch Kira send me the recipe for a potion that can cleanse dark magic. It’s in the fridge now. Would you take it?”

I blurted it out all at once, and now I waited, fumbling with the hem of my shirt. What would it mean if Artemis refused to take the potion? She remained calm, turning to face me after glancing up the ceiling.

In a quiet, serious voice, she said, “At this point, I’ve got nothing to lose. So why not?”

“Really?!” I asked, clapping my hands. “That’s awesome!”

“You look relieved,” she commented, deadpan.

“Yeah, because I didn’t know how you would react. I mean, you’ve been kind of unpredictable lately, and I am a little bit scared of—” I caught myself because before finishing that sentence. “Anyway! Let me go get the potion.”

I raced downstairs to grab the potion from the fridge. Greyson was in the kitchen, stirring something inside a cup—probably the delicious beverage he’d promised me. His expression changed from neutral to alarmed.

“Oh no. What is it this time?” he asked.

The faint resignation in his expression was almost offensive.

*Excuse me? Is not like I act like a reckless dork ALL the time. Just, some of it, okay? Jeez!*

Determined not to let anything ruin my optimism, I grinned. “I’m fixing Artemis! Hopefully!” I told him, pointing at the potion in my hand.

Before he could reply, I ran away and up the stairs. I was back into Artemis’s room in record time, and I found her in the exact same position I’d left her in, still looking exhausted.

“Okay! I’m back,” I said. I gestured at the potion. “From what Kira said, this isn’t a one-time thing. You would have to keep taking it. But hopefully it will keep you from being all… possessed or whatever, and trying to kill our friendly neighborhood medium.”

Artemis slowly sat up. She stared down at the potion in my hands for a long time.

I started to get worried that she’d changed her mind, that there was something in her, right now, that was stopping her from making this decision.

*Oh no. Please tell me she’s not about to explode on me. Please, no more mayhem, after the bullshit in the pond. I cannot deal—*

My thoughts were interrupted when Artemis, in a super swift movement, reached out and grabbed the jar from my hand. She unscrewed the top quickly and took a big gulp.

The relief I felt was palpable.

“Well?” I asked, my voice shaking but careful. “Can you feel anything? Do you think it’s working?”

Artemis swallowed again. She tilted her head to the side before shaking it. “I don’t think I’m feeling anything…” She peered at me. “Are you sure you made it right? It must be a complicated spell, and it’s not like cooking is your strong suit.”

I was torn between being glad that Artemis was acting like her usual snarky self, and also annoyed. But then, out of the blue, Artemis’s whole body seized.

I choked. “Artemis! What—”

She contorted with a gasp, falling to the floor and writhing in agony.

**Episode 1376**

CHARLIE

Violet and I were on a beautiful beach, sitting on a blanket with a picnic spread out before us. Violet had prepared all my favorite foods: blueberry pie, spring rolls, dumplings, coleslaw. The ocean sparkled a few feet away, and the umbrella hovering over us created some wonderful shade. The view was perfect, but nothing was as gorgeous as Violet’s smile.

“Are you having a nice time?” she asked me, pulling me into an embrace. Her touch felt incredible. It made me shiver.

“With you, always,” I murmured, feeling my heart expand ten sizes. I was so full of love, to a level I hadn’t even realized was possible. How could you love someone this much? How could you feel like everything was right in the world when they were right beside you? Violet was the most amazing dream come true.

Violet brushed my hair off my forehead and leaned closer for a kiss.

I closed my eyes, so eager for it, but when I opened them again…

I was awake.

It *had* been a dream.

I groaned and closed my eyes again, fighting to go back to sleep. I wished that I could will myself back into the fantasy, but it was obviously not working. I scowled to myself, feeling the urge to grumble, but then I remembered that Violet had said that she would come to visit as soon as she could. That meant that soon, that wonderful dream could be the real deal.

I wanted it to be the real deal so badly.

Sighing, I rolled over and saw that the whole room was empty. Wait, where was Zachery? Aisha? Reggie? I frowned and picked up my phone, realizing that I’d totally overslept. Why the hell hadn’t any of my roommates woken me up?

I got dressed as quickly as possible, pretty sure I looked like a mess. I gave up trying to find matching socks, and my shorts had a tiny hole at the hem, which I hadn’t seen before, but I had no time to fix all that. I fought to remember where exactly I was supposed to be this morning. *Right.* Running drills in the field house.

I sprinted all the way there, moving as fast as I could without looking like a supernatural being. When I arrived, literally everyone in the field turned around to look at me. They were all lined up, with Sergeant Pepperdine at the front, looking at me severely.

“How kind of you to join us, Charlie,” he grunted. “I can see why our resident hero needed a little extra sleep.”

I wasn’t quite sure what he meant by that, so I just ignored it.

“Sorry,” I mumbled. “I overslept.”

I slinked back to join the others, and Zachery waved at me. What a dipshit. Couldn’t he just have woken me up so I could avoid being called out?

While Sergeant Pepperdine barked out order after order, I followed the group’s lead and did every drill required. It was the usual, not that different from what we used to do for lacrosse—burpees, sprints, push-ups… The only difference now was that this kind of exercise was just a blip on my radar. Everyone else seemed to be sweating and huffing and puffing, but I was still fresh as a daisy.

Zachery came over to me, wheezing. His face was bright red, his hands resting on his knees. He looked up at me, taking in little puffs of air. “How the hell aren’t you dying like the rest of us, bro? Are you some kind of robot?”

I thought back to how Romilly had said to keep a low profile. I couldn’t screw this up, no way. I stretched awkwardly, pretending that my back was hurting, and groaned loudly before wiping my brow. “Trust me, I’m totally exhausted too,” I said. “This is brutal, man.”

On the inside, of course, I was thinking that I could do this all day. It was kind of fun, actually. Like a nice little game. It was pretty cool to feel like I was great at something.

“Take a water break, you useless crybabies!” Sergeant Pepperdine barked, startling both Zachery and me.

I jogged over to the sidelines, making sure I wasn’t any quicker than anyone else. I maintained a ruse of being very tired, panting slightly. Panting was a thing that people did when they were tired, I knew. I remembered.

I was starting to believe that I needed to work on my acting skills, though.

As I was filling up my water bottle, Sophie slid up to me, nudging her hip with mine. Well, that was kind of intimate and playful, so I ignored it and said, “Oh. Hi.”

I also took a step to the side, away from her, in case she wanted to engage in any more hip action. Not that it wasn’t flattering—Sophie was very pretty—but I was… betrothed to Violet, or something.

Oblivious, Sophie gave me a little grin. “I heard about what happened last night.”

I blinked, confused. “What?”

Sophie kept grinning. “I heard that you were a total badass at the hazing last night. Sounds like you scared that guy pretending to be a vampire half to death.”

Oh, shit. *That*. Nobody was supposed to know that. But I probably shouldn’t have been that surprised that everyone had heard about it. Gossip always spread like wildfire.

“It was nothing,” I said, embarrassed. “And isn’t hazing illegal now, anyway? Because if it’s not, it should be.”

I kind of sounded like a grandpa, but at that point I didn’t care. Sophie gave me a funny little look and snorted. “We’re at a supernatural hunter training school—I don’t think the normal rules apply here.”

Okay. She had a point.

She went on and said, “Anyway, personally, I think that what you did sounds ballsy A-F.”

I blinked as she nudged me with her hip for a second time and gave me a distinctly sultry smirk. *Oh, geez.* She walked off, literally looking over her shoulder to make sure I was watching her, which I was, because I was still kind of feeling weird after all the hip nudging. I instantly looked away, thinking back to what Zachery had said—about how this camp was a notorious hook-up place.

I was pretty sure that my parents would be thrilled if I ended up dating someone like Sophie, someone from a family of hunters. But obviously, that was never going to happen. No one here—and certainly not my parents—could understand how intense my connection was with Violet. We were bound together for life. Forever. And I looked forward to that. I couldn’t fucking wait.

I poured some water over my face, shirt, and armpits, making sure to get as messy and drenched as possible to make it look like it was sweat, not water. At the same time, I started contemplating if it had been the smartest move ever to invite Violet here. But what was I supposed to do? I missed her. I would die without her.

*Okay, I’m being dramatic. But… it’s true.*

It was going to take some work to keep her identity hidden, but I was certain that we could do it. Where there was a will, there was a way. And when it came to my mate, I was willing to do whatever it took to bring us back together and to keep her safe.

*Maybe I could get another charm bracelet from Romilly, somehow, a charm bracelet that would match mine, and Violet and I would be like a little set. That would be cute*, I thought. *Or maybe I could—*

My thoughts were interrupted by a third hip bump in the same five minutes. What in the hell? Could I not pretend to be sweaty in peace? What the hell had the world come to?

I flinched, turning around to face Sophie, *again*.

“Oh. It’s you,” I said. It had sounded less rude in my head, but she didn’t seem to register my tone. That was good at least.

She gave me what felt like her millionth grin of the day. “A bunch of us are going to play ice hockey out on the lake later. Want to come?”

That sounded amazing.

“I love ice hockey!” I said, smiling. “Sure, I’ll definitely be there.”

She looked extremely excited and then sauntered off once more. I made sure not to watch her as she walked away, because I didn’t want to give her the wrong idea.

And then someone nudged me. Thankfully, not in the hip.

“So?” Zachery waggled his eyebrows on me. “Sophie, huh?” He gave me a little smirk, and there was this weird note in his expression and, like, his entire vibe.

I frowned. “What is this? What’s going on with your face? What are you talking about?”

Zachery chuckled at my array of questions. “Dude, are you serious? You don’t know what just happened?”

I huffed. “No, but you do?”

Zachery’s smile grew. “You just agreed to go on a date with Sophie!”

**Episode 1377**

ARTEMIS

I was on the ground, feeling like every nerve ending in my body had caught fire. I couldn’t even hear the voice that was now an almost constant presence in my head, couldn’t think of anything but making this excruciating pain stop. It was unlike anything I’d ever felt. Not even the Kollector had ever bestowed this kind of torture upon me. It felt like a million flaming needles were penetrating my skin all at once, their energy connecting simultaneously under my flesh and creating a shockwave of menace and mayhem.

I was vaguely aware that Cali was kneeling beside me. She was saying something—she was crying, maybe—but I couldn’t focus on her. She was so close to me, but she felt miles and miles away. Suddenly, the pain focused around my abdomen, moving up like a toxic wave from my insides and upward to my chest and throat until I convulsed. I started to gag, and then…

*Vomit*.

I was choking, spitting out tons and tons of clear liquid. It felt never-ending. But as it poured out of me, the pain started to recede ever so slightly.

*That’s good*, the Orb said in my head. *Get it all out.*

My mind, what was left of me, my real self, was horrified. Clearly, my body was rejecting whatever charm Cali’s potion might have been able to enact within me. I finally stopped vomiting, and the pain was gone, but it felt like my stomach had melted. Kind of like how it had felt the morning after I’d drunk all that liquid humans called whiskey with Greyson.

I had to fight to keep my torso upward. Resting both my hands on the floor, I took in a shaky breath, still feeling sick. Was I going to puke again? I waited, but nothing else came up.

“… Artemis?” Cali was saying. She must have repeated my name a million times, as if that would make me come back. I doubted it would work—not when I felt the Orb inside my skull, its claws digging deep into my brain.

Cali waved a hand in front of my face, her expression deeply worried.

Again, she said, “Artemis? Artemis, are you okay? What happened?”

I stared at my sister, but I couldn’t speak. My throat felt raw.

Cali’s dark eyes were full of tears. “I’m so, so sorry! I must have made the potion wrong! I never meant to hurt you; I can’t believe I did this!” She started caressing my arms, my face, being so tender that I wanted to flinch away and move toward her at the same time. I didn’t know if I deserved her care and comfort. No, I knew I didn’t.

*This is where you’re wrong*, the Orb said inside my head. *She doesn’t care about you. She wants you dead, Artemis. She’s afraid of how powerful you are. So much more powerful than her pitiful mind could even imagine. She thinks she can do something to stop you.*

The voice laughed a creepy, chilling laugh and made me shudder.

*But she doesn’t understand*, the Orb went on. *There’s nothing she can do now.*

I didn’t want to listen to these horrible words. To these horrible thoughts. I sat down on the bed and wiped my mouth. I drank from a water bottle that Cali had left in my room earlier. Clearing my throat, I said, “I’m okay.”

Cali sniffled. “Are you sure you’re not dizzy or anything? You don’t look so good…”

The voice returned in my head. Probably because it was always there. *Kill her. Kill the girl.*

I was trembling all over. Shaking my head, I whispered, “No.”

Cali’s eyebrows shot up her forehead. “Maybe I should go get Mom.”

My mother couldn’t know about this. She could never know what a disappointment I truly was.

*We don’t need her to know*, the voice hissed.

Suddenly, something forced me to snap back into focus. “No. I’m fine. I’m just tired.”

“But—”

I didn’t let Cali finish her sentence. “I need to lie down for a bit.”

Cali frowned, wiping her eyes. At least she wasn’t crying anymore. “I’ll be right back to clean up everything, okay? Stay here.” She left quickly, shooting a look over her shoulder at me.

I went to the bathroom to wash my face and mouth.

My reflection mocked me the moment I made eye contact with it.

*Why did you let the little half-Fae leave?* asked the voice in my head. *You’re such a fool! You think that her idiotic love can cure you? It’s not even real! She just wants your power!*

“Shut up,” I mumbled, returning to the bedroom. I made sure to avoid the pile of liquid on the floor and curled up on the bed. I knew I should clean up the vomit myself, not have Cali do it. That was undignified. It wasn’t her fault, none of it. It was all mine.

I closed my eyes for a bit, feeling worn out. Like I’d been broken down into pieces. I had spent so long fighting the Orb, but I just couldn’t do it anymore. I had no strength. It was too much.

But even though I was exhausted, I couldn’t sleep. I hadn’t been able to sleep for a couple days now, though it felt like years. Years of having something evil leeching off me, draining my life force, my strength, my mind.

I was being constantly drained and filled with something else. Something new that the Orb brought in that horrified me, because I was there to see it all happen.

I was there to see the Orb shape me into what it wanted me to be.

*Maybe I could try to tell Cali? Maybe I could—*

The thought was shut down the moment it entered my head. The Orb didn’t even let me finish it.

There was a little knock on the door, and I expected Cali’s face to appear.

Instead, it was Rishika. She was wearing a pair of shorts and a black tank top, her hair pushed back. She looked as breathtaking as ever. I looked like someone’s nightmare.

I was the entire pack’s nightmare, actually.

“How are you doing?” she asked. She looked awkward, worried, and overwhelmed. I didn’t want to know what she would’ve done if she’d seen me vomiting magic. “Cali asked me to check in on you,” she quickly explained.

I sat up, avoiding Rishika’s gaze. I would probably start crying if I looked at her for too long. In the end, the only thing I managed to say was, “I’m so tired. But I can’t ever sleep.”

I could see in my peripheral vision that Rishika was frowning. “Do you want to take a walk?”

My head felt numb. How could I be so numb yet feel too much, all at the same time? It didn’t make any sense.

“A walk?” I asked Rishika slowly.

She nodded again. “Yeah. It’s nice out. Maybe some fresh air would do you good. I’ll go with you.” She licked her lips. “I mean, I would love to go with you.”

Fresh air actually did sound appealing to me. It felt like I’d been closed up in this room for ages. Gingerly, I nodded, following Rishika downstairs and onto the lawn. The day was peaceful, beautiful, the exact opposite that was going on inside me. As we started walking across the massive yard, my gaze remained on the ground.

When I glanced at Rishika, she looked sad, troubled, beautiful. Gods, was she beautiful. She opened her mouth to say something, she *was* saying something, but I wasn’t listening. I knew I didn’t deserve her, but there was part of me that thirsted for her company. For her touch. For her lips.

It was nightmarish to know that I couldn’t have her. I could never, *should* *never* have anyone. Not like this. Hell, I shouldn’t even have been in this house, but I was certain that if I attempted to leave, the Orb would force me to come back.

Wait, what was Rishika saying, though? When had she started speaking?

I had no idea.

The only thing I cared about was what appeared before me as Rishika and I moved to the side of the house.

The cellar doors.

Suddenly, every pore of my existence felt drawn to them, for reasons I couldn’t explain. I started moving in that direction, ignoring Rishika as she called after me.

“Artemis?” she yelled. I could hear her now. “Artemis, I’m talking to you! Where are you going? What’s happening right now?”

Rishika fired one question after the other. But I wasn’t about to offer any answers. I suddenly heard a different voice in my head. Different than the Orb, different than usual.

*Mistress*, it said.

I realized, dully, that it was York.

“My name is Artemis,” I said shakily.

*No. You are no longer Artemis*, York said. *You are the Mistress of Letifer, and tonight your reign begins.*

**Episode 1378**

I stood in the dim hall outside Big Mac’s room, trying to gather the courage to knock. I needed the witch’s help—she was the only person in the pack house who even had a chance of helping me figure out what the hell had just happened with Artemis and my potion—but I had this sneaking suspicion in the pit of my stomach that she wasn’t going to be happy with me. She wasn’t happy with me in the best of times, and I had a feeling that hearing I’d bypassed her and reached out to another witch for help wasn’t going to put me on her Christmas card list. And that I had then made a magical potion—*by myself*—in our kitchen without telling her about it probably wasn’t going to make things any better.

But Artemis needed help, so there was nothing to be done. I squared my shoulders and took a deep breath.

Before I could knock, however, the door flew open and Big Mac appeared in the doorway, glaring at me.

“What’s wrong, Cali? Did something happen? What do you need?” she asked.

“Um…” I didn’t know how to answer these rapid-fire questions, so I glanced over her shoulder. “Can I come in?”

Big Mac frowned at me—clearly confused—but stepped aside, allowing me into the room.

I walked in, my heart beating so hard I could hear it, and looked around. Mrs. Smith wasn’t here. I couldn’t decide if that was a good thing or not. On the one hand, the fewer people who knew I’d concocted a potion that had nearly killed my sister, the better. On the other, a witness might’ve kept Big Mac from throttling me when she found out what I’d done.

“What?” Big Mac asked again, rounding on me. “What do you want?”

I was starting to feel a little dizzy, so I dropped onto the desk chair. “It seemed like you had some other stuff going on, so I asked Kira—you know, that other witch—if she knew of a potion that might help protect Artemis from dark magic, and it turned out that she *did* know one, so I made it and I just gave a dose of it to her—to Artemis, not Kira—but then she had, like, a pain seizure or something and she barfed everywhere and it was super gross and also really scary and anyway, I just wondered if you had any idea what all of that meant?” I drew in a long breath and looked up.

Big Mac was staring at me, her eyes wide as saucers. “I’m sorry, *what*?” she asked, like I’d been speaking in a foreign language. “What did you just say?”

“Um…” I was starting to sweat. “Which part did you want repeated?”

She blinked slowly. “Let me get this straight: not only did you decide—on your own, I might add—to consult a witch outside of this pack on a very complicated, difficult issue, you went ahead and brewed an unknown potion—in this pack house—without any understanding of what that potion could do to whoever took it?” Big Mac’s voice was rising, and her face was flushing as she spoke. “Does that about cover it?”

I nodded mutely.

“What the *hell* were you thinking?” she demanded, taking a threatening step toward me. “We don’t even *know* this witch, and brewing potions is an incredibly delicate art. You don’t just whip them up like you’re making a big batch of margaritas for girls’ night! You could have blown us all sky-high, Cali! Do you have any idea how *dangerous* that was?”

In my heart I knew that Big Mac was basically right, but I didn’t like being screamed at, and my hackles went up. “You’ve totally had it out for Artemis since all of this dark magic stuff started, so it’s not like I could have come to you about all this, could I? And besides,” I went on, when Big Mac narrowed her eyes, “you’ve never mentioned knowing of a potion that could help Artemis, or that could ward off dark magic or anything like that, and it’s not like I haven’t asked for help. You knew that was what I was looking for, and if you had known something like that existed, it could have been really helpful, don’t you think?”

Big Mac narrowed her eyes. “If done correctly, and by the *right* witch”—she glared at me—“then yes, potentially, it could be helpful. But who the hell knows what you’ve thrown together? And now we have no idea what you’ve unleashed!”

I winced, my hands balling into fists. Big Mac was right. What the hell *had* I been thinking? I’d just been trying to help!

Big Mac started to pace the length of the small room. “This isn’t good. You say Artemis started to seize?” She looked over at me.

I nodded. “And throw up. Like, a lot,” I said, grimacing.

Big Mac shook her head. “That is *not* good.”

I flinched like she’d slapped me. “Well, yeah, when you put it like that it doesn’t sound great.”

Big Mac stopped pacing and spun around to look at me. “How exactly *should* I phrase it so that it sounds good?” She didn’t wait for me to answer. “Where did you find the ingredients for this potion? You know that any potion worth its snuff isn’t composed of things you can find in your pantry.”

My hands were growing clammy, but I managed to keep myself from wiping them on my pants. This conversation was going about as well as I’d expected. But I was in too deep, and there was no turning back. I took a deep breath. “It wasn’t stuff I found in the pantry. I stole the herbs that I needed.”

Big Mac swelled alarmingly. “You did *what*?”

“I helped her,” said a calm voice.

She whirled around. “*Sabine?*”

Mrs. Smith stood in the doorway, her face grim but calm, and I watched as the blood drained from Big Mac’s face. Her expression changed from anger to something more like hurt and betrayal, and I felt a sharp twist of guilt in my heart.

I’d never meant to cause a rift between Mrs. Smith and Big Mac, but now they were just staring at each other in silence, and I was starting to feel like a third wheel. Or, more accurately, like they had forgotten I was even in the room.

“Well,” I said quietly, standing and inching toward the door, “maybe I’ll just leave you two for a moment…” I trailed off as I slipped out the door.

Back in the hall, I breathed a sigh of relief and headed back to my own bedroom. I sank down onto the bed and pulled out the jar with the rest of the potion. Giving the contents a swirl, I stared at it. What the hell had I done?

Kira told me the potion would be a light purple—and it was. The color of lilacs in the springtime.

I thought carefully back to making it. I had been so careful, following Kira’s instructions to the letter. How could I have gotten it wrong?

Unless… *Had* I gotten it wrong? Big Mac had made it seem like Artemis’s reaction to the potion was terrible, but—*was* it? I had no idea, having nothing to compare it to.

And there was no way to tell how anyone else would react to the potion—I couldn’t put anyone else at risk.

I looked down at the small jar. I should probably just get rid of what was left. I couldn’t believe how useless it’d turned out to be. It’d caused more harm than help.

I thought for a moment longer, then—decided—I leapt up and charged out of my room. I rounded the corner toward the stairs and ran smack into Violet. We bounced off each other and fell backward, and I screamed as I lost my grip on the jar and it hit the ground.

The top flew off, and the lilac-colored liquid leapt up and splashed everywhere—the walls, the floor, my pants, my shirt, and even my face. Great. If Big Mac hadn’t wanted me to make the potion in the first place, she probably didn’t want it spilling all over the house either.

“Oh my god, Cali,” Violet gasped, grabbing my arms to steady me, “I’m so sorry, are you okay?”

I blinked, then nodded stupidly.

Violet put her hand over her heart and took a deep, relieved breath. “Oh, okay good. I’m sorry, I didn’t see you coming.”

“Mm hm,” I said, nodding. But I wasn’t listening, because I wasn’t fine. I was *freaking out*.

“Cali?” she said. Her voice sounded like it was underwater. “Are you okay?”

I was not.

There was a sweet taste on my tongue—one that hadn’t been there before. I tried to ignore it, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t pretend that this wasn’t happening.

*Shit.*

I’d just accidentally drunk some of the potion.

**Episode 1379**

LOLA

*Light and Dark: Vampires Find Their Place in the World* with Professor Wiggins was next on my schedule, and I was headed that way. But I paused in the bustling hallway before I got to the lecture hall and looked down at my phone—for what felt like the thousandth time.

*Hey, can you call me back? Please?*

I didn’t know why I thought *this* text was going to make a difference when Jay had ignored the last thirty texts I’d sent since he’d hung up on me. Not that I didn’t understand why he’d gone silent. I closed my eyes as I cringed, thinking of that agonizing moment after I’d told him I’d almost kissed Emmett—remembering that leaden silence that had followed, then the click of Jay abruptly ending the call.

My heart physically ached as I looked down at the empty phone screen. I couldn’t imagine how he had to be feeling. *I’d* been feeling like I was going to be sick. My stomach was twisting painfully, I was sweating, my heart was beating hard—I was feeling so awful I considered going into class and telling Professor Wiggins I was too sick to stay.

But I knew the alternative to class was just sitting in my room—*alone*—and calling Jay over and over, and that didn’t exactly seem like the healthy alternative. It certainly wasn’t going to make me feel any better.

So I turned toward the classroom. Maybe some distraction would be helpful—at least it would help take my mind off things, even if I didn’t actually care that much about learning how vampires blended into the normal world. Hesitating, I stopped outside the door, stepping to the side as vampires streamed past me into class, all chattering and laughing as though none of them had a care in the world.

I dialed Jay’s number and waited as the phone rang, hoping maybe this time it would be different.

But it wasn’t, and my heart sank as Jay’s recorded voice told me to leave a voicemail.

“Hey, it’s me… again. Listen, if you get through the other twenty messages I left and are listening to this one, please, please, please, *please* call me, Jay. I just want to talk to you.” I took a shaking breath. “I love you.”

I ended the call and looked down at my silent phone. My whole body ached with pain, but I took a breath, trying to keep myself from bursting into tears. I wouldn’t check my phone all through class, and maybe by the time I got out, Jay would have called me back.

In class, I didn’t keep checking my phone, but I wasn’t exactly listening either. I was trying to focus on Professor Wiggins’s lecture, but it was impossible. My mind just wasn’t taking direction at the moment. All I could think about was Jay, and how he had to be feeling.

I tried to reverse our roles—imagining how I would feel if he’d called me to tell me he’d almost kissed someone else.

*Gutted.*

I would’ve felt absolutely gutted if he’d told me that.

Looking out the classroom window, I worried a sore spot on the inside of my cheek. Nothing had actually happened between Emmett and me. But… if I was being honest with myself, even that didn’t feel quite true. Even if we hadn’t *technically* kissed, there was still something between us—a draw and a fire—that I couldn’t deny.

I sighed, and then, distinctly, heard someone clear their throat in an irritated way. When I looked around, I realized that the entire room had gone completely silent, and every eye was on me.

My stomach sank.

“*Lola*,” Professor Wiggins said from the front of the class, sounding annoyed, “I have asked you a question and am waiting for a reply.”

Staring up at her, I must have looked like a slack-jawed fool. I heard a couple of snickers from behind me. “I-I’m sorry,” I stammered. “I didn’t hear the question.”

Professor Wiggins shook her head. “Never mind.” She turned to the rest of the lecture hall. “As I was saying, when vampires have successfully acclimated into society, history will often bear no record of them. Though there are several notable exceptions…”

As the class slowly shifted their focus away from me and back to the lecture, I sank down in my hardwood chair, wishing I could disappear. Clearly I was unsuccessful, because the girl next to me—a girl with dark hair and skin, and piercing grey eyes, who I’d never met—poked my arm and passed along a note.

I took it, too surprised to do anything else.

*dirty dogs like you don’t have any place at this school. you should have been drowned in the well with the rest of your disgusting litter. you’re making the whole place smell like wet dog. LEAVE BITCH! xoxo Jacqueline*

Shocked, I stared at the note for a moment, then crumpled it and dropped it into my bag. I knew I should just ignore it, but I was already feeling so vulnerable and overwhelmed, and tears pricked at the corners of my eyes.

The remainder of class felt as though it lasted another year, but when Professor Wiggins finally let us go, I bolted into the hall, desperate to get back to the privacy of my own room so I could just crawl under my blankets and cry.

But I wasn’t even halfway down the hall when I felt someone grab my elbow and pull, spinning me around.

Jacqueline looked up at me, smirking. Behind her were three of her tiny cronies.

I rolled my eyes and shook my arm free. “I do not have the energy for your shitty vibes, Jacqueline. You’re just going to have to leave me the hell alone.”

Jacqueline folded her arms across her chest and tilted her head. “We’ll leave *you* alone when you leave *us* alone.” She raised her delicate eyebrows. “And I mean *alone*. You don’t belong here, little doggie. You’re not really one of us, and you never will be. You should run along back to your little mate.” She started to giggle at this, and the other girls joined in.

They had hit a spot so sore it ached like a bruise, and tears welled up in my eyes. But I would *not* cry in front of these tiny mean girls, so I spun on my heel and sprinted down the hall, running blindly until I reached my dorm room.

I slammed the door shut, then leaned against it and sank to the floor, the tears finally flowing down my face. As much as I hated to admit it, maybe Jacqueline was right—I *didn’t* belong here. I wasn’t really one of them, and I never would be. Not really. I belonged with Jay—my mate—and with people who loved me.

My heart pounding, I pulled my phone out of my pocket, and through my tears, saw that Jay still hadn’t called me back. And, strangely, this filled me with resolve.

Fine.

If Jay wasn’t going to call me, if he wasn’t going to text me, then I was going to go back to see him. I was going to look him the face and explain everything, talk until he understood how much I loved him, and make sure that the two of us were okay.

I got to my feet and tossed my phone onto my bed, then dragged my suitcase out from underneath it. My head was spinning as I planned out all the things I’d need to say, so I was throwing clothes and shoes in a little haphazardly when I heard a knock on the door.

Before I could answer, Emmett opened the door. “Hi, Lola. I heard there was an incident in Professor Wiggins’s class, and I wanted to drop by to make sure you were okay…” His voice trailed off as his eyes drifted to the bed and the half-filled suitcase. “What are you doing?”

“What does it look like?” I grumbled.

He frowned and stepped into the room. He crossed the room and sat down the corner of the bed. “Where are you going?”

“I’m going home,” I said, not looking at him. “Where I belong.”

Emmett’s frown deepened, and he looked troubled. “Lola, you can’t do that.”

“Why not?” I snapped. “Am I a prisoner here?”

“Of course not,” he said quickly. “There’s just so much more we can accomplish together. So much we can learn from you.” He looked at me for a long moment. “I thought we were really making some headway. If you leave now, all of that will be lost. What about our sessions?”

“Yeah? What *about* your sessions?” asked a new voice.

I froze halfway through folding a pair of jeans. Then, slowly, I turned toward the door. Next to me, I felt Emmett doing the same. And there, standing framed in the doorway, was the *last* person I’d expected to see.

“*JAY?*”

**Episode 1380**

Sitting on the edge of my bed, I held my breath, tense and waiting. The potion—which I was pleased to discover actually tasted delicious—was currently being absorbed into my body and would be coursing through me at any moment, and I wanted to be ready when it happened. *Whatever* happened.

I thought back to Artemis, to the rictus of pain on her face, and felt a flash of intense guilt. Whatever she had gone through had certainly looked horrific—I’d had food poisoning once from some bad potato salad, and that was nothing compared to what I’d just seen her go through. She had been screaming and writhing, her body twitching like she was being electrocuted, and then she’d convulsed as she’d thrown up, like her body was trying to rid itself of everything that was poisoning her.

Just thinking about it was making my palms sweat, and I glanced down at my feet where I’d placed a bucket I’d found in the bathroom, and I hoped I’d have enough control over my body to actually use it.

“Oh god,” I muttered, dropping my head into my hands. Maybe I should go get someone. Or tell someone what had happened. Big Mac was going to be absolutely furious with me.

But maybe nothing would happen to me. I’d given Artemis a large dose, but I’d only gotten a small drop on my tongue. More like a sip than anything else. Maybe everything would be fine.

But then again… Artemis had come into contact with dark magic, so the potion had had something to fight in her. Maybe it wouldn’t have anything to do in me…

My heart started to beat hard, anxiety making me frantic. Whatever was coming, I was starting to wonder if *waiting* for it would be the worst part. I breathed through my nose, waiting for the pain, but then something strange happened. I did notice something starting to course through me—but it wasn’t pain.

In fact, it was nothing like pain. I looked up. What I felt flowing through me felt like… optimism or hope, filling me from within. Like I had swallowed a drop of liquid sunshine. I was filled with a sense of lightness and euphoria, and all the lingering aches and pains I’d been feeling since I’d been pulled from the stagnant pond vanished in an instant.

I’d been cold since I’d come out of the water, and half a dozen hot showers hadn’t been able to break through the bone-deep chill, but suddenly it was gone, like the potion had warmed me. I had a sudden flash of myself bursting from the freezing ghost pond—breaking through the surface of the water. Before, when I’d thought of the memory, I’d been terrified, but this time was different. This flash was the opposite of being pulled into the water, this was a breaking free—like a rebirth, and it filled me with happiness and energy.

What in the world was going on?

I got to my feet, energy running through my limbs like electric charges. I wanted to *move*. I wanted to *run*. I jogged in place for a moment, then did a few jumping jacks, moving with the kind of perfect coordination I’d always admired in others. Moving my body felt *amazing*, like my muscles and tendons had been waiting all their lives for this exact moment.

With no idea of what had gotten into me, I dropped to the floor and into a perfect push-up position, and did a series of ten—a feat I’d never once even *attempted*.

I looked up only when I heard someone clearing their throat from my doorway.

Bounding back to my feet, I looked up at a stunned Greyson. “Hey,” I breathed.

He looked at me for a long moment, his expression baffled. “Cali? Are you okay?”

“I’m *great*.”

He frowned and looked me up and down. “Are you… *working out* right now?”

I bounced from foot to foot. Now that I’d started, I couldn’t stop moving. “Yeah, well, I just had kind of a burst of energy. I felt like I wanted to move.”

Greyson’s confused expression had changed to something like concern. “Did you have a lot of coffee this morning or something?” He eyed my wide smile and bright eyes. “Or sugar, maybe? What’s going on?” His eyes slid from me to the bucket at my feet, and then up to the bed, where the jar with the rest of the potion lay. He crossed the room and picked it up. “Isn’t this what you were making in the kitchen last night?”

I grinned up at him. “It is! Thank you so much for really engaging in my interests, Greyson. It feels great to be so *seen* by you.”

“What is it?” he asked, looking at me warily. “In the bottle?”

I spun around, like I used to do as a kid whenever I put on a dress with a full skirt. The euphoria felt like a full skirt, and I giggled. “It’s supposed to ward off dark magic, and let me tell you—*truth in advertising!* I’ve never felt lighter! I’ve never felt freer!”

My whole body was tingling with a sense of well-being, and I was happier than I could remember ever having been. Life had felt like such a tangled knot for so long, but suddenly it all seemed so simple! I was ready to tackle any problem that came my way.

It surprised me when Greyson frowned at me. And it surprised me even more when he reached for the hem of his T-shirt and started to pull it off.

My heart—already beating faster than normal—stuttered dangerously as I caught sight of his perfectly chiseled abs, and I stared openly.

“What’s going on?” I murmured, my eyes never leaving his midsection. I could already feel my heart rate increasing. “What’s happening here?”

Greyson held up his shirt and pointed to a small stain. “Torin spilled coffee on me this morning. I came up here to change.”

“*Right*,” I said slowly, moving toward him. “Change.”

My euphoria was moving southward in my body, and I didn’t even try to stop it.

Greyson took a step back, away from me, and held up the jar of potion. “Cali, are you really telling me you drank this unknown potion without knowing what it was going to do to you?” His brow furrowed. “Why the hell would you do that?”

His question was like a stiff wind, and it blew the curtains of my euphoria away from the windows of truth, allowing me to see clearly for a moment. If I was feeling this good in response to the potion—if this was how a person was *supposed* to react to it—then what the hell did it mean that Artemis’s body had completely rejected it?

Greyson watched the emotions move across my face with growing concern. “Cali? What’s going on?”

“Um… It wasn’t on purpose,” I started, not sure what else to say. It’d really been a mistake. My heart was racing now, but it wasn’t from the potion, or from the effect of Greyson’s perfect abs.

He took a step closer to me. “You know you can tell me anything, right? You can talk to me about anything that’s worrying you.”

I hesitated. The last thing I wanted to do was tattle on my sister, but… what else could I do? I was so scared about what was going on with her. I’d been defending her to everyone, but—as much as I hated to admit it—maybe I’d been lying to myself. Maybe Big Mac and Greyson were right, and maybe she was still affected after having been possessed by the revenants that had come into the pack house. Maybe she was both in danger *and* dangerous.

“Cali?” Greyson said quietly. His eyes were on me, watching me carefully. “Whatever you’re going through, you don’t have to do it all alone. I’m right here.”

“I know,” I murmured, but I was finding it hard to breathe. Was this an anxiety attack?

He stepped forward and reached for me, like he was going to pull me into a hug, but I put my hand on his chest. I was too overwhelmed by the revelation I’d just had—I just needed time to think, and pressing myself against Greyson had historically not been great for clear thinking.

But then I gasped.

“What?” Greyson said, and I could feel his heart start to beat hard beneath my hand. “Cali, what is it? What’s wrong?”

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t. It was like my voice had been stolen from me. I was staring, transfixed, at his chest. Beneath his skin, his chest was still covered in the dark, swirling veins of the curse. But, as I put my hand on him, the veins moved, like spilling a drop of oil into vinegar, scattering away from the touch of my hand.

**Episode 1381**

GREYSON

Cali and I both stared down in complete shock. Her hand was still resting on my chest, and the dark, swirling veins were still fleeing from her touch.

“What the hell am I looking at?” I murmured, almost to myself.

Without responding, Cali moved her hand along my skin—from one side of my chest to the other—and we watched in astonishment as the dark, angry veins skittered away. They swirled like sand, reforming in different patterns away from her hand. They didn’t disappear, just slid away, as if moving to avoid contact with her.

Finally, Cali raised her dark eyes to look at me, and when she did, I could see that she looked as shocked as I felt.

“What do you think this means, Greyson?” she asked breathlessly.

“I-I’m not sure,” I said, shaking my head. I thought hard, a million ideas racing through my mind. “What did Kira tell you about this potion again? What’s it supposed to do?”

“She said it would ward off dark magic,” Cali murmured.

“Right,” I said, looking back down at my chest. “Dark magic.”

Cali was quiet for a moment, then she spoke. “I think we’re both thinking the same thing, Greyson, even if we’re afraid to say it.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, though I thought I knew the answer.

She gave me a long look. “I’m saying that we might be looking at a possible solution.” She looked at the potion bottle in my hand. “Do you think it could ward off the *due destini* curse, too?”

I felt something rise up in my chest. It was a bubble of hope, but I shook my head, trying to swallow it back down. If I’d learned anything in my life, it was that it didn’t pay to get your hopes up, because that made it much harder to watch those hopes shatter. “Listen, Cali, whatever’s happening here is really strange—I’ll admit that—but in my experience, solutions to massive problems don’t normally turn up so easily.”

Cali frowned, then tugged the bottle from my hand. “These curse veins clearly don’t want to be anywhere near the potion in my system, Greyson.” The frown cleared from her face, and it filled with hope. “Think about it!” she said excitedly. “If that’s true, and you and Xavier both drink it, maybe it will get rid of the curse completely! Maybe the veins will disappear and the curse will be broken!”

Her eyes were wide, and as much as I hated to crush the hope I saw in her eyes, I just wasn’t sure about this. I glanced around the room, thinking as I took in Cali’s messy bed, the tangle of clothes tossed near the hamper in the corner, and the riot of books, headphones, cords, and tissues on top of her dresser.

I loved this woman, and I wanted her in my life so much it made me ache. I thought about how many times she and I had asked for solutions to the due destini curse, but we’d *never* been successful. Big Mac had always been pessimistic about our chances, and Cali had gone all the way to some enchanted library and hadn’t found any answers—even the three witches’ solution had seemed incredibly complicated. It just didn’t make any sense that with all these supernatural resources telling us there was no hope—or that the only chance we had was nearly impossibly complex—that everyone had overlooked such an incredibly simple solution.

It was just too good to be true, and that made me deeply suspicious.

But when I looked at Cali, at the light of hope in her eyes, I knew I just didn’t have it in me to tell her it couldn’t be so. “I’m not sure,” I said carefully. “It’s something to think about, maybe.”

But *thinking about it* didn’t seem to be what Cali was considering. She held up the potion. “You should try it. It’s actually really good. Which I know isn’t the most important thing about a potion—I get that what matters is that it works—but as someone who has messed up boxed mac and cheese with a startling amount of frequency, its actually awesome that it’s so tasty. Do you want to try it?”

Her manic energy was back, and she was speaking without stopping to breathe. Her eyes shone bright as she shook the bottle in my face.

I covered her hand with mine, registering the electric shock of the touch of her skin. It was insane that even after all this time, she still had that effect on me.

“Listen, Cali,” I said, when I’d gotten ahold of myself again, “it’s a good hypothesis, but if the solution is as simple as drinking a potion, don’t you think someone would have been able to tell us about that already?”

Cali paused, apparently thinking about this. She looked away, and I took the opportunity to study her face. She did look good—she’d been growing pale and thin lately, but her face had more color and her eyes shone bright. She looked vital and healthy, and even after I’d told her no, she still looked happier than I’d seen her in a long time. Maybe there was something to this. Maybe it would work. Or at least it wouldn’t hurt to try.

But maybe it *would*. I didn’t trust witchcraft, and as the Alpha of my pack, I couldn’t just go around drinking unknown potions to see what they did to me. I felt sick that Cali had accidentally gotten exposed to this on her own. I was thankful she was all right, but there was way too much at stake for me.

I looked back at Cali, whose eyes had dulled a little.

“You’re not going to drink it,” she said, lowering her hand and looking down at the bottle.

The sadness in her voice broke my heart, but I thought back to the first time we’d used witchcraft—it hadn’t worked then, either.

But I loved seeing Cali looking so buoyant. She’d been having a hard time—with everything going on with Artemis and *due destini* and literally everything else happening around her—and it was nice to see her so happy. I prayed that happiness would linger a little longer, even after the potion wore off.

She looked up from the bottle, her expression hurt and confused. “Greyson, I don’t understand. Even if there’s a *chance* it could work—even half a chance it could take away the *due destini* curse—isn’t it worth trying?”

I sighed. “Cali, love, it’s more complicated than that.”

“How?” she asked. “Don’t you want to get rid of the curse?’

“Of course I do,” I said fervently. “I want it gone more than anything. I want us to be able to make a choice free of curses and threats. I want it gone, love.” I looked down at the potion. “But this kind of thing could get dangerous.”

Cali’s eyes were wide, and she nodded slowly.

I shook my head. “Potions affect most people the same, but there are always outliers. And we have no guarantee that this could actually remove the curse—or have any effect whatsoever. I want you to be careful. I want to keep you safe. You know that’s my goal, right?”

I knew she was listening to everything I said and taking it into consideration. It was all I could ask of her. But I knew Cali, and she wasn’t going to be put off.

“Greyson,” she insisted, stepping closer to me again, “it *might* work! I’m not saying we have to brew a whole new batch, I just think you should try it. I mean, look!”

She put her hand on my chest again, and again the veins skittered away, skating across my chest in wild, intricate patterns. They moved so quickly it made me dizzy to watch, and slightly sick to my stomach. I hated looking at them, and never did if I could help it.

Cali looked up, her eyes flashing. “You have to admit that this is the first thing we’ve seen that seems to have any effect on them.”

That she was right about. I’d never seen the veins react this way to anything. They usually just stayed here on my chest, reminding me of the *due destini*.

Of my love for Cali.

I hesitated and looked down again, watching as the veins reformed away from her hand. She was right, and I had to admit it, but before I could say anything, the door to Cali’s room flew open. I hadn’t shut it tightly when I’d walked in, and Sage burst into the room.

She looked around wildly. “There you are, Greyson!”

“What’s up?” I asked, as Cali dropped her hand from my chest.

“I’m sorry to barge in like this, but it’s York,” Sage said, gasping for air.

Immediately I went on edge. “What about him?”

Sage shook her head. “He’s *dead*.”

**Episode 1382**

XAVIER

I looked across the small table at Kira, but she didn’t look up at me. Her eyes were on her half-empty cup of coffee, like the secrets to life could be found in its swirling depths. With a sigh, I looked around, scanning the half-full diner for the fifth time.

After the ambush at the motel, I was feeling extra edgy and wanted to make sure we hadn’t been tracked here, too, but everything looked fine. Just a few tables filled with people staring dead-eyed at their phones or newspapers or coffee. But when my gaze returned to Kira, I felt frustration welling up in me again.

Back at that motel, Kira had choked—*again*.

Even after I’d called her on it, she’d been unable—or unwilling—to kill any of those vampires, and I’d had to take care of them all myself. That part hadn’t been a big deal—those jokers were easy enough to kill—but there was a larger issue. If Kira wasn’t going to be able to follow through with killing a vampire who was actively trying to kill her, how the hell was she going to take out Garren?

She kept insisting that she wanted to take care of him herself, but I was finding that harder and harder to believe. At this point, I was wishing I could just find her a safe motel room to hole up in, go rogue in our mission, and take Garren out myself. I just wanted to get this over with.

It would sure as hell be quicker, and I was desperate to get back to Cali. I’d been anxious to get back to her this whole time, and since Greyson’s call, that feeling was ten times worse. Thinking of her being in danger when I was so far away, unable to do anything to protect her, was excruciating. I couldn’t bear it, and my hands curled into tight fists on the table.

Kira’s eyes darted to my hands, then up to my face. Her expression was miserable, and she looked guilty as her eyes met mine. “I’m sorry, Xavier. About what happened back there. I know what you wanted, and I’m sorry I couldn’t kill that vampire.”

“What happened back there?” I growled, determined to get to the bottom of it. “Why couldn’t you do it?”

She only shrugged.

That wasn’t enough for me. “He was a stranger. Why couldn’t you take him out?”

She looked away, toward the kitchen of the diner where a lone cook moved over a griddle, making pancakes. “That’s just it. I didn’t have anything against that vampire personally. I just kept thinking, *why should I kill him?*”

I stared at her, dumbstruck. “Are you fucking kidding me, Kira? They tore off the door to our motel room and charged in. They were there to kill us. How much more personal can it get?”

Kira wrapped her hands around her cup of coffee and shook her head. “It wasn’t personal, though. They were hired to do that, Xavier. It’s not the same thing. They didn’t hate us; they were just doing a job. You must know what that’s like.”

I did, but I wasn’t in the mood to get into a big philosophical discussion on the topic, so I just sighed and leaned back in the booth.

“I promise,” she assured me, leaning forward and looking at me intently, “once I’m face to face with Garren, it’s going to be totally different.”

I shook my head, tired and stressed out. “I gotta say, I’m really starting to doubt that, Kira. I just wish you would let me do this on my own. It’d be cleaner and faster. You’re not helping me, and your revenge fantasy is just that—a fantasy. You’re dead weight.”

An injured look crossed Kira’s face, but I was too tired to care if I’d hurt her feelings as I slid out of the booth.

“I’ll be right back,” I muttered as I headed for the door.

What had started out feeling like an itch now felt like a full body tremor, and I couldn’t stand it a moment longer. I felt like I was going to lose my mind if I didn’t hear Cali’s voice, so I slipped out the door and onto the empty street. I glanced around, but there was no one on the sidewalk, and the only traffic on the street was cargo trucks and cars flying past—no one even looked in my direction. So pulled my phone from my pocket and dialed her number. I held my breath, hoping she’d pick up—not knowing if she would—but my heart pounded when I heard her voice.

“Xavier?”

Relief flooded through me like a warm river. Just the sound of her voice felt like an embrace, and I felt the muscles in my shoulders unknit. Her voice felt like coming home.

“What’s going on?” she asked, sounding worried. “Where are you? Are you okay?”

“Hey, Cali,” I said, leaning against the cool brick of the building and savoring the feel of her name on my tongue. “I’m fine. Everything is fine. I just wanted to hear your voice.”

After my conversation with Greyson, it felt good to hear her more than ever.

“It’s nice to hear yours, too,” she said, her voice like warm honey. “You’re sure everything’s okay?”

“Yeah, things are moving along. In fact, I’m going to be home as soon as I possibly can. I just need to dot a few Is and cross a few Ts.”

“Oh, that’s good,” Cali said, sounding relieved. “Really good. I’m glad to hear that.”

“Yeah?” I asked, smiling to myself.

“Yeah,” she said. “We really need you back here.”

A stab of guilt speared through me. “I know. I wish I could be there right now.” I shifted, feeling uncomfortable. “Greyson called me. He told me you almost drowned in some kind of pool of ghouls or something? What happened?”

“Oh god,” Cali said, sounding embarrassed.

“What happened? Are you all right?”

“I can’t believe he calledyou,” she said. “Should I be embarrassed or shocked?”

I chuckled grimly. “I know. I was pretty shocked, too. But you know, we both have a vested interested in keeping you safe.” I bit through the words. “What happened? Are you okay?”

“Yes and no,” she said, sounding a little discomfited. “I’m fine. I mean, it’s not like I want to take the gang to go swimming there. It was scary, but I’m doing better. Great, actually.”

“Really? That’s good.” I was glad to hear it, but also surprised. She did sound kind of hyped up, though.

“By the way,” she said, clearly trying to sound casual—and failing, “you haven’t noticed anything happening with the curse veins, have you? You know, the ones on your chest?”

I frowned. “The *due destini* veins?”

“Yeah,” Cali said. “You haven’t noticed anything weird or new about them?”

I pulled my jacket and shirt away from my chest and looked down. The veins were just as they’d always been—ever-present and ominous. “No, they look the same. Why? What’s going on?”

“Oh! Nothing!” Cali said, too loudly. “No reason! I was just… wondering. That’s all!”

I frowned. “What’s going on, Caliana?” I asked, immediately suspicious.

“Nothing!”

I didn’t believe her. Something was going on, that much I was sure of. She was a terrible liar. My heart started to pound. Had she made some kind of choice? I was about to ask when I heard some kind of commotion from Cali’s end of the line. I could hear voices, but I couldn’t hear words or the specifics of what was going on.

“Hey, Xavier, I have to go. I’m sorry,” Cali said quickly.

“Cali—” I started, but she cut me off.

“I can’t wait until you’re back at the pack house. See you soon!” she said, then ended the call.

“Cali—” But she was gone. I stared down at the phone, dumbfounded.

What the hell had *that* been about? Why was she asking me about the veins? I knew Cali as well as I knew myself, and there was definitely something she wasn’t telling me. Why else would she have been asking about the veins after all this time? She wouldn’t—not unless something had changed.

My hand tightened around my phone. I had to get back to the pack house. *Now*. I couldn’t leave Cali alone with Greyson for a second longer than I had to.

As I headed back into the diner, my decision was made. I had to get this job done, as soon as possible. As I slid into the booth, Kira flipped over her phone and looked up at me.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“I just talked to Tallis. I set up a time for this all to go down.”

“What?” I asked, confused.

“We’ve got to get to the docks,” she said. “Garren will be there.”

I frowned, confused. “So, what? This is an ambush?”

Kira grinned. “No, not an ambush. A motorcycle race.”

**Episode 1383**

VIOLET

When I walked into the kitchen, Marta was standing at the counter, one hand on her hip, the other holding a fork.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

She frowned at me. “Making waffles,” she said darkly. Then she glanced up to the right. “And I don’t want to hear a word about it. It’s not even breakfast time.”

I stared at her for a moment before I understood. She was speaking to Lilac, of course. “So why are you making them, then?”

“Because I promised—*yes*,” she snapped, looking up at the empty space where Lilac must have been standing, “I *know* I promised. That’s what I’m telling her, isn’t it?”

I shot her a questioning look. “Everything cool, Marta?”

She sighed. “We made a bet this morning that I couldn’t throw my socks into the hamper with my eyes closed.” She paused for a moment. “Yeah,” she snapped. “I think it’s obvious to her that I lost. That’s why I’m in such a bitchy mood. Anyway,” she said, turning back to me, “Lilac made me promise that if he won, I’d make waffles.”

I grinned. Marta was in a bad mood, but this still made me happy. “Waffles are Lilac’s favorite. He’d get so pumped whenever Mom told us we were having breakfast for dinner. Make him do the dance—”

“He’s shaking his head no,” Marta said, glancing up. “No dance, apparently.”

I leaned on the counter. “God, I haven’t thought about that in ages,” I sighed. A wave of sadness swept over me, which was strange, because I knew Lilac was right there in the kitchen with me. It was painful to have him so close, but still so far away. The warm, sweet smell of the waffles made him feel close, and I smiled as Marta opened the top of the iron and lifted out a golden-brown waffle. “I’d forgotten how much he loved them.”

Marta rolled her eyes as she covered the waffle with whipped cream and then sprinkled blueberries over it. “Tell me about it. He hasn’t shut up about them for days, now.”

I frowned as I watched her drizzle syrup over the waffle. “But… Lilac can’t eat, can he?”

She shook her head. “No, but he can smell food.” She glanced up to her right. “He says it’s better than nothing.”

The smile slid off my face as I thought about how difficult it had to be to exist like that.

Marta glanced up, and as she caught my eye, all traces of annoyance left her face.

“I know,” she said sincerely. “It sucks, doesn’t it?” She looked up to the right, and her eyes widened. “No way, perv!”

“What?” I asked, surprised.

Marta shook her head. “He says he wants to watch me eat them.” She pulled the plate closer and turned her shoulders, like she was trying to block Lilac’s view of her.

I reached for a blueberry and popped it into my mouth, thinking hard. “I wish there was some way Lilac could experience these things, too…” I said thoughtfully.

She looked up at me. “Well,” she said, her expression growing serious again, “Lilac and I have actually been talking it over.”

For a moment I was struck by this. I knew Marta had this connection with Lilac, but it somehow surprised me to hear they’d been talking privately. I suppose it shouldn’t have startled me to realize they’d been growing close. I shook my head. “Sorry, what have you been talking about?”

“That ghost pond,” Marta said. “The one that sucked Cali in yesterday.”

“Right, yeah. What about it?” I asked.

Marta cut a piece of her waffle. “Lilac is pretty sure that it’s a door to the spirit world. And I agree.”

“Really?” I asked.

Marta nodded. “Cali told me she looked down when she was underwater, into the depths of it, and there was no bottom.” She shrugged. “Sounds like a portal to me.”

I swallowed. “A portal to where?”

Marta shoved a large piece of waffle into her mouth. “Hell? If that’s a thing?”

“Holy shit,” I murmured, shaken. This was all so weird.

I watched absently as Marta pulled another waffle from the iron and pushed the plate toward me. I’d told Charlie that I would visit him as soon as I could. He’d sounded so lonely when he’d called, and I hated thinking of him missing me in a new place, but how could I leave? With everything going on here, how could I even think of leaving the pack house? What if something happened while I was gone, and Lilac disappeared for good?

No—the idea was unbearable. I bit my lip as I poured syrup over my waffle and wished—for the *thousandth* time—that there was a way to bring Lilac back for real. A way where I wouldn’t have to live with the anxiety that he could slip away from me again at any moment.

I looked ponderously down at my plate. I still needed to talk to Big Mac about what she’d found at the library, but I’d been too scared to approach her. Ever since she’d gotten back, she’d been storming around in a monstrously foul mood, and I knew I’d already pushed my luck with her.

As I absentmindedly ate my waffle, I became aware that Marta was being very quiet. I looked at her and realized she’d stopped eating. She was looking up to her right, clearly listening to something, her expression skeptical.

“What’s Lilac saying?” I asked.

Marta looked at me, her expression aggrieved. “He thinks that if we go back to the pond, he might be able to communicate with some of the spirits. Or *I* might.”

“*Really?*” I asked, almost choking on a blueberry.

“He thinks there might be a way to get news of the spirit world. To figure out what’s going on.” She shook her head. “But I doubt it.”

“Why?”

“Like I said, this is all way beyond anything I’ve ever done before. And I don’t think we should go back to that place. Cali almost died there. It’s a bad idea,” she said, speaking to Lilac.

“Hang on,” I said, grabbing her arm. “It’s actually a great idea!”

When Marta looked at me, taking in the crazed light in my eyes, her shoulders drooped. “Oh great. You’re just as crazy as your brother.”

“Wait, listen,” I said, leaning toward her. “Maybe it’s not such a crazy idea. Maybe it *is* a portal. And we might as well *try*, right?”

“Violet—”

“We’ll be careful,” I said quickly. “We’ll make sure not to get too close to the edge of the pond. We’ll have a buddy system!”

Marta groaned. “Come *on*. I was really hoping to take a nap this afternoon. Maybe do a little reading. Not seek out a portal to hell!”

“Come on, Marta,” I goaded. “Don’t you think trying to find answers is more important than taking a nap? Maybe it wasn’t an accident Cali found that pond. Maybe she was *supposed* to find it. Maybe we’re supposed to learn something! Isn’t it worth skipping your nap to find out?”

Marta gave me a long look. Finally, she rolled her eyes. “*Fine*.”

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I was going on the assumption that Greyson and Big Mac wouldn’t be too pleased with the idea of us seeking answers from the ghost pond, so we snuck out of the house without anyone seeing us.

“I think it’s just around that little stand of trees,” Marta said, pointing along the trail.

I nodded. But when I glanced over at her, I gasped and stopped in my tracks.

“What?” she asked, looking around, her eyes growing wide with fright.

“It’s Lilac!” I said, staring. “I just saw a flicker of his outline.”

Marta looked in his direction. “Really? How?”

“I have no idea,” I said, my heart starting to beat hard. But I had seen it, I was certain. It had just been for an instant—a heartbeat—but I’d seen my brother striding along beside Marta. “Let’s keep walking.”

I kept glancing over, and the closer we got to the pond, the more solid Lilac’s outline became.

“I can’t believe this,” I whispered, moving toward him, my eyes wide with disbelief. “I can see you, Lilac! Can you see me?”

“He could always see you,” Marta said, frowning at me.

But Lilac was smiling at me, and happiness beamed from his face. I could see that he understood, and he was happy.

“I’ve missed you so much,” I said, stepping toward him. “But why?” I asked, shaking my head. “Why can I see you now?”

“Maybe it’s the pond?” Marta wondered out loud.

“I couldn’t see him the first time we were here,” I said, still confused.

“I don’t know,” she said.

As we rounded the last copse of trees and the pond came into view, I started to hear Lilac’s footfalls next to me.

“This is amazing!” I said, my heart hammering. “But I don’t get it.” I turned to look at him. “What is it about this pond that lets me see you?”  
 Lilac’s eyes—so like my own—were fixed on mine. “I don’t know,” he said, his voice echoing in my head. “But I’m going to find out.”

And before either Marta or I could say another word, he stepped toward the pond and jumped in.

**Episode 1384**

The basement room was small, and seemed to have grown smaller with Greyson, Big Mac, Mrs. Smith, Sage, Zainab, and me all crammed into it. We all stood silently, staring down at York’s body. He was stiff and still, lying on his cot, his eyes open and unseeing.

“Like I said,” Sage said, her voice shaky. “*Dead*.”

“Let me see him,” Big Mac said bossily, stepping forward. She leaned close to him, bending so they were nearly nose to nose, and examined him. She turned her head so her ear was close to his chest and closed her eyes for a moment. Then she stood straight and looked at us. “Well,” she said flatly, “he’s definitely dead.”

“Dead as in, like, *dead dead?*” I asked. “Or dead like he’s about to pop back up with orange eyes like the fires of hell and try to eat all of us?”

Big Mac gave me a leveling stare. “I’m not exactly a revenant expert, but this one’s heart’s not beating. Can’t get more dead than that, can you?”

I stared back at her. “Are you kidding me? *Yeah!* You can! That’s what happened to York before, remember? He’s been dead already—a couple of times, I think. So don’t look at me like I’m crazy for asking if this time it’s going to take!”

Big Mac’s stare grew in intensity. “Is this really the moment to start something with me, Caliana?

I thought quickly back to the potion and the herbs I’d stolen from her to make it and swallowed hard. No, she was right. This was not the time to start any new fights.

“We’ll need to burn the body,” Greyson said, his eyes on York. He glanced up at Big Mac. “To make sure he doesn’t come back as a revenant.”

I looked down at the guy on the cot, still dressed in what looked like a work uniform jacket, and felt a pang of real regret. Even after everything that had happened with him, I knew none of it had really been his fault. Somehow, he’d gotten mixed up in something far outside his control. He had just been some guy who’d been in the wrong place at the wrong time. He was just a human who probably had a family out there somewhere, wondering why he’d never come home from work. I bit the inside of my cheek as this thought filled me with a wave of sadness.

“Listen, I get that we have to…” I shuddered, remembering Arlo lunging at me with his creepy orange eyes and super-human strength. “I get that we have to destroy his body to protect ourselves, but York’s a victim here, just like we are. If we’re going to burn him, we’re going to have a funeral for him first.”

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am,” I said stubbornly.

“None of us even knew who he was. He was a danger to us from the moment he turned up here, and the sooner we burn him, the better.”

I shook my head, my jaw set. “*Someone* knew who he was. He’d already been affected by something evil by the time he got to us, but that wasn’t his fault. If we have to burn him, we have to, but he deserves a dignified farewell first.”

Big Mac opened her mouth to argue further, but Mrs. Smith laid her hand on the witch’s arm.

“Cali’s right,” she said softly. She looked around the room. “We may not know anything about who York was before he came here, but he died beneath our roof, and werewolves honor the dead.” She looked at Greyson. “Just because he wasn’t a member of our pack, doesn’t mean that he doesn’t deserve that same honor.”

I looked over at Greyson, wondering how he was taking all this.

He was looking between Mrs. Smith and me, his expression somewhere between annoyed and touched.

I looked over at Mrs. Smith and smiled, grateful for her support. She caught my eye and returned my smile.

Next to me, Greyson sighed. “Fine,” he said. He rubbed his forehead, as though he had a headache. “Sage and Zainab, head upstairs and go tell the others to gather outside for the funeral rites.” As the two of them moved toward the door, Greyson added, “And tell them to be quick about it. I want to get this show on the road.”

“Greyson?” I asked wonderingly.

He looked at me, his expression grim. “We’ll do the funeral rites, Cali, but I want to get this body burned right away.”

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It took a startlingly small amount of time for the pack to assemble and build a bonfire large enough to incinerate a body. The bonfire structure—not yet lit—was huge and looked strangely skeletal, and York’s body lay just beneath it, wrapped in a coarse woolen blanket.

I looked around. Everyone stood in a circle as the autumn wind whipped around us. Violet and Marta weren’t here. I’d looked for them, but they were nowhere to be found. Artemis and Rishika hadn’t been in the house either, but I caught sight of them further off, walking toward us from the back of the house. Wondering what they had been up to when I couldn’t find them, I watched them as they drew closer to us. Rishika was looking at Artemis, watching her with a strange, startled expression on her face. But it was the expression on Artemis’s face that made my heart start to pound: her eyes were locked on the dark shape of York’s body on the ground, and there was something hungry and intense about them.

I looked over at Greyson, wondering if I should tell him, but when I glanced back at Artemis, she looked normal again. I gave my head a little shake. Had I just imagined it?

With a sigh, I glanced around the circle of faces. Things had been pretty intense lately, and I hated how miserable everyone looked. I felt a sharp pang of guilt when I caught sight of my mom and dad, who were standing across the circle from me, looking pale and exhausted. I had to tell them to go home. I knew they were worried about me and Artemis, but this was too much for them. My dad looked thin, and my mom had lost most of that healthy glow she’d won back after having been sick for so long. In a lot of ways it had been nice having them so close, but their coming here had been a mistake. I should have insisted they leave long ago.

My eyes traveled to Big Mac, who was looking grim, and next to her, Mrs. Smith, whose eyes were downcast. Next to her were Sage and Zainab, who both looked tired and worried.

With a sigh I looked down at the dead grass at my feet. I just wished there was something I could do.

Greyson cleared his throat and stepped forward. “I want to thank you all for being here. This man, York, died while in our care while we didn’t know whether he was a revenant or something else. And, as I was reminded today, we werewolves honor the dead, so that’s what we’re doing here today.” Greyson looked down at York’s still form. “None of us knew much about him, but we know that he deserved a better ending than he received, and we can only hope that he finds peace on the other side.”

There was a general murmur of agreement from the back, and a few people stomped their feet, trying to warm them, as the wind had turned bitingly cold. Greyson turned to me, and I gave him a small smile. He nodded and turned to Big Mac, who was holding an unlit torch in her hands. She pulled a lighter from her pocket and lit the torch, and we all watched as it flamed to life in the grey afternoon light. Then she handed it to Greyson.

Greyson took the torch and stepped toward the bonfire. “Farewell, and peace for your journey.”

As he lowered the torch to light the wood, I looked over at Artemis, who hadn’t joined the circle. She was standing with Rishika just outside it, and that strange look was back as her eyes locked onto the shape of York’s still body. I narrowed my eyes, trying to read the inscrutable expression on her face, but we all looked up when we heard a bloodcurdling scream emanating from the forest.

“What the hell?” Sage muttered, stepping toward the sound.

Greyson pulled the torch away from the bonfire without having lit it. “Who’s out there?” he asked, his eyes scanning the circle, looking for who was missing.

But his question was answered almost at once as Violet came sprinting toward us from the trees. Her dark hair streamed behind her, and her eyes were wild.

“Come!” she gasped. “Please! Come quick!”

**Episode 1385**

LOLA

I stood—frozen with shock—between a deeply confused-looking Emmett and an absolutely murderous-looking Jay.

Jay was in the doorway, glaring at Emmett, but after a moment he stepped into the room and right into Emmett’s face. “Just what the hell do you think you’re playing at here, huh? You’re supposed to be a *professor* at this school. A person of authority. But instead you’re going around trying to take advantage of your new students? How many times have you done this before, you pervert?”

Oh my god. I wanted to melt away—just disappear into nothingness. If the ground had opened up just then, I would have happily disappeared into it, never to be seen again. It took all my self-discipline, but I managed to not look toward my exit route through the window as I willed my frozen body into action and stepped between Jay and Emmett.

“Jay Taylor Young,” I croaked, looking angrily up at him. “What the *hell* are you doing?”

“*What*?” he asked, looking a down at me, a little off-balance. “What do you mean?”

“What are you doing here? And why are you yelling? You stop it this instant,” I snapped. I glanced over my shoulder at Emmett, whose brows were furrowed. He was looking between Jay and me, politely confused.

Then he took a step back from us. “*Oh*,” he said, nodding, his eyes on Jay. “You must be the mate, then.”

Jay—who was looking a little deflated from my scolding—looked back at Emmett and puffed himself up again. “Yeah, that’s right, man. I fucking am her mate.” He took a threatening step forward. “Lola’s one and *only* mate.”

“Oh my god,” I muttered, my face searing with embarrassment. I put my hand on Jay’s chest as he made to take another step forward. “Could we talk about this in *private*?” I hissed through gritted teeth. My blood was pumping so hard I could actually hear the thud of it.

Jay looked down at me, his eye narrowed in confusion, then looked over me at Emmett. “No.” He shook his head. “No, he needs to hear this.” He pointed a finger at Emmett’s face. “You stay away from my girl or else, you hear me?”

“Holy shit,” I murmured. The small room seemed to grow even smaller, until it felt like the three of us were all standing on top of each other. I sidled close to Jay, moving right in front of him again, and fought to keep my voice steady and rational. “Jay, listen to me. You don’t understand. You didn’t give me a chance to explain—nothing even happened, which I would have told you if you’d picked up the phone. Emmett didn’t do anything. I swear to you—”

“Oh, *Emmett*?” Jay cried in disbelief, looking down at me. “You actually *call* your professor *Emmett*?”

“Excuse me,” Emmett said politely. “But I think I can be of some help here, Lola.” He turned to Jay. “I understand that as a werewolf it might be hard for you to understand the nature of cross-species experience and what the vampire heat is like, but I can assure you that—”

“The *what*?” Jay said, staring at Emmett. “Excuse me? What the hell is *vampire heat*?”

It was like that nightmare everyone has where you walk into class on the first day of school and everyone starts laughing at you and you look down and realize that you don’t have any clothes on and you’re standing in front of them absolutely naked. Except that instead of strangers laughing at you in a dream, this was my mate and my absurdly hot professor talking about my horniess levels, and it was completely fucking really actually happening to me and I wanted to die.

I opened my mouth to say something—to explain what was going on or to tell them to stop or that I was about to literally die from embarrassment—but then I closed it again. The fact was, I had *no* idea what I could say to diffuse this nightmarish situation, and I had a feeling that anything I might add would only make things exponentially worse. I just looked back and forth between them in horror.

Emmett looked over at me, that warmly understanding smile on his face. “Yes, vampire heat. It happens sometimes. And, as I keep telling Lola, it’s really nothing to be ashamed of.” He turned to Jay and spoke clinically, almost like a doctor. “Lola is experiencing elevated hormonal levels as her body transitions to a new form. It’s rare, but not completely uncommon, and natural. She can’t help it, any more than she can help craving blood.”

Jay did not seem to care for Emmett’s bedside manner, and he glared at him. “Why don’t you shut the hell up?” Then he turned to me. “Why didn’t you tell me about this, Lola?”

It was an odd moment: every nerve in my body felt electrified with embarrassment and my face felt hot and flushed with anger, but when Jay turned his gaze on me, there was an almost physical power to it, and I couldn’t help but notice that he’d never looked sexier than he did in that moment.

He was standing in the middle of my dorm room, all distressed and rumpled. The way he’d gotten himself all worked up and rushed up to the school to save my honor was really doing something for me. I started to feel heat rush between my legs… He really was handsome, wasn’t he?

I gave my head a hard shake. *Get a grip, Lola!* I couldn’t let my hormones control me. I had to snap out of this.

Putting my hand on Jay’s arm, I leaned forward, lowering my voice as though I could keep Emmett from hearing, though I knew that was impossible—he was standing only a foot and a half away.

“It’s *really* not a big deal, Jay,” I said. “None of it. I swear it.”

“But, what you said, when we talked,” Jay said, his brows furrowed. “What you said…”

My face flushed hotter, and I prayed that Jay wouldn’t go on. The last thing I wanted was for Emmett to hear that I’d told Jay that he and I had almost kissed.

“*Nothing* happened, Jay,” I insisted. “*Believe* me.”

“But when you called, you said—”

“It’s these crazy hormones, Jay,” I said quickly. “You have no idea what it’s like right now. I feel like I’m going to crawl out of my skin.” I bit my lip and looked at him intently. “That’s all that’s going on. Do you understand?”

Jay looked at me, and behind the uncertainty and worry, I recognized something else: I saw love. He nodded. “Yeah, Lola,” he said quietly. “I understand.”

I breathed a sigh of relief and smiled. “Good.”

But then Jay’s whole demeanor changed, and he looked up, over my shoulder, and glared at Emmett again. “I understand perfectly. I understand you’re in this incredibly vulnerable state, which this creep seems to know an awful lot about, and he tried to take advantage of you when he knew you were super susceptible!”

“That’s *not* what happened, Jay,” I started, but it was too late.

Jay was across the room in two strides. He cocked his fist back and punched Emmett, catching him in the jaw. Emmett’s head snapped back.

“Jay, no!” I screamed, clasping my hands over my mouth in utter shock.

Jay’s punch had caught him off-guard, and Emmett stumbled back a few steps. Then he got his feet back under him and put his hand to his jaw.

When he looked back at Jay, his usually warm, kind eyes were cold and steely with anger. “You don’t want to do that, boy,” he said, his voice icy cold.

Jay’s growl came from deep in his throat. An instant later, he’d shifted and dropped onto four paws on the polished hardwood floor.

*Oh god oh god oh god oh god oh god*. I backed against the far wall, my eyes wide. This wasn’t happening. It couldn’t be. This was a nightmare. I was going to wake up any moment. I *had* to wake up.

Jay reared back and leapt, pouncing so his front paws hit Emmett’s shoulders, knocking him back through my still-open door. They both hit the ground with a tremendous thud and rolled into the hallway.

“Jay!” I screamed, launching myself away from the wall and following them into the hall. “Emmett! Stop! No! Stop this! *Jay!*”

But Jay only growled and snapped and fought harder.

All my focus was on Jay and Emmett as they struggled on the ground, so it was a full minute before I realized that doors up and down the hallway were slamming open as students began to pour out of their rooms, coming to see the source of the commotion. Screams filled the corridors as all eyes fell on Jay’s wolf.

**Episode 1386**

XAVIER

Kira looked down at her phone, then up at the street sign. “It’s just down here,” she said, pointing.

I looked around at the meeting spot Tallis had told Kira about. We had walked about two blocks past an old, abandoned speedway—a half-fallen down structure that looked like time had forgotten it—and had just started down a long, empty, industrial street when a figure stepped from the shadows of a building. I tensed, but as we drew closer, I saw Tallis grinning at us.

“Hey,” Kira said.

“I thought you’d call,” Tallis said.

“What’s the deal?” I asked, looking around. I was edgy and ready to get this over with.

Tallis tipped her head back, gesturing to an alleyway over her shoulder. Behind her was a large object covered with a filthy tarp. “*That’s* the deal.”

I stared at it, nonplussed. “What is that?”

Tallis walked over and yanked the tarp, uncovering the motorcycle underneath with a big flourish. But the flourish was far from necessary. The motorcycle was a piece of shit. It might have been an impressive bike at one time—it was big, at least—but the parts it wasn’t missing were dented and corroded with rust. I eyed the bike with unmasked disdain. “Nice. This your ride?”

Tallis’s grin widened. “Nope. It’s yours.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Seriously?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

I closed my eyes with a sigh. “Fine. Whatever. What’s the plan? I want to get this thing over and done with as soon as possible.”

“Yeah, what’s the deal with this race?” Kira asked curiously.

“These races are kind of a Blood Moon thing,” Tallis explained.

“Fine,” I said, running a hand through my hair as I looked at the wreck of a bike. “I’ve been in a lot of races.”

Tallis gave me a skeptical look. “Blood Moon races are probably a little different.”

I looked over at her. “Let me guess—they’re much more gruesome?”

Tallis gave me a wicked smile in answer.

I groaned. “God, you people are all such drama queens. Does everything the Blood Moons do have to be so theatrical?” I gave my head a shake. “Let me see if I’ve got this straight: Garren’s entering this race, which means there’s a chance for me to take him out *fair and square*,” I said sarcastically, “so the Blood Moon won’t retaliate in any way. That about it?”

Tallis raised her eyebrows and glanced over at Kira. “You got a real smart one, here.”

Kira gave Tallis her frightened rabbit look and stepped toward me, grabbing my arm and pulling me close. “*Gruesome?* Xavier, are you sure this is a good idea?”

“What?”

“What if something happens to you during the race?” She shot the motorcycle a wild look. “That thing doesn’t look safe.”

I gave a grim smile. “As long as it starts, Kira, I can race it. I know my way around a bike. And as far as the parameters of the race, I’ve seen *Mad Max*, so I know how this works.” She looked so worried that I gave her a real smile. “Don’t worry about me. Okay?”

She didn’t look convinced, and another of my own worries cropped up.

“You need to keep cool when you’re on your own while I’m racing, got it?” I said. *Not that she’d even attack a fly.* “I won’t be there to protect you if anything goes down in the stands, so you need to keep your eyes open and stay safe.”

Kira opened her mouth, looking like she was about to argue, but I gave her arm a gentle squeeze.

“Trust me, okay?” I said. “This is our chance, just like I told you. After today, Garren will be dead and your husband will be avenged. This is what you wanted. All you have to do is stay out of the way.”

Kira bit her lip, and I could see a battle raging behind her eyes. “We had a deal,” she said, her voice low. “How will I know it’s really done?”

I felt a flash of frustration that after everything, she was still so distrustful. “Believe me, you’ll know,” I growled.

She still didn’t look certain and gave her head a little shake, but I was quickly reaching the end of my patience. I had put up with a lot of shit because of this chick, and I *had* to get back to Cali. Kira had been slowing me down every step of the way, and I was done with it.

“This is our chance,” I snapped. “This is it. Either we do it now or we don’t do it at all. You got me?”

Kira looked up, clearly surprised by the sharp tone of my voice. But, after a moment, she nodded. “Okay. I’ll lay low until everything’s over. I can do that.”

“Good,” I said, relived, and turned to Tallis.

Kira put a hand on my arm. Her eyes were sharp and fiery. “But I’ll be watching you—and Xavier? Don’t make it quick.”

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The speedway that time forgot had filled with people, and they made themselves heard as the nine bikers competing lined up on the starting line for the race. All the racers were Blood Moon, and their rides were clean, sleek machines that made mine look even worse by comparison.

Garren pulled up on a massive bike with a deafening engine. He killed the engine and cupped his hand around his ear to hear the cheers from the crowd, then he looked over at me and his lip curled. “Look at the new kid!”

I ignored him and the mean-spirited laughter from the other ugly bikers. I was too busy trying to get a sense of the course. It looked like a half-mile loop, but it meandered a bit, and was overgrown and dusty with disuse, which made it hard to see where I’d be able to get an advantage. I wanted to be able to find a spot where I could easily ambush Garren.

The knife I was carrying in my jacket brushed against my side as I leaned to my right, and I saw a spot about two hundred yards out—just over a rise—that could work. I narrowed my eyes, envisioning how I could bend low on the curve just before it to slash Garren’s tires and send him sprawling in the dust, then jump off my own bike for a hand-to-hand fight.

There was a rise in the volume of the cheers from the crowd, and I looked over to see a massive guy walking toward the starting line with a green flag in his hand. He was tall and muscular—which was easy to see, as he was wearing a skin-tight spandex suit that showed off the curve of every muscle.

I rolled my eyes. These Blood Moons ought to start a theatre troupe if they liked attention this much. I looked out into the stands, searching for Kira. I finally spotted her—small, sitting alone on the end of a bench. She waved to me, but before I could raise a hand in return, the guy in the spandex lifted the green flag and the crowd went wild again. The sound bounced around the speedway, growing louder somehow, and the motorcycles roared to life again, adding to the cacophony.

I started my bike, which choked and spluttered, but finally started, growling beneath me.

The spandex guy dropped the flag, and we were off.

The start was chaos. Dirt flew in every direction as the drivers jostled for position. Tallis hadn’t been wrong when she’d said the race was dirty—from the cloud of dust, a shower of roofing nails rained down, and I almost wiped out trying to avoid them.

“*Fuck!*” I bellowed as I clipped the back of another racer’s bike. I hadn’t been aiming for him, but the clip made the other’s rider’s bike wobble, and the racer lost control and wiped out. I had to swerve hard to the left to avoid him as he skidded across the dirt.

“Come on,” I muttered, urging my rust bucket of a bike onward. I narrowed my eyes against the dust in the air and saw Garren ahead of me. His bike was faster and more powerful, but I was a better rider, and by riding the tangents hard, I was able to catch up to him.

Garren looked over, clearly surprised when I pulled even with him, and he looked even more surprised when I pulled slightly ahead. But, with a leer, he leaned over his handlebars and revved his engine, preparing to put on a burst of speed.

I couldn’t let him get away, so I reached for the knife in my jacket. At the next curve, I was going to lean over and get his tires.

The curve was almost on us and I had just shifted my weight, leaning against it, when my bike started to sputter. Then, an instant later, it died completely. But inertia was an immutable thing, and while my bike stalled, *I* kept moving, sailing over the handlebars of the motorcycle and onto the hard-packed dirt, directly in front of Garren’s moving front tire.

**Episode 1387**

I stared in astonishment as Violet came tearing down the lawn toward us. She looked like a madwoman, crying and screaming and waving her arms over her head.

Greyson stood watching her, too, the lit torch frozen in place just over York’s wrapped form.

The wind blew, making the fire flare back toward him, so I sent a bolt of magic to snuff out the flames. Greyson caught my eye and nodded as he dropped the torch, and I knew he was thinking the same thing: we needed to find out what was going on with Violet before we lit the pyre. I imagined the pack trying to fight a vampire invasion or something similar while a massive bonfire blazed and figured we didn’t need two disasters happening simultaneously.

I joined the pack as they rushed down to meet Violet on the lawn.

“What’s going on?” Mrs. Smith asked, reaching for Violet as she nearly collapsed. “Are you hurt?”

Violet shook her head, but when she tried to speak, she was breathing so hard it was nearly impossible to make out what she was saying. “Pond! In clearing!” She pointed back toward the woods, where she’d run from. “Marta! Lilac! Dove! In!”

The picture of the ghoulish pond in the middle of the dark woods hit me like a wave of icy water, and I took a step back with a gasp. “The *pond*?” I asked, shuddering. “You went back there? What on earth were you doing out there again?”

But Violet only sucked in a breath, looking miserable.

“*Why?* After what happened to me, what would *possess* you to go back out there?” I demanded. “I can’t believe this! We should have built a giant fortress around the thing and thrown away the key!”

The rest of the pack were looking at each other, looking confused.

“I think I speak for everyone when I ask: what the *hell* are you talking about?” Sage asked.

“Cali?” my mom said warily. “Did something else happen?”

But Greyson was looking at me, worry creasing his brow. He looked over to Big Mac, whose lips were pressed into a thin line.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. “The rest of you stay put. Keep an eye on York’s body, and whatever happens, stick together. Big Mac and Cali, you two come with me and Violet.”

He ignored the questions lobbed at him as the four of us strode across the lawn and into the woods.

Violet was breathing a little more regularly but was still clearly terrified and kept jumping anytime someone trod on a stick as we stormed through the trees.

“What the *hell* did you think you were doing, going back out there?” Big Mac snapped, glaring at her.

Violet shook her head. “I don’t know. I’m sorry. God, I’m so sorry. Lilac had this idea that maybe he or Marta would be able to talk to the spirits in that pond, and then we were out there. Marta didn’t want to, but I thought he might be right, so we went out there and—”

“You were fools,” Big Mac said, her voice harsh. “Playing around with things you can’t even begin to understand.”

Violet looked over at her, and her dark eyes filled with tears. “I know, I know. I’m sorry.” She looked down as the tears began to fall down her cheeks.

I caught her hand in mine, giving it a squeeze. “I know you went out there to help your brother, Violet.” Violet nodded mutely. “I know you’ve been looking for a solution for him for a long time. I get that.”

“What’s done is done,” Greyson growled. “You came out here—there’s nothing we can do to change that. But what happened?”

We were moving quickly through the trees and, as I looked around, I realized with a sinking feeling that we were getting closer and closer to that cursed pond.

Violet took a shaking breath. “Only Marta can see Lilac, right? But as we got out here, I started to see him, too. Just flashes at first, like out of the corner of my eye. But then, as we got closer, I started to see him. Like, *all* of him. And when we got there, he was so clear—” She broke off, her voice cracking. “And I couldn’t figure out what was going on. None of us could. And then Lilac said he was going to find out, and he dove into the pond.”

“Oh my god,” I murmured as a cold wave of terror washed over me. I remembered being in that pond—the freezing water, the feel of the hands on me, pulling me down to the bottomless depths. I took a deep breath, trying to clear my spinning head.

Violet had started shaking. “And then it was like Marta was frozen. Like, frozen in time.”

I frowned at her. “Frozen? What does that mean?”

We rounded a stand of trees and stepped into the pond’s clearing. Greyson, Big Mac, Violet, and I all stopped walking, staring in shock at the scene before us.

Violet swallowed a sob. “*That’s* what I mean.”

The pond lay still, untouched by the biting autumn wind that blew around us. It was a mirror, reflecting the sharp points of the trees as they soared up into the leaden grey sky. But it was Marta who made us all catch our breath. She was standing still as a statue at the edge of the pond. Her eyes were closed, and she had one arm extended toward the water, like she was waiting for someone to take her hand.

The chill that crept up my spine had nothing to do with the weather, and everything to do with the terrifyingly eerie scene. On the walk over, the air had been filled with the sounds of the forest—the chattering of squirrels getting the last of their food before winter, the call of birds, the wind rushing through the trees—but here, at the pond, all that had stopped. There was nothing. All was silent and still, quiet as a grave.

Violet turned to Big Mac, her eyes wide and pleading. “Help her, please. You have to do something.”

Big Mac looked startled, as thought she hadn’t been expecting the request, but stepped forward uneasily. She moved toward Marta—giving the pond a wide berth—and came to a halt in front of the still and silent medium. She looked at her closely, moving around her in a circle. She snapped her fingers in front of Marta’s face, but Marta didn’t even flinch.

Violet sucked in a terrified gasp.

Big Mac closed her eyes for a moment and began to murmur what sounded like an incantation. She opened her eyes and moved her hands, waving them like she was pulling something from the air around her.

Still Marta didn’t move.

The rest of us stood silently, watching and waiting.

“Well?”

Violet’s voice sounded loud in the silent clearing, and it made goosebumps rise painfully on my arms.

Big Mac looked over at us. She was glaring, but she didn’t look angry—at least not at us. “She’s not dead, but she’s not here either.”

I glanced up at Greyson, who looked as confused as I felt.

“What does that mean?” I asked. “Where is she?”

When Big Mac looked at Marta, her eyes were full of sadness. Then she looked at the pond. “Her spirit’s gone.”

I shuddered hard and kept on shaking, but before I—or anyone else—could say anything in response to this extraordinary statement, Violet pointed a trembling hand at the pond.

Like the repeat of a nightmare, I watched as the mirror-like surface of the water began to bubble. Everything in me told me to run away—to get away from this place—but it was like my feet were glued to the ground, and I could do nothing but stare in horror.

In the center of the pond, rising from the midst of the bubbles, was a tall male figure. He was a stranger, but he looked oddly familiar. I couldn’t figure out why until I heard Violet utter a little cry.

“*Lilac!*”

I stared in wonder. Could it be? The figure was almost fully corporeal! He walked out of the pond and over to Marta, his dark eyes wide and horrified as he stared at the still girl.

Violet gave a strangled sob and rushed toward him, but before she could reach him, Marta’s eyes snapped open, making Violet stop in her tracks.

Marta looked around, her eyes open but empty, and when she spoke it was in a voice not her own.

“*The hour of Letifer is upon us*,” she said, the voice deep and rough and totally unfamiliar. “*The Helm of Destruction will bring about the end of the world and begin a new kingdom of death.*”

The voice echoed for a moment in the stillness of the clearing, and we stared at her in shocked silence.

Then she turned her empty eyes on me, and I felt my blood run cold.

She blinked slowly. “*All who stand in its way will pay*.”

**Episode 1388**

LOLA

*Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god…*

The litany ran through my mind on repeat as I watched Jay’s wolf and Emmett, fighting right out in the open hallway. My vampire teacher and my werewolf mate were duking it out after Jay had rushed up to the school in what I could only assume had been a well-meaning attempt to defend my *honor*.

But had I missed something? Was this the early 1900s?!

*There’s no way this can get any worse…*

The door to one of my classmate’s rooms swung open, no doubt so she could find out what the actual hell was going on outside, and her already pale face went ashen.

“Werewolf!” she screeched.

My heart sank. *Thanks, universe. You just had to prove me wrong, didn’t you?*

Jay and Emmett crashed from wall to wall as each of them grappled for dominance. Emmett was strong—he was an old vampire, after all—but in the confined space, Jay had never seemed more imposing and dangerous. I was sure it didn’t help that in his head, he was probably fighting for me. Even the weakest werewolves were capable of seemingly impossible feats when they felt their mates were threatened, and Jay was far from weak.

Jay tackled Emmett into a case of old photographs and mementos, his teeth snapping precariously close to Emmett’s neck. Emmett kicked him off at the last second, and Jay slammed into an old stone bust displayed on a pedestal. The sculpture hit the floor with a *crack* and broke into several pieces.

“Guys, stop!” I shouted. “You’re making a scene!”

They didn’t stop trying to murder each other for even a second. Up and down the hallway, students started spilling out of their rooms, their fangs bared.

“We’re under attack! Save Professor Laurence!” someone shouted.

*No!* Jay had already been through enough because of me and the vampires here. First getting attacked by that swarm of kid vampires back when we’d first come to Tottenville, and now getting into a terrible fight with a full-grown one because I’d suddenly forgotten how to keep it in my pants.

My bloodsucking classmates would have to find another werewolf to pick on, because I wasn’t going to let anything else happen to Jay.

I jumped into the fray, snarling at my classmates. “*Back off!*”

Then I turned to Emmett and Jay and elbowed my way in between them—one hand pressed against Emmett’s chest and the other held out in front of Jay’s wolf. “Enough, you two!” I shouted, chest heaving with the effort it had required to break them apart.

Jay still snarled at Emmett, his hackles raised, and Emmett hissed back at him. His pearly white fangs were out in full force, ready to sink into any piece of Jay that he could reach.

“Shut it!” I snapped. “You two are grown-ass adults! Stop acting like children!”

The two adversaries glared at each other for a long string of seconds, and I tensed, ready to physically force them apart again if I needed to. Then Emmett blew out a breath and stepped back. His fangs slipped back into his gums.

Jay, however, still in his wolf form, looked absolutely ready to pounce again.

“Jay,” I hissed. “Back off!”

Emmett shifted his gaze to me, rubbing his jaw where Jay had hit him. “If this isn’t reason enough to get rid of your mate, I don’t know what it is you’re waiting for.”

Jay growled and lowered his body, ready to pounce again. I rushed forward and threw my arms around his neck to hold him back and then craned my neck to face Emmett. “You don’t get to make that call.”

His eyes flashed. “You’re making a mistake.”

This earned another growl from Jay.

“Let me know when you’re ready to stop being something you’re not,” Emmett said.

He stepped away from my mate and me and headed off down the hall. Several students followed him to make sure he was okay, while others watched from their doorways, a sympathetic eye on Emmett and an accusatory one on me and Jay.

*How could I have ever been attracted to this guy? He has no idea how powerful the mate bond is. He should’ve just stayed out of it.*

I turned back to Jay, my fingers still locked tight in his fur. “Are you okay?”

Jacqueline’s voice echoed from behind me. “I thought we weren’t allowed to have pets in the dorms.” She sniffed. “I can see why. Yours sure is stinking up the place.”

*Bitch, are you for real right now?*

I threw her the nastiest look I could muster. “Hey, Jacqueline?”

“Yes?” she asked sweetly.

“Shut the fuck up.”

Her offended gasp was music to my ears, but I couldn’t savor it for long.

I turned back to Jay. “If I let you go, will you be chill?”

Jay snarled softly and shifted back to his human form. His *very naked* human form.

A collective gasp rippled through the lingering audience in the hallway, followed by a few *oohs*. Like many werewolves, I had never had an issue with nudity, but that was clearly a cultural practice not shared by my classmates.

“Your boyfriend’s naked!” someone cried out—in horror or delight, I wasn’t sure.

Another vampire chimed in. “He’s kind of hot.”

Jacqueline turned to one of her mean girls. “You know, if that’s what they all look like, I wouldn’t mind a mate of my own.”

The other girls tittered. “Oh, me too. But only if he looks like that!”

All right, time to put a pin in this. I grabbed Jay’s hand and pulled him into my room, then stuck my head out and glared at my classmates. “Keep ogling my mate, and god help me, I will take your eyes out.”

I slammed the door with a huff. *What a nightmare.*

As soon as I turned around to face Jay, however, I realized I wasn’t the only pissed off person in the room. Immediately, my anger fizzled and burned out—replaced with cold, heavy guilt.

“I’m so sorry, Jay,” I said. “I never meant for any of this to happen.”

His eyes narrowed, and he crossed his arms over his chest. “I brought you here to protect you, to help you deal with being a vampire. I had faith in you.”

The past tense snapped my heart in half. “I’m so sorry.”

“Did you do anything with him I should know about?”

I blanched, hating that he even felt he had to ask that. “No! Of course not. I would never.”

Jay didn’t respond at first, just wiped the blood from a healing cut on his hand.

“Are you hurt?” I rushed over, my guilt deepening. This whole thing was all my fault. If I’d just been able to control myself better, none of this would have happened. Jay had been hurt because of me.

I instinctively wrapped him in my arms, and he stiffened. He didn’t hug me back.

Guilt twisted into panic. “You’re not going to unmate from me, are you?”

Still, he stayed silent. Apparently, his raised eyebrow was the closest thing to a response he felt I deserved.

“I didn’t do anything!” I insisted. “I promise, Jay. I know I’ve been a bit out of control lately, but I swear it’s not my fault. It’s the vampire heat—it’s driving me crazy!”

“Can I hear from *you* what that means?” he said. “And not Professor Suck-it?”

“It’s like… I’m a new vampire and I’ve got all these feelings and emotions and my body is adjusting to all these changes. And part of that, I guess, is that I’m like… really, really horny.” I grimaced. “All the time.”

This had to be the worst explanation in the history of terrible explanations. Why in the world would Jay believe a word that was coming out of my mouth? If I hadn’t lived through it myself, I definitely wouldn’t have believed it either.

I tried again. “It’s like when an animal goes into heat—all these feelings aren’t necessarily something I can control. But I’ve been trying to control my actions, regardless. I promise, I’ve been trying to deal with it.”

A crease appeared between his eyes as he processed this information. “And that’s why you wanted to kiss him?”

I stepped back, breaking contact with my mate. “I never *wanted* to kiss him. I did everything I could to keep it under control. I even watched porn to try to take the edge off!”

His eyes bugged out. “You *what*?”

Heat rushed into my cheeks. “It doesn’t matter! The point is the whole time, I only wanted to kiss *you*.”

He finally reached out, gently lifting my chin so I would meet his eyes. “You know I would never unmate from you, Aaliyah.” A tiny flame of hope sputtered to life inside me. “All you had to do was tell me,” he added. “You knew I’d understand, didn’t you? You knew I’d do anything to help you.”

I nodded.

He searched my eyes. “Promise me you’ll never keep anything like that from me again.” His voice was gentle but firm.

“You’re not mad at me?” I asked.

“I can’t stay mad. I love you.” He closed the space between us, dropping his head to kiss the daylights out of me. I was dizzy with need by the time he pulled away and whispered, “Now how can I help you with that vampire heat?”

**Episode 1389**

My eyes were frozen on Marta, my head playing those terrifying words over and over again.

What the hell did she mean, the end of the world was upon us? I wasn’t ready for the world to end, and I definitely hadn’t signed up to participate in this “kingdom of death” nonsense. And what about the part where “all who stand in its way will pay”? What was that supposed to mean? And why had she looked directly at me when she’d said it?

Whatever it was, hard pass. I was just a girl trying to take care of my family and figure out the curse that keeps threatening to kill the two men I love. I didn’t have time for the apocalypse!

Lilac, who was looking very… *vibrant*, for a dead guy, called out to Marta, “Let go of your hold on the spirits and come back to us!”

Marta shook her head slightly, and then her body began to sway. Greyson stepped forward to catch her before she could hit the ground, and even though Marta was clinging to consciousness now, no longer the mouthpiece in a creepy game of spirit world telephone, I was still unnerved by the whole thing.

Lilac moved closer to inspect Marta. “Is she okay?” he asked Greyson.

It was still freaking me out that we could see Lilac. He was as clear as day, like back at the Lupo Finale before Adra from the Manus Cruentae had killed him. The ghost pond was clearly a hotbed for the supernatural. And not only due to its proximity to a werewolf pack house.

He shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Worry was etched into the lines of Lilac’s face. What did a ghost have to be worried about? I knew he and Marta were connected, but it had never occurred to me that Lilac actually cared about the medium.

“Lilac, thank god,” Violet breathed as she strode forward to wrap her arms around him—

And walked right through him.

Violet spun around, completely dumbfounded. “What the heck?”

Apparently Lilac only *looked* corporeal. He was still as much of a ghost as ever.

I looked over at Big Mac, sure she’d have an answer for this new riddle. Her eyes were wide, too, and she was clearly unnerved by everything that had just happened.

*That can’t be good.*

“Let’s bring her back to the house,” Greyson suggested, looking down at Marta. He shifted her in his arms and turned to the rest of the group. “Everyone, go back to the house. This ghost pond—or whatever the hell it is—isn’t safe. As of right now, it’s off limits. Everyone needs to head back.”

Without waiting for a response, Greyson strode through the forest, taking Marta back to the house. The rest of us followed, but slower. Maybe because we were all still trying to come to terms with whatever it was we’d just seen.

Big Mac sidled up to Lilac. “What were you all doing in there anyway?”

Lilac grimaced. “We came here to communicate with the spirits—the ones that tried to get Cali.” He gestured at the pond. “We thought maybe we could learn something, or calm them. Help, somehow. And we did learn a thing or two.”

“Such as?” Big Mac asked.

“It’s definitely a door to the spirit world, and all the spirits down there in the pond are waiting for it to open.”

“Those things that tried to drown me?” I asked.

He nodded. “I think they’re getting impatient.”

My blood ran cold. So our pond was chock full of confused and impatient ghosts? What a terrifying thought.

*If only the Ghostbusters were real. We sure could use them now.*

“That was what I’d felt too—that the spirits were tired of being stuck in-between,” I said. “They wanted to come back into our world instead.”

Silence settled between us as we started back toward the pack house. There was so much to consider, so many questions that had gone unanswered. I glanced at the pond over my shoulder. It looked so peaceful now—there was absolutely no indicator of all the dark power it held. The power that had taken control of Marta. The power that had made Lilac’s ghost visible to us all.

I glanced at him. He looked real. Like I could reach out and touch him if I wanted to.

*This must all be so strange to him. He never asked for any of this spirit world nonsense.*

“Are you okay?” I asked him.

He shrugged in a series of jerky movements. “I’m fine. Just worried about Marta.”

*He really cares about her, doesn’t he? It’s good that Marta’s making some friends, even if those friends are a literal ghost and his sister.*

“So you’re kind of plugged in to the spirit world, right?” I asked.

His lips twitched. “A perk of being dead, I guess. Maybe the only one.”

I grimaced at the reminder. “Do you know why Marta said all that stuff about the end of the world and the kingdom of death?”

“My guess is because all the spirits down in that pond were chanting it.”

“What, really?” Suddenly, I imagined an army of ghosts all chanting in unison.

*Well, that is freaky AF.*

“I guess that’s because Marta and I are tethered, and she’s a medium,” he continued. “Maybe they channeled her energy to tell you about Letifer.”

On the other side of Lilac, Big Mac did a double take and stumbled a bit.

*Letifer…* “Isn’t that the name of the Orb?” I asked her.

The witch shook her head. “No, it’s the Orb *of* Letifer,” she said. “It has no other name that I know of, other than the Sphere in the Fae world.”

I looked at Lilac. “Do you know how we stop the spirits from coming here, then?”

“I’m not sure. If I had to guess, I’d say the spirits are waiting for—” Lilac’s body flickered for a moment, then faded away completely.

I stopped in my tracks. “What the *hell*? Did he just die, or something?”

*Wait, no. That doesn’t make sense. He’s already dead. He’s just… not visible anymore.*

I let out a growl of frustration. He’d been about to reveal something important, I could tell.

Violet looked around wildly, her eyes wide in panic. “Where is he? Lilac? Lilac, come back!”

Big Mac put a hand on her shoulder. “It won’t do any good crying for him. I bet he only appeared because of Marta’s proximity to the pond—there’s a heap of a spirit energy there.”

“Let’s bring Marta back, then,” Violet said. “I need to talk to my brother.”

I winced. I completely understood Violet’s distress, but getting face time with Lilac wasn’t anywhere near the top of our priority list right now. “Why don’t we make sure Marta is okay first?”

Violet sighed. “You’re right.”

Once we got back to the pack house, I immediately headed for the staircase. Big Mac and Violet were going to check on Marta, but I wanted to check on my sister. More than that, I wanted to know if any of this had affected her.

Greyson’s voice slipped into my mind. *I want to talk to you.*

*I’ll come find you after I check on Artemis*, I promised him.

I crept up the staircase and poked my head into Artemis’s room. She was asleep in her bed. Rishika was propped up in a chair next to her, a book in her lap.

“How is she?” I whispered.

“She’s been out cold since you left,” Rishika told me. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen her be so still for so long before. I didn’t realize Fae could get sick like this.”

Worry and guilt tightened in my stomach. Artemis and I had had such different reactions to the same potion… I couldn’t help but wonder why that was—and if it was a sign that Artemis wasn’t really back to her normal self just yet. Big Mac claimed that Artemis had only been touched by the Orb, but what if there was something worse happening?

Even knowing that Artemis had been asleep the entire time we’d been out at the pond, I still couldn’t quite shake the feeling that everything that happened at the pond and with Artemis were somehow connected.

“Are you okay?” Rishika asked. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost—and not of the pond variety, I hope.”

She was pretty much right on the nose. “Just a long night. Something happened to Marta, but I think she’ll be okay. Thanks for watching out for Artemis. Are you good here?”

She nodded. “There’s nowhere I’d rather be.”

I left Artemis to continue sleeping off the potion and went in search of Greyson. What did he want to talk about? All the crazy stuff that had been happening? Or was it about us? Honestly, I didn’t know which one I’d rather talk about. Neither option was great—the end of the world, or the curse that made it impossible for me to choose one mate over the other.

I found Greyson standing on the porch outside. A grave look was etched onto his face, but it softened when his eyes landed on me. He pulled me into a hug, and even with all my carefully constructed boundaries, I didn’t hesitate to hug him back.

*This feels so comforting.*

As the hug lingered, I came back to myself. We couldn’t do this. We were supposed to be broken up. I forced myself to pull back. “What did you want to talk about?”

That grave expression had returned. “It’s not safe for you here anymore. You need to leave.”

**Episode 1390**

GREYSON

Cali stared at me, her eyes wide with shock. “*What?*”

Amidst all that shock, I saw a fire in her eyes. One that told me she wasn’t just going to agree to leave. Cali struggled to listen to a thing I said even in the best of situations—and this was far from that.

Which was why I’d been preparing my argument in my head ever since I’d arrived back at the pack house and left Marta in the care of my mother. The idea had been spinning in my head ever since we’d found Cali half-drowned in that godforsaken pond, but after the threat that ghost had given us through Marta’s body, I knew I couldn’t allow Cali to stay here.

I’d foolishly thought that by defeating my father, the threat from the Orb and its dark power would be nullified, or at least brought down to something manageable by comparison. But these undead people who kept popping up, the ghosts… Lately, it seemed like things were worse than ever.

I thought back to what Marta had told us.

*The hour of Letifer is upon us—the Helm of Destruction will bring about the end of the world and begin a new kingdom of death. All who stand in its way will pay.*

As the Alpha of the Redwood pack, it was my responsibility to face this new threat. But that didn’t mean Cali had to. In fact, I would personally make sure that she was far, far away from whatever threat might be headed our way.

I turned away from the shock and hurt and anger in her gaze, staring out over the property. Maybe it made me a coward, but even with all the time I’d spent practicing my speech, I still couldn’t look her in the eye and deliver it.

“It’s not safe for the pack if you stay,” I said, reciting the careful rationale I hoped would make her keep her distance. “And—”

She stepped in front of me so she was standing directly in my line of sight. Apparently, there would be no escaping her—or this conversation.

“Excuse me?” she snapped. “You’re dropping this huge bomb, telling me that I’m supposed to leave my home, but somehow this is about the pack? Do you want to try that again?”

I fought the urge to smile. Even if it was pretty damn inconvenient for me in this moment, I loved how fiery my mate could be. But I couldn’t smile, because at the end of this conversation, she was supposed to be convinced that the best thing would be for her to leave.

“Yes, that’s right,” I said. “I’m the Alpha, and I have to put the pack above everything else. Even my mate.”

A crease appeared between her eyebrows. “I don’t understand. How is me staying where I belong keeping you from protecting the pack?”

“Because I can’t put myself in the position where I’m forced to choose between you and the pack,” I said. “And the truth is, if push comes to shove and we do end up facing down the end of the world, and I can save you *or* the pack, I’ll choose you. Every time. No matter what.”

She fell silent for a moment, mulling this over. Then a small smile curved her lips. “You realize how romantic that sounds, right?”

A laugh slipped between my lips before I could stop it, and I leaned in and brushed my lips over her forehead. “I know, which is why I need you to not argue with me about this.”

“But what if I don’t want to leave? This is my home too, Greyson.” Her eyes were large, pleading with me to change my mind. And damn, if they didn’t stop my conviction right in its tracks. I sighed. “I don’t want you to leave either,” I admitted. “In fact, it’s the last thing I want right now.”

“Okay.” She slowly reached out and linked our hands. “Then why don’t we try something else? Something we both want? Why don’t we stick together? We’re going to need each other to get through whatever the heck this is.”

I gently squeezed her hand, never forgetting for a single moment just how small it felt in my own, all those fragile bones wrapped up in my fragile mate. And yet I got so much strength from that simple touch, from Cali herself. She never failed to bring out the best in me, to make me want to be a better man, to be a worthy mate for her. Being with her—even as rocky and tenuous as our relationship had always been—had changed me for the better, had made me a better man, a better mate, and a better Alpha.

Which was why it was so goddamn hard to have this conversation with her. How could I send her away when she was to thank for so much of who I was now? For so much of who I would continue to be, even if she did leave?

“Cali, Marta looked at *you* when she said all who stood in the way would pay. That doesn’t exactly bode well for you or your future if you stay anywhere near that spirit world door.”

“She could have been looking anywhere! She was possessed, remember? Who knows how long it had been since those ghosts tried to drive a human body? Maybe she wasn’t looking at me at all.”

Despite myself, I chuckled again. “You know that’s not true.”

“She was *possessed*,” Cali repeated emphatically. “Who knows what she was really doing?”

I shook my head. “We’re both trying to protect each other—I’m telling you to get away from all this danger, and you’re trying to pretend there isn’t any, just so I won’t worry.” I smiled. “I kind of like that we’re both looking out for each other here.”

“I do too,” she said with a smile of her own. “But I’m serious, Greyson. I’m not leaving. I can’t. Artemis… She isn’t well, and she probably can’t travel right now. I would never leave her here, so that’s out of the question.”

I sighed. I’d known it would be a long shot to convince her to leave, but I should have been better prepared for this. *God knows, it would be easier to face down the end of the world if I didn’t have to worry about protecting her all the time…*

But I knew my mate.

I knew that when she had her mind set on taking care of someone, there was no budging her. She didn’t value herself nearly as much as she valued the people around her. She’d been lucky so far, despite all the trouble she’d gotten into, but I couldn’t help the nagging sense of worry that one day her luck would run out.

If that were the case, maybe it was better if she stuck around. Distraction or not, if she was going to put herself in danger, I’d rather it be somewhere I could keep an eye on her.

I sighed. “You’re right, even if I don’t like it.”

She squeezed my hand. “I’m glad you understand. I know how difficult it is…” She bit her lip and then added. “I feel the same way, too. I can’t stand the idea of you being in any kind of danger.”

My heart swelled. Whether we were broken up or not, I still loved her so damn much it hurt. “If what’s coming really is as horrible as it sounds, then we’ll need all the support we can get.”

“I’d rather fight alongside the pack than run away and hide.”

I nodded. “I think that’s a good strategy—facing this instead of trying to run from it. That’s why I called Xavier and told him to come back.”

She smiled. “He told me. I’ll be honest, I’m surprised you did that. It’s a big step for the two of you.”

I shrugged. “Don’t read too much into it.”

She moved closer to me, her hands sliding up my arms and anchoring themselves on my chest. I felt a slight tugging sensation as the veins moved away from her touch, like tiny snakes slithering beneath my skin.

Was Xavier feeling this too? I hoped not. Sure, things with us were always basically a shitshow, but I did still want him to come back here to help defend the pack against whatever was coming. And to help protect Cali.

I leaned in, pressing my forehead to Cali’s. For a moment, I just breathed her in, savoring the sensation of being close to her. I could stay like this forever.

“Greyson!”

I turned to see Zainab coming up from across the lawn.

“The pyre is ready,” she said.

“I’ll be there in a second.”

She nodded and turned back.

Cali tensed in my hold. “What are we going to do about all of this?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “But I do know one thing…”

And then I leaned in and brushed my lips against hers.

**Episode 1391**

LOLA

My already red face took on a tomato-like appearance as Jay moved closer to me. My tireless attraction for my mate collided with the full power of my vampire heat and set off a chain reaction low in my belly. Suddenly all I wanted was to kiss him senseless and then drag my tongue over the deep lines of his chest and abs.

*Yum.*

Was it hot in here, or was it the very ripped, naked werewolf crowding me against the wall? I resisted the urge to fan myself—along with the urge to press my body against every inch of firm, muscled—

*Lola, keep it in your pants! You’re not done talking yet!*

Even though all I wanted was to jump Jay’s bones right here and now—as loudly as possible—in my dorm room, things still didn’t feel quite settled between us. I still felt like complete garbage about how everything had gone down. Why hadn’t I just been honest with Jay about everything I was feeling? I’d told myself that I didn’t want to stress him out when he already had so much on his plate, but that sort of fell flat now.

Why hadn’t I told him about my urges? About my vampire heat? Why hadn’t I trusted him to still love me and still want me—even if it meant exposing him to all this weird vampire shit?

“Lola?” he prompted, his eye searching mine again. There was no accusation there, no judgment or blame. Somehow, that made me feel even worse. I deserved more than that, didn’t I? After how I’d betrayed him? I mean, Jesus, he’d been so hurt by what I’d done that he’d felt the only solution was to straight up attack Emmett.

I thought back to their fight, and Emmett’s cruel words. He really was an asshole. I truly couldn’t believe I’d ever been attracted to him, not after what he’d said. And especially not when I had the most perfect mate in the world, someone who was made for me and meant for me. How could I have ever even thought about anyone else?

Maybe it was just the vampire heat. Maybe that had caused me to straight up latch onto the first person I’d seen. I’d definitely been longing for Jay pretty much ever since he’d left, and I’d never done particularly well being separated from him, even for a short time.

“Baby…” Jay backed me up against the wall, his hands warm and heavy on my hips. “I’d love to know what’s going on in that head of yours.”

I met his eye again. “I’m… I’m really sorry, Jay. You know that, right? I hope you can forgive me.”

My back gently made contact with the wall, and his hands bracketed my body, his palms pressing against the wall behind me. Jay was quickly overwhelming my senses, and I didn’t mind one bit. My lady parts were practically begging me to let him take the edge off, but I clung to my focus. I had to clear things up with him first.

“I trust you, Lola. I never stopped.”

“But—”

He cut me off. “Hey, I don’t want you to beat yourself up for any of this, okay? I should have listened to you when you told me you were struggling and wanted to come home. I should have taken you more seriously—maybe then you would have felt more comfortable telling me what was going on with you.”

Tears burned my eyes, and I looked back down to hide them as a few escaped down my cheeks. “I’m so sorry,” I said again. God, I was like a broken record. “I never wanted to hurt you in any way. You did all of this for me, and I feel like a complete fuck up.”

He reached out and gently wiped the tears from my cheeks. “You’re not. I’m here now, and I’m not going to leave until I know for sure that you’re okay.”

I let out a sob and wrapped my arms around his neck, breathing in his scent as he hugged me tightly. Jay was everything I needed, everything I could’ve ever asked for in a mate. How could I have ever thought, even for one second, that anyone else could give me what he did?

That flame low in my belly grew into an inferno at the thought.

And right now, I wanted him to give me everything.

I wasn’t entirely sure when we began to kiss, but once we started, there was no stopping. I couldn’t get enough of his taste, of the feeling of his lips moving urgently against mine. We absolutely devoured each other as he pressed me up against the wall.

He broke away long enough to lift me up and walk me over to my bed.

“I’m sorry,” I told him again as he pressed me into my twin-size mattress. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Lola. More than you’ll ever know.” He kissed my forehead, then the tip of my nose, then my lips. He broke away to give me a pained look. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there when you needed me.”

I whined at the distance between our lips. It felt like my entire body was on fire with need—from my vampire heat, from being with my mate. I *loved* him.

And I loved that despite the intensity of the moment—my synapses buzzing with hunger—Jay and I weren’t just hooking up to scratch the itch. He was everything to me, my entire world. My one true love. And I couldn’t wait any longer.

“You’re here now,” I said.

Jay’s lips skimmed over mine again, the barest of caresses, and traveled up to my ear. His warm breath washed over the shell of my ear and made me moan like a cat in heat.

“Those videos you watched,” he whispered. “Did they give you any good ideas?”

I bit my lip, flushing. “A few.”

He smirked. “Show me.”

I gently pushed him off me so that he was sprawled out, naked and ready, across the tiny mattress. I dashed over to my closet to grab one of my silk scarves and then returned to the bed. I held it out to him. “Cover your eye.”

His eyebrows lifted. “Seriously?”

“Mm hmm.”

Jay was nothing if not a good sport, and he covered his eye and lay back. “All right, then. Rock my world.”

*Yes, please!*

I started with simply touching his chest and then sliding my hands up to his shoulders, more a soothing caress than an attempt to seduce him. My fingertips drew circles and other shapes across his skin, sometimes making him tense, and other times relaxing him.

Even though his cock was hard and ready, I avoided touching it—for now.

*Good things come to those who wait.*

“Do you trust me?” I asked.

“Of course,” he said, breath catching ever so slightly.

“Do you want me to do whatever I want?”

“Yes,” he said so quickly it made my knees want to buckle.

Fitting.

“Lola, what are you—*shit!*” he said as my hot mouth surrounded him.

One hand on his base, my mouth working his tip, I pulled as many of those noises from my mate as possible. His hands sank into my hair, but he didn’t push me. More than anything else, it seemed like he just needed something to hold onto. It turned me on so much that I couldn’t contain my moan.

Suddenly, he let go of my hair, and I had about two seconds of warning before he was pushing me back on the mattress and peeling away my clothing. Apparently he couldn’t wait any longer.

“You are so fucking sexy,” he growled. “I need to fuck you.”

If I hadn’t already been so wet, that string of words would have done the trick.

He flipped me onto my belly and pulled me up by my hips. “I love you,” he whispered, kissing me. “Do you want me?”

“Yes,” I whimpered.

My eyes rolled back on a moan as he tilted my hips up and thrust into me. First slowly, in a way that was unraveling me, then harder, deeper, setting my nerve endings ablaze.

“God, Lola,” he groaned. His thrusts were becoming sloppy, and the half-assed rhythm of me rocking back against him wasn’t much better.

Jay reached around me, running his fingertips down the plane of my stomach and lower—stopping on my clit. He rubbed tight circles on my swollen bud, and I clenched around him with a cry.

“D-Don’t stop,” I gasped.

I was so close I was practically seeing stars. And then I bucked my hips back in time with his rough thrusts inside me and detonated around him, my muscles clamping down on his cock as a tidal wave of pure pleasure slammed into me.

We came back to the world in a breathless tangle of limbs, and I snuggled into Jay’s arms with a happy sigh. For the first time since all this vampire heat nonsense had begun, I felt truly satisfied. Like my heat was backing off, sated for the time being.

I craned my head to look up at him. “Are we okay?”

He smiled. “Better than okay.”

My eyes closed with a hum. “Good.” Then, almost immediately, they shot open. “I don’t understand why I was even attracted to anyone else. You’re my *mate*. I thought being mates meant that I would never be attracted to anyone else ever again.”

To my immense surprise, Jay laughed. “Where did you hear that?”

My jaw dropped. “It’s what I was taught! Didn’t you?! Am I wrong?”

“I’ve never heard of that,” he said. “It was never something I was told.”

“Okay, then.” I was so confused. “What *were* you told?”

He shrugged. “That mates were just to have kids.”

I blinked. Once. Twice.

And then I snapped. “That is totally sexist! WOW. Why am I even surprised?!”

“It’s what I was *told*,” he said quickly. “It’s not what I believe.”

“You’d better not!”

He leaned in, his gaze warm in a way that made my stomach flip-flop. “I think whatever we were both taught was wrong. I know in my heart you’re my forever person, no matter what happens. I’ve never questioned it. That’s what being mates means to me.”

My anger instantly evaporated, and I leaned in to kiss him—

A loud rapping on the door made me jolt.

“Lola Spillane!” Irma’s voice slipped through the door. “Get out here this instant!”

**Episode 1392**

XAVIER

I hit the ground so hard the air was knocked out of my lungs—and still the roar and rumble of the motorcycles filled my ears, reminding me I wasn’t out of danger. Far from it, actually.

Garren’s grin could only have been described as feral, and he revved his bike, accelerating to bear down on me and squash me like a fucking ant.

I couldn’t let that happen. I’d promised Cali I’d come back to her, and I wasn’t going to break that promise. Not now—not ever. I rolled at the last second, narrowly avoiding getting mowed down. The searing heat of the engine washed over me, the caustic scent of gas filled my heaving lungs, and Garren’s boot dug into me as he roared by, his maniacal laugh fading as he drove off.

That motherfucker was toying with me, and—worse than that—he was convinced he’d already won.

*Fuck you.*

I leaped to my feet and grabbed my bike. With a burst of motion, I started cruising forward while I tried to kick start it. Another biker was heading toward me, just as fast as Garren was pulling ahead. I couldn’t afford to be stranded here on this godforsaken lemon.

Taking a deep breath, I tried again to kick start it, and the bike roared to life. I pulled back into the race in a cloud of exhaust. The biker reached me a few seconds later as I was still picking up speed, and he tried to kick me down a second time, holding on to his handlebars for leverage and heaving his body forward to counteract the shift in his weight as he slung his right leg out.

Unfortunately for him, I’d learned my way around these cheap-ass tactics.

Rather than ducking completely out of the way of his leg, I moved just far enough away that his foot couldn’t make contact with my body, then reached out with one hand, grabbed him around the ankle, and *yanked.*

The driver flew off his bike with a scream, crashing to the ground as I sped on ahead.

*Goodbye, Johnny T.*

I roared forward, turning the throttle as high as it would go as I scanned the road for my target. Predictably, Garrett was way the fuck ahead. I’d have to catch up to him if I wanted any chance at killing him—and it wouldn’t be easy. There were still five bikers in my way—

Suddenly, Garren threw out a steel chain at the bike closest to him, wrapping the long, metal length around the front tire. The bike came to an abrupt stop that sent the driver flying over the handlebars and skidding across the road. He didn’t get up.

*Well, four more to go then.*

A burst of pain burned up my side, and I lurched around to see another biker just behind and to the left of me, lashing out at me with a box cutter. I wasn’t sure if he was trying to slash my tires and had missed, or if he was going for the much more ambitious route of trying to gut me mid-race.

But it didn’t matter either way, because this dude had just made himself my problem—and that didn’t bode well for him.

I swerved to avoid his knife, then cut back in, crashing into him and sending him flying off the road.

And then there were three. The race was changing almost faster than I could keep up. As I hugged my body low to my bike, cutting as many corners as I could to regain the lead I’d lost, I saw two of the bikers ahead of me collide and veer off the track in an explosion of fire and smoke.

Now it was down to Garren and one other biker. Suddenly, the odds didn’t seem quite so impossible.

I revved my engine and kept a tight hold on the throttle, pushing my sorry piece of shit bike to the absolute limit and hoping to hell it wouldn’t quit on me again. I’d gotten lucky the last time it had thrown me, and I knew it. I wasn’t a cat. I didn’t have an abundance of lives just lying around for me to blow on this stupid death race.

I only had one life, and I was meant to spend it with Cali. The sooner I gutted Garren, the sooner I could go home to her. I needed to win this, and not just so I could be with Cali—after dealing with these Blood Moon assholes, this whole thing had become a question of honor.

I was here to make good on my debt to Kira, even though the whole thing was a huge pain in the ass. But it was the honorable thing to do, and the more honorable I was, the greater my chances at being someone worthy of Cali. A mate who was equal to her in… well, not goodness, necessarily, but still the match she deserved.

I closed in on the final biker separating me from Garren. She must have heard me coming, because she looked back, a sadistic grin on her face. She reached into her saddleback and dropped a box on the roadway, which burst open, spewing nails across the track.

I swerved to avoid ripping a tire open and getting knocked out of the race for good. I didn’t want to kill anyone but Garren, but if this biker bitch was trying to interfere, well, that was her mistake.

I leaned down and scooped up a handful of nails, then gunned the engine and pulled ahead of the biker. “I think you dropped these!”

I pulled up just in front of her and dropped the nails before putting on another burst of speed.

The screech and crash of her bike echoed behind me. Now it was just me and Garren. Finally, I was going to end this. Right here, right now.

I pulled closer to Garren, who looked back with a sneer, shouting, “Glad you could make it! I’ve been waiting for this. Bring it on, dude.”

I rolled my eyes. *Really? That’s the best this dickhead’s got?*

“I’m not a dude, asshole!” I shouted back. “I’m a fucking Alpha!”

I gunned my bike, pulling back on the handlebars, and the front wheel rose up. Huh. Maybe this thing wasn’t such a hunk of junk after all. Barreling forward on just my rear tire, I pulled up to Garren’s bike from behind—then dropped the front tire of my bike down on Garren’s rear tire.

Both bikes went crashing to the ground in a tangled, fiery heap, but I was ready this time, and I tucked my body and rolled with the momentum instead of going splat across the concrete. I really, really hoped Garren couldn’t say the same.

Once I found my feet, I didn’t waste another second. Every moment this asshole continued to draw breath was a moment too long. I jumped up, bruised and battered, with murder in my eyes.

*It’s time to fucking end this guy.*

But when I made it around the flaming pile of scrap metal that had once been our bikes, I found Garren on his feet, wiping blood from the corner of his mouth. He gave me a twisted grin that showcased the blood smeared across his otherwise white teeth.

One thing was for sure—without Garren sucking up oxygen, the world would have one less degenerate. I would be doing *everyone* a favor by taking this bastard out.

Suddenly, Garren lunged forward, and there was a flash of silver before bright, hot pain burst up my side. I staggered back with a gasp. He was using the twisted remnant of a handlebar like some kind of club.

*Jesus fucking Christ.*

Ignoring the pain searing up my side, I rolled to avoid another blow and then began my own attack. I caught the handlebar with both hands the next time he swung it, then tossed it away with a growl. Garren took the opportunity to sucker punch me, and I let out a groan and threw every ounce of anger thrumming in my body into a right hook aimed for his face.

The sound of flesh slamming into flesh was music to my ears, along with the blood that sprayed out of Garren’s mouth. The crowd let out an *ooh*—they must not have been used to seeing him get hit. But I didn’t linger on the thought. I had to focus. Garren was a natural born streetfighter, and no part of this would be easy.

But I also remembered what I’d told Cali—that kiss hadn’t been our last. And if I was going to kiss her again, I had to make it out of here alive. I had to keep my mind on the prize.

And right now, the prize was trying to rip my throat out with his partially shifted snout. I kicked him in the stomach, and then gave him an uppercut when he lurched forward with a grunt. He staggered backward, like he was going to hit the ground. He hooked his foot around my ankle at the last second, and then we were colliding onto the concrete, grappling for dominance even as we hit the ground.

Nails dug into my back as we rolled and fought, and with a snarl, I landed a blow to Garren’s face that was so hard my bruised knuckles split open. It hurt like a bitch, but it stunned him just long enough for me to pin him to the ground, ready for the kill.

Garren started to shift, snarling as he jerked and bucked to free himself. I partially shifted as well, keeping him firmly pinned.

Then I lifted one partially shifted hand, ready to deliver the final blow and tear out this motherfucker’s throat. But then I heard a cry from the stands, followed by several voices.

*Focus, Xavier. Take him out!*

“Any last words?” I asked Garren.

“Fuck you,” he spat.

“Hard pass, thanks.”

As I brought my hand down, Kira’s hands wrapped around my arm, stopping me from landing the killing blow.

“No,” she said. “He’s mine!”

**Episode 1393**

The second Greyson’s lips met mine, my whole body began to tremble. And after a beat of my limbs shaking, my mind screaming at me to push him away, and my heart cracking open with love for the man in front of me, I kissed him back.

It was a gentle kiss at first, a soft brushing of his lips against mine paired with a release, a moment when we weren’t kissing, but we hadn’t separated either. A moment where were still pressed together, mouths just short of touching, sharing the same air. We were locked into our own little bubble of desire and love where nobody and nothing else mattered.

It was so intoxicating that not even my brain thought twice about sliding my hand around the back of his neck and guiding him down to kiss me again. This one was harder, hungrier, edged with a desperation I knew all too well.

I missed him too. I wanted to be with him too.

But, of course, nothing in my life could ever be that simple. Because my life involved curses, other men, family members who put everything at risk…

Just like me, everything Greyson wanted was at odds with everything he was.

My back hit the siding as Greyson pressed himself against me, still kissing me, still savoring my mouth with those raw-edged kisses that made my chest ache just as much as they made me hungry for more.

All I could do was press myself against his chest and kiss him back with everything I had, pouring my love, my heartache, my whole self into this pure, perfect, devastating moment with my mate.

I loved with him with everything I had. More than I’d ever thought I was capable of—at least until I’d met Xavier. But the thought of my other mate didn’t bring me up short like it normally did. Instead, it made me throw myself more deeply into the moment.

I’d promised myself that I’d keep my distance from my mates for their protection. It didn’t feel right, and moments like this never failed to drive that fact home, but I didn’t exactly have any other options. All I had was my love for them—and beautiful moments like this one with the man I loved. The man who tried to protect me just as fiercely as I protected him.

Who wouldn’t want a mate like that? To have a powerful Alpha like Greyson looking out for them? And while there were still so many things that we hadn’t resolved, none of that mattered, not now.

His tongue slipped into my mouth, and I let out a soft moan. I couldn’t stop kissing him. Ever.

If I did, something horrible would happen to him, and I loved him too much to allow that.

Maybe love by itself wasn’t enough to break the curse or help me choose or stop the world from ending, but right here, right now, it was enough. Just being with my mate in this simple, sweet, soul-aching way was more than enough.

I had no idea how much time had passed with Greyson pushing me up against the side of the house before the sound of someone clearing their throat shattered our precious, perfect moment.

“Um… Sorry, excuse me?”

Greyson broke away from my mouth with a groan—but not a good one. I peered around his broad shoulders to see that Zainab had returned.

“I’m so sorry to interrupt,” she said, looking everywhere but directly at Greyson or me. “But everybody’s kind of waiting?”

*Oh, shit. York’s funeral.*

The majority of the pack had gathered to watch York’s body burn on the funeral pyre, and we’d kept everyone waiting.

Heat rushed into my cheeks. “Sorry!” I called to her. “We were just coming—I mean *leaving*!”

When I leaned back and looked up at Greyson, he was smiling. Not the least bit repentant, my mate. I lightly slapped his chest. “How long was she watching us?”

He caught my hand, holding it for a few extra seconds before giving it a gentle squeeze. “If you ask me, she should have waited a bit longer before interrupting us.”

I rolled my eyes and adjusted my shirt. There would be no hiding the blush heating my cheeks, or my swollen lips. Hopefully everyone would be more focused on York than on what Greyson and I had been doing to make us late for the funeral.

*Seriously, what were we thinking?*

Except, there was no real mystery there. It would always be a challenge for me to come up with good reasons to not kiss Greyson. But faced with his love and protective declaration—not to mention a ghost heralding the end of the world—kissing had seemed like a very natural response.

In fact, some not-so-small part of me thought it would be a great idea to pick right up where we’d left off.

Greyson let go of my hand and headed down the porch stairs. “Let’s go.”

Or maybe not.

Disappointment and guilt warring inside me—along with a healthy dose of embarrassment—we followed Zainab to the funeral pyre, where most of the pack had gathered.

My mom shot me a dubious look. “Where have you been?” she whispered.

“Um, Greyson and I were discussing something.”

I ducked my head so she couldn’t see the truth written across my face. God, I hoped she wouldn’t put two and two together. The last thing I needed was a lecture from Mom about how kissing sexy Alphas and showing up late to funerals was bad etiquette.

Greyson moved to the front of the group. “Can I get everyone’s attention, please?” he called. The pack immediately quieted down, and everyone turned to face him. He knew how to command a room—and I didn’t mind it one bit. It was a hell of a look for him.

“We’re here today to give York a proper send off, which is probably the very least of what he deserves,” Greyson began with a sigh.

I wondered how much ghost-Marta’s threat was lingering at the forefront of his mind as he tried to deliver a proper eulogy. Whatever was going on in the spirit world, it was wreaking havoc on ghosts and innocent living bystanders alike. York himself was proof of that.

“I didn’t really get a chance to really know York,” Greyson continued. “Nobody really did. In fact, the best we’ve been able to come up with, other than his name, is that he might have worked at the drive-in nearby.” Greyson’s gaze lowered to the wrapped body on the funeral pyre. “York, I wish we could have gotten to know you better. But more than that, I wish you’d never had reason to meet us at all.”

He lifted his gaze to the pack. “The truth is, York got caught up in something that he didn’t deserve. And I would like to invite each of you to remember not to let his death be in vain. The complete disruption in York’s life—leading up to his death—can serve as a reminder that there are many dangers out there, and we must never forget that.”

Torin wiped tears from his eyes as Greyson stepped forward and threw the torch onto the pyre.

I stared into the flames, watching as they consumed York’s body. Greyson was right about the dangers out there. There was so much we didn’t know, so much that could still hurt us no matter how well we prepared.

This might have been the end of York, but I had a sinking feeling that it was just the beginning of all the trouble yet to come.

As the fire slowly consumed the body, everyone was solemn, silent, seemingly lost in thought. It was then that I noticed Big Mac slowly circling around the house. I took the opportunity to step away from the funeral and approach the witch. I still had so many questions about what had happened at the pond, and if anyone here could answer them, it was Big Mac.

When I reached her, I realized she was chanting under her breath.

“Are you casting a spell?” I asked. “You’re not going to lock me in here again, are you?”

She shook her head. “No, though that’s not a bad idea. There’s always trouble when you go wandering off on your own. I’m actually trying to ward off dark magic. After what happened today, I just hope I’m not too late.”

My eyes widened. “Too late? What’s that supposed to mean?”

My mind flew to Marta and Artemis, two people who had been touched by this dark power.

Astrid popped up next to me and nodded toward the tree line. “Who’s that?”

I glanced over, and my surprise deepened. It was Mace. And he’d come alone. He was heading over to Greyson.

I started over to him, Astrid in tow. “He’s the Alpha of the Blue Blood pack,” I said. “Don’t you remember him from the battle? He was on our side.”

“Hmm,” Torin said, taking him in. “He’s kinda cute.”

I ignored Torin’s comment. What the hell was Mace doing here? I kind of doubted that he’d come all this way just to invite us to Thanksgiving.

I reached them just in time to overhear Mace say, “—my pack attacked by a horde of creatures with orange eyes.” He wheeled around and pointed to Big Mac. “Your witch is coming with me!”

**Episode 1394**

XAVIER

If I were being honest, I hadn’t expected Kira to make it down from the stands. I’d gone into this fully expecting—planning, actually—to be the one to take Garren out. And I was fine with that. Despite the way Kira and I met, I knew she wasn’t a bloodthirsty killer. She didn’t have the stomach for it, even when the one marked for death had taken so much from her. Even when she’d ordered the hit herself.

And yet here she was, in the middle of the track, keeping me from fulfilling my part of the deal and taking out the werewolf who’d murdered her husband.

I looked back at the stands and then at the witch next to me. There was no natural way for anyone to have made it down here that fast.

“Did you use your magic to get down here?” I asked.

She ignored me—or she was just so focused on Garren that she couldn’t think about anything else. In either case, she didn’t look away from our target.

Garren looked up at me, still being held back by Kira, and laughed. Some blood from his busted mouth sprayed up into my face as he sneered. “You’re too soft to take on a hard man like me, aren’t you?”

I barely resisted the urge to gag. It was bad enough that he was spraying god only knew what across my face, some of which had gotten *in my mouth*. Was he seriously gonna stick to the toxic masculinity script too? The dude was pinned! I was moments away from ending his life, and he was *laughing*.

*Maybe he’s not all that skilled. Maybe he’s just so batshit crazy he doesn’t care if he gets hurt, or if his life is in danger. This is still just some fucked up game to him.*

But that didn’t mean the dude wasn’t getting on my very last nerve. “If you’d like me to rip your throat out and put an end to all of this, I’d be happy to make that happen,” I growled.

“No!” Kira snapped again. “I said he’s mine—”

Taking advantage of my distraction, Garren freed one hand and punched me square in the jaw. My head snapped back, and sharp pain burst across my face. Fuck, he was fast. I hadn’t even seen that coming.

I teetered back just enough for Garren to buck me off him, and I hit the ground. The sound of snapping bones filled the air—Garren was shifting.

*Fuck!*

Why the hell hadn’t the witch just let me kill him? Garren lunged toward Kira, and I caught him around the neck and slammed him to the ground. We fought for dominance, his wolf growling and clawing and snapping at every inch of me he could reach, while I tried like hell to just hold onto him long enough for Kira to make this supposed killing blow she kept talking about—and to keep her from getting torn to shreds by a vicious, bloodthirsty werewolf before she could even muster up the power to defend herself.

Garren’s wolf snarled again, his breath hot on my face as he jerked in my grip. His breath smelled like he’d just eaten an animal carcass from the side of the road—something I honestly wouldn’t have put past him. His teeth glanced across my shoulder, tearing open my shirt and leaving shallow cuts on my skin.

“Don’t you fucking dare!” I spat.

This was such a joke. I’d had Garren in the perfect spot. I’d *had* him! All of this could’ve been done by now, if Kira hadn’t had her murderous change of heart.

Garren’s wolf slammed all four feet into my body and sent me skidding back, breaking my hold on him. I didn’t even get a full second to recover before he pounced on me, teeth and claws aiming to kill. I shifted the moment before he made impact, and our powerful lupine bodies collided with a loud *thwump*.

Despite the all the natural advantages I got from fighting in my wolf form, as my fight to the death with Garren continued, I realized how much I missed the good old days—like three minutes earlier, when we’d just been beating the shit out of each other.

Because if I thought human Garren was crazy and reckless, he had nothing on his wolf form. I landed blow after blow, biting and snapping, but he didn’t seem to notice or care. He was single-minded in his goal—namely ripping out my throat—and it didn’t seem to matter to him how fucked up he got along the way. Could the dude even feel pain?

In a moment of opportunity, I snapped my teeth at his exposed neck, my teeth centimeters from sinking in and ending this farce. But he jerked back at the last moment and my teeth snapped together, closing on empty air.

Then Garren was on me again, body slamming me and sending me flying backward and into a motorcycle, which somehow managed to rev the engine. It took off flying, out of control with me on it for the space of about two seconds before I crashed into a heap.

Stars were spinning in my head, but I forced myself to my feet and leapt out of the rubble—

Only for Garren to catch me mid-air and slam me back into the ground, his huge, powerful paw pressing my head toward the spinning chain of the still-roaring motorcycle. I tried to buck him off, but he had the advantage—size, the fact that he was pinning me down, and the complete derangement required to try to shove my head through a motorcycle when it would’ve been easier to just rip my throat out.

A huge blast boomed and suddenly, Garren was thrown off me. I leapt onto him with a snarl and sank my teeth into the vulnerable part of his neck until my mouth filled with blood.

*Ugh, how do vampires* like *this shit?*

Garren yowled and kicked me off, but the blast was enough to put him on the defense. I slammed into him again and again, my claws finding purchase in his fur and flesh more and more with every blow. He was barely staying ahead of my snapping teeth, doing what he could to protect his neck. The same realization must have dawned on each of us: the next time I got my teeth in his throat, the fight would be over, and Garren would be a bloodied heap on the ground.

I feinted to the left, then aimed for his right side when he fell for my trick and exposed his neck. I was going in for the kill—I was done waiting for Kira to grow a spine.

My teeth had barely grazed Garren’s neck when I was blasted away.

*What the* fuck*?*

I skidded back a few feet and twisted to see Kira advancing on Garren’s struggling body. She whipped out a knife, and then, with a flash of gleaming metal, she plunged it into his shoulder.

Garren let out a broken, desperate wail that I’d never heard from a wolf before and never wanted to hear again. The knife was silver. It had to be.

His body shuddered and he fell back onto the road. His body shifted back to human.

I raced over, shifting back myself along the way.

“Hurry up!” I snapped at Kira. “Finish him off!”

*Before we have to face the wrath of the entire Blood Moon.*

But Kira didn’t even seem to hear me. She held out her hand and blasted Garren harder into the ground. The cement cracked under his body, and he let out a pained groan. It was the most forceful magic I had ever seen her use. The knife was still sticking out of his shoulder, blood gushing out around the blade.

“You killed my husband,” she rasped.

Garren let out a low, rumbling laugh. “He deserved it, the fucking bloodsucker.”

Kira roughly yanked the blade out of his shoulder in reply, and Garren let out another scream. Kira’s grip tightened on the hilt of her knife, but she didn’t back down.

I, on the other hand, never took my eyes off the werewolf. Garren might have been hurt—and that silver wound could even fatally poison him, given enough time—but it was still well within his capabilities to hurt Kira. To kill her even, if given the chance.

She held the knife in front of herself, blade out. Through the light glinting down the blade, I saw the word “Geoff” etched into the blade in elegant cursive.

Kira’s eyes narrowed on Garren. “The only person who deserves to die here is you.”

Garren looked up at her, lifting his chin. “You don’t have the guts. You’re just a filthy vampire-loving witch hag. I made your husband suffer.”

Kira’s grip tightened. “Shut up.”

“By the time I was done carving your husband up—”

With a scream, Kira plunged the knife into Garren’s chest.

**Episode 1395**

Mace took a step toward Big Mac. “You! You’re coming with me. The Blue Blood pack needs your help!”

The witch scoffed. “Coming with you? Who do you think I am? Some kind of magical Band-Aid you werewolves can pass around?” She turned in a slow circle, glaring at anyone who dared make eye contact. “Take another step toward me and I’ll turn you into a fucking toadstool.”

Greyson stepped in, his expression pinched. “What is this all about? Why do you think you need a witch, Mace?”

The Blue Blood Alpha scoffed. “I just told you—”

Greyson cut him off. “You told me about the revenants, and I’ll tell you right now, even with Big Mac helping us, we’re still scrambling to figure out what to do about them ourselves. She won’t be the cure-all you’re looking for.”

Big Mac threw Greyson a dirty look. “Do you mind not speaking about me like I’m not here?”

Greyson rolled his eyes and then looked back at Mace. “Unless there’s something else you need her help with…?”

Mace’s face turned a few different shades of red, and then his expression crumpled. “Pip’s in trouble,” he finally admitted, his voice thick with emotion.

My heart lurched. I had never exactly been Pip’s biggest fan, nor she mine, but I would never wish harm on her. And the complete devastation on Mace’s face… I’d never seen anything like it. We needed to help him—if the Blue Bloods were facing down the same terrifying issues we were, then we were better off sticking together, weren’t we? It was like fighting Silas’s army all over again. There was strength in numbers, and right now we needed all the strength we could get.

“There’s no Luna for the Blue Blood pack right now?” I asked, shaken by the concept. Losing Joss had been a terrible loss for the Redwood pack, and she and Greyson hadn’t even been together. I could only imagine how much it had to hurt for the Blue Blood pack members to be without their Luna. And looking at Mace, I didn’t have to try to imagine the devastation he felt.

He shook his head. “No. She’s too hurt. She’s in this…” He sniffed and cleared his throat. “This coma. She just won’t wake up. No matter what I do.” He turned to Big Mac. “I need your help. Please.”

My heart ached for him. It was all too easy to tell he was desperately trying to keep a tight hold on his emotions, to continue presenting himself as the strong Alpha even though he was so distressed. But to have your mate stuck in a coma…

If something like that happened to Greyson or Xavier, I would’ve come this far to find a witch, too.

Greyson nodded, looking sympathetic. “I’m so sorry to hear about your Luna. Can you tell me a little more about the revenants and any other strange things that might be happening with your pack?”

“We fought these… these creatures. They looked like humans, but they were clearly dead. Zombies or something.”

“Revenants?” I supplied.

“Sure,” he said easily. “They had these glowing orange eyes, and it almost seemed like they were moving on something’s orders. They weren’t… They weren’t natural.”

I looked to Greyson. “This isn’t good at all.”

Big Mac crossed her arms. “And you need me why?”

He scoffed. “Isn’t it obvious? I need you to get Pip out of whatever state she’s in. I’ll only take the best.”

The witch snorted and shook her head. “This is all very flattering, but I’m going to pass. If you haven’t noticed, we’re kind of knee-deep in our own bullshit right now.” She gestured at the blazing funeral pyre. “I’m very sorry, but I can’t exactly go off on a side quest at the moment. Maybe try calling ahead next time and save yourself the trouble.”

“MacKenzie!” I gasped.

She narrowed her eyes at me. “Only Sabine gets to call me that.”

“Ugh, fine!” I threw my hands up. “Either way, how can you be so cold? Doesn’t it matter to you that someone needs your help? This your chance to do something good for someone else—for no other reason than the fact that it’s the right thing to do!”

“Cali,” Greyson said warningly.

I ignored him. I was so sick and tired of this witch lurking around. following her own agenda. She had abilities the rest of us could only dream of, yet it was like pulling teeth to even get her to participate beyond the bare minimum required for her to save her own skin.

“Is self-preservation seriously your only goal?” I demanded. “What’s the point of having all that magic if you won’t use it to help anyone?”

The witch’s scowl deepened, and Greyson moved close to me, gently taking my arm. “Cali, that’s enough.”

I jerked my arm out of his grip and rounded on Big Mac. “You wonder why we go to other witches all the time, but you ignore us when we need help. Sure, you’re in love with Mrs. Smith, but you’re still so selfish I’m surprised you can see past your own nose!”

“Do *not* bring Sabine into this,” Big Mac growled. “I’m *trying* to protect the Redwood pack. It’s not my fault you’re too focused on not getting every little thing you’ve ever wanted that your ungrateful ass can’t see everything I’ve already done for you!”

My vision went red. *Oh, no she didn’t!*

A loud whistle ripped through the air. It was Greyson. “Both of you, cool it,” he ordered in that deep Alpha voice. He turned to Mace. “I’m sorry about this. Could you please go inside? I need to talk with my pack members for a moment, and then I’ll be back in to see what we can do for you.”

Mace looked between us all, then nodded before heading to the pack house. He passed Mrs. Smith on her way to join us out on the lawn.

“I heard yelling,” she said. “What’s going on?”

“Just your fiancée hoarding all her magic for herself,” I sniped. “Nothing out of the ordinary.”

“Hey.” Greyson put a hand on my shoulder. “I know you want to help. I know this is all coming from a good, kind place. But you need to step back and take a breath right now.” Then his gaze landed on Big Mac, who looked sort of murderous—probably because I’d just badmouthed her in front of her partner.

*It’s not like I said anything that isn’t true.*

“You can take a breath too,” he told the witch before turning to his mother. He filled her in on the reason for Mace’s sudden visit.

Mrs. Smith shook her head. “I’m not sure why you were all fighting so much about this. Why shouldn’t we help him?”

I jumped in. “Exactly!”

I threw Big Mac a smug look, and she rolled her eyes. “We’re fighting because he came in here stating that I needed to leave, that I had to do everything he demanded. No hello or anything!”

“He *asked* you to help save the Luna of the Blue Blood pack!” I shot back.

Mrs. Smith looked back and forth from me to Big Mac. “Really, there’s no need to get so feisty. There’s a simple solution for this.”

“Oh, is there now?” Big Mac drawled.

“Yes, MacKenzie. Why don’t we just tell Mace to bring Pip and the rest of the Blue Blood pack here? If they’ve encountered revenants, we could be in for more trouble. And that way any help that MacKenzie can give Pip”—she gave her fiancée a conciliatory glance—“if she decides to offer it, of course, can be done without making her leave the pack house.”

Greyson nodded. “That’s a good idea. More people on our side could be good for the packs. Especially since we probably have a bigger issue on our hands than we know.”

Mrs. Smith’s quick and easy solution was perfect—but it had kind of taken the wind out of my sails. And I wasn’t completely over being annoyed with Big Mac’s trademark selfishness.

“Yes, all of this makes perfect sense,” I said, looking at Big Mac. “So why can’t you just be more cooperative with us?”

Before we could devolve into another argument, Greyson stepped in, looking between Mrs. Smith, Big Mac, and me. “Solved? We good here?”

The witch rolled her eyes and nodded.

“Yes, I think so,” Mrs. Smith said. “Why don’t we go back to the house and all have a white chocolate mocha? I’m sure Mace could use one too.”

The two women walked ahead of us, heading back to the house, and Greyson fell into step beside me. “Are you okay?”

I nodded. “This just didn’t need to be so complicated.”

“I know. I’m going to talk to Mace and inform him of our decision.”

As we approached the house, I saw a flash of movement in the top window. Ava. It suddenly hit me that I never had found out what she’d been doing last night.

“I’ll catch up with you,” I said to Greyson, then headed straight upstairs. I walked into Ava’s room without knocking, and she jolted upright from her place on her mattress.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded.

“Who were you talking to last night?”

**Episode 1396**

CHARLIE

Maybe I’d gotten a little ahead of myself. Even with my werewolf strength and speed, I just *couldn’t* do training drills with Sergeant Pepperdine all day.

I half-limped into the dorm after lunch. It had been a hell of a morning—way more training than I’d ever endured in my life. I was fit, and my werewolf abilities obviously gave me certain advantages, but it was a lot even for me.

I honestly had no idea how my fellow trainees were even surviving.

I showered and changed into a sweatshirt and some sweatpants, then stretched out across my twin bed. Now that I was clean and had a chance to relax, I was torn. Should I call Violet, or should I just take a long nap?

*Why not both?*

I grabbed my phone out from under my pillow and pulled up my text thread with Violet. The days we’d been apart hadn’t made the separation any easier. I wanted to know everything she was up to, how she was doing, how her day was going—all of it. Nothing was too mundane.

Longing stirred in my chest—the feeling that had been my constant companion since I’d left Violet in Oregon. I didn’t know if it was our bond or just my natural feelings for her or both, but I liked to think that she was feeling the same way about me, and that in a way, we were keeping each other company.

Still, it couldn’t compare to the real thing. I hoped she’d be able to join me soon. I could just picture her, lying here right next to me, her head on my chest. Once again, something snagged in my chest, filling me with the sweetest ache I’d ever experienced.

I shook my head. The more I thought about Violet, the more the mate bond tugged at me. All I wanted was to be around her? She was my mate; we were meant for each other. And I knew she loved and supported me just as much as I did her. Why was it so impossible for us to just be together?

I began typing into the text box in our thread when my mom’s photo flashed on the screen. *Shit, is she psychic?*

I took the call right away. “Hi, Mom.”

“Hi, sweetie!” She sounded energetic and chipper, just like she had been through so much of my childhood, before I’d become a werewolf and broken her heart. “How’s boot camp going?”

I stretched out a bit, my phone still held against my ear. “Oh, it’s fine. Tougher than I thought it would be, though.”

Mom chuckled. “It takes grit to be a hunter. Are you making friends?”

“Uh, yeah. But even better, I’m actually roommates with Zachery. So at least there’s a familiar face here.”

“Oh, that’s so wonderful! He’s such a lovely boy—and from such a respectable family.”

*Yeah, respectable. That’s the word I’d use to describe a family that lies to its kids almost their whole lives…*

Of course, I knew better than to say that.

Mom’s voice lowered. “Have you talked to Vonn?”

“If by Vonn, you mean Romilly? Then yes.”

“Yes! Oh, that takes me back,” she said. “I can’t even think of the last time I called Vonn by that name.”

“Great.” I tried to infuse some enthusiasm into my tone, but lately I’d forgotten how. At least when it came to talking to my parents.

“So, you spoke to her?” my mom pressed.

“Yes.” I looked around the empty dorm room. Could I speak freely here? Probably. But it was better safe than hunted by a camp full of trainees. “I talked with her and got the ‘stuff.’ No incidents.”

“That’s not what I heard,” Mom said. “She told me everything—that the older trainees were hazing the new kids, and you almost revealed your identity *in front of everyone*.”

Annoyance flickered through me. Why the hell had she asked if I’d spoken to Romilly when she already knew damn well that I had? But then again, I knew this tone. She was angry. And my mom was never scarier than when she was good and pissed off.

“I literally did what I’m being trained to do. I thought there was real danger, so I tried to take down the threat before anyone could get hurt.”

“Come on, Charlie! Use some common sense! Do you seriously think the camp is going to send a bunch of new trainees out hunting all by themselves? You’re going to have to be a lot more careful than that if you want to avoid being outed.”

I grimaced. “Obviously—”

The door swung open and Zachery walked in. He must not have seen that I was on the phone, because he bellowed, “You ready, dude? Ready for some hockey?”

Meanwhile, my Mom was still lecturing me on the other end of the line. I couldn’t participate in both of these conversations at once. So I chose the one that sounded a hell of a lot more fun that getting ripped into by my lying mother. “Sorry, Mom. I have to go.”

“What? Where are you going?” she asked.

“To play ice hockey. Bye.” I hung up before she could even try to tell me why that was a terrible idea.

I huffed out a breath. My mother really was unbelievable sometimes. I felt the urge to shift rolling down my spine. These days, it was my natural reaction when particularly strong emotions took over. I cracked my knuckles instead.

Zachery looked me up and down. “You’re not ready to go!”

“I was just on the phone with my mom.”

“Oh. Well that explains your face, at least. Not a great convo?”

“Understatement,” I grumbled. “I don’t even want to go to this ice hockey game—”

“*What?*” Zachery burst out. “But you’re going on a date with Sophie!”

I glared at him. “I thought you promised to let that slide. It’s *not* a date.”

He gave me a smug smile. “That’s what they all say. What’s the problem though? She’s cute.”

“I’m not here to hook up with anyone or get betrothed or whatever else this place has to offer. I’m here to become a hunter, and that’s it.”

“Sure.” Zachery shrugged. “But you could at least have some fun in the meantime. Grab your coat—we don’t want to be late for kick off!”

“It’s a *faceoff*,” I said with a groan. “Do you even know how to skate?”

“I’m willing to learn.”

Despite myself, laughter bubbled up in my chest. “Fine.”

I grabbed my phone and sent Violet a quick text asking her to call me later, then I got ready for the game.

*This is* not *a date, and I’ll make sure Sophie knows that.* Not that Sophie thought it was a date, necessarily, but I loved Violet too much to allow any confusion.

I smiled to myself. *Not everyone has a mate, huh?*

A while later, we arrived at a lake that already looked completely frozen. The blessings of Minnesota in the winter. There was already a good-sized group of people clustered at the edge of the lake, and I caught Chad’s eye from across the way.

*Great. I’ll have to steer clear of him… Shit.*

Chad was already approaching. “Showing your face, killer?”

I gave him a thin smile. “I was invited.”

“Really? You?”

Sophie came bounding up and threw her arms around me. “You made it!”

Jealousy flashed in Chad’s eyes, and I couldn’t stop myself from leaning into Sophie’s embrace—just to rub it in—but I stopped short of hugging her back.

“Wouldn’t miss it,” I said simply.

She smiled, her cheeks already red from the cold. On her other side, Zachery gave me a pointed look, and as soon as Sophie’s attention was elsewhere, I mouthed, *Stop*.

Zachery raised an eyebrow.

“You should come grab a stick,” Sophie said. “There’s also some hot chocolate and cider if you want.”

“You know, I was pretty tired earlier, but I’m glad I came out. This looks like fun.”

She grinned. “We just started holding these games—the ice wasn’t thick enough until now, but Tina checked earlier and it’s good.”

“I’m going to go get some skates and bails,” Zachery said before disappearing.

Great, he was leaving me alone with Sophie, making it seem more and more like a date. Sophie and I grabbed sticks and skates and found a log near the lake to sit on while we laced up our skates.

“Thanks for inviting me,” I said.

“I had to invite the newest hunter star, didn’t I?”

I shrugged. “Everyone’s kind of blowing that out of proportion.” *Including my mother.*

“No, they’re not. You were going to save your friend’s life. It’s totally admirable.”

I smiled. “Yeah?”

She nodded as we glided onto the ice. “Completely. It’s so honorable. It makes you the kind of hunter I want to be, too.”

Would she feel that way if she knew I’d learned how to fight from Violet?

Sophie pulled out her phone. “Can I have a selfie with the superstar?”

Back on the shore, I noticed Zachery giving me a thumbs up and Chad watching us with a sour expression.

“Um, sure.” I had to blend in, after all. I leaned in close, but not too close.

“You’re not in the frame!” she protested, and pulled me in.

Now we were much closer than I was comfortable with.

She took the photo just as a loud crack erupted beneath us, and before I knew what was happening, Sophie plunged through the ice.

**Episode 1397**

XAVIER

Kira’s silver knife sticking out of his chest and his blood spilling across his skin in rivulets, Garren howled out a horrible death cry and then went very, very still.

*She did it.* I blinked slowly, completely in shock. *She really did it. She killed Garren. Holy shit!*

Kira released the knife and backed away, her shaking hands caked with Garren’s blood. As she put some space between herself and the bastard she’d just killed, I moved in to make sure that Garren was truly one hundred percent dead. After the long-ass, grueling measures I’d gone through to put this bastard six feet under, I wasn’t going to take any chances and let him walk away.

I leaned down and pressed two fingers to Garren’s neck, checking for a pulse. Nothing. I blew out a long breath.

*Thank fucking god.* I had honestly started to wonder if Garren could even be killed. He’d certainly seemed larger than life when he’d been trying to bash my head in with those handlebars.

I turned to Kira, whose face had gone ashen.

“Is he…” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

The murmuring in the stands, which had filled the air during our fight with Garren, grew even louder. The spectators sounded confused—and angry. We needed to get the fuck out of here before we ended up just like our target.

I grabbed Kira’s blood-covered hand. It was cool and sticky on my palm.

“Yes, he’s dead,” I said in a low voice, not wanting to be overheard. I glanced over my shoulder and froze when I saw a group from the stands heading toward us. “We gotta go. Now. We’re out of time.”

I pulled Kira toward the nearest exit, tugging her along like a staggering, half-helpful ragdoll. She really was trying to keep up, but the shock of taking a life was slowing her down. And since I was pretty much the only thing standing between us and certain death, now wasn’t the right time to try to comfort her.

She stumbled and almost face-planted, but I caught her by the shoulder and pulled her up against my side.

“Pull yourself together,” I hissed. “We might need those powers of yours if we want to get the fuck out of here.”

The voices behind us were growing louder. Were they getting closer? Or was the murder mob just growing? Either way, the very last thing we needed right now was to be ambushed by an angry Blood Moon mob. I didn’t have another fight in me right now, and Kira was pretty much checked out.

*Fuck, how the hell are we going to get out of here?*

I scanned the track, and my eyes lit on the shitty motorcycle I’d been riding. It was still tangled up in a broken heap with Garren’s—but beyond it, there was a different bike, resting on its side. The engine was still running, too. Must have belonged to the guy I’d kicked off his bike… In fact, he was crawling his way over to the bike right now, groaning with pain.

Too bad for him. That bike was our way out of here.

I scooped Kira up and threw her over my shoulder before breaking into a sprint. When I reached the bike, I kicked the dazed and injured driver back again. “Sorry, I’m just going to borrow it, hope you don’t mind.”

The driver reached for me, groaned, and fell limply to the ground.

I hopped onto the bike and turned to Kira. “Get on!”

She just blinked at me, and then looked down at her bloodied hands.

*Fuck! Come on, witch!*

I scooped her up again with a snarl, settling her in front of me on the bike, then peeled away.

I headed toward the exit, but I quickly realized some of the Blood Moons were blocking our way. Trapping us was the smartest option. We were sorely outnumbered here, and if we had no means of escape, then no matter how hard we fought, we were still sitting ducks. I considered revving the engine and trying to plow through them, but it was too risky. If they were even half as strong as Garren had been, they could knock us off the motorcycle, which would be a death sentence whether the fall killed us or not.

Eyeing our options, I spotted a construction ramp far from where the Blood Moons were grouped. I immediately veered toward it and put on another burst of speed.

*That’s our ticket out of here.*

“Hold on tight!” I called to Kira.

She reached back and clutched me around the middle, and then I gunned the motorcycle, shooting up the ramp and over the track wall, landing in the weed-filled parking lot with a jolt that rattled every bone in my body.

*We made it!*

But I didn’t allow myself more than that fleeting moment of celebration. The Blood Moons were bound to follow us, so we needed to put as much distance between them and us as possible.

Within seconds, we were back on the main road, heading for the highway.

*Oh thank god. I’m finally done with this bullshit job.*

Now that I’d fulfilled my bargain with Kira, I could get back to Cali. And, of course, help Greyson with whatever the fuck was going on back at the pack house. But more importantly, I was finally returning to my mate. I wasn’t going to allow Greyson to be alone with Cali for another second longer than I absolutely had to.

I gunned the engine, eager to get back to the motel and put the Blood Moons and Garren behind me.

We reached the hotel in what felt like no time at all, and I pulled around to the back of the building and instructed Kira to get off the bike. Then I walked it into a particularly thick cluster of bushes where it would be well hidden.

When I was done playing Houdini with our getaway vehicle, I turned around to see that Kira was still standing where I’d left her. She still hadn’t made a peep since we left the arena. Honestly, I wasn’t surprised. I’d seen this before, and I had an idea of what had to be going through her mind.

“Kira, come on,” I said gently, taking her hand and leading her to our room. “Okay, we’re getting out of here now, so gather your stuff as fast as you can.”

And I was going home to Cali. To *my* pack. Excitement thrummed through me, energizing all my tired, aching muscles.

I threw all my stuff into a bag and then ended up helping Kira, who was still catatonic, before I hustled her out the door. “Come on. We’ll take the car back, broken windshield or not.”

I slung both of our bags over my shoulder and led the way away from the road and into the woods. It was a quiet journey, since Kira had never been less talkative, and I was listening carefully and pausing every so often to check for the slightest hint that we were being followed.

We reached the car without incident, and I grimaced at the broken windshield. *Shit, was it really that fucked up when we left it?* I’d thought it was in slightly better shape. Well, trying to see through a gigantic glass spiderweb was sure going to make the ride back interesting.

I knew I should probably get it replaced, but I’d already been away from Cali for too long. I didn’t want even one more task standing in the way of reuniting with my mate.

I threw our bags into the back seat and turned to Kira, who was just standing there. The blood on her hands had dried, at least.

“Any chance you can do some witchcraft and fix the windshield?” I asked. “I don’t exactly relish the thought of a mouthful of bugs.”

Again, she didn’t seem to hear me. I blew out a breath, rolled my eyes, and grabbed her firmly by her shoulders.

“Kira, snap out of it.” I shook her lightly. “Can you do something about the windshield?”

She let out a little gasp, and her eyes seemed to focus on me and then slide down to the busted windshield. She mumbled something under her breath, and the windshield pieced itself back together.

“Great. Now get in.”

I ushered her into the car, jogged around to the driver’s side, and then we were pulling out onto the road.

As soon as we reached cruising speed, I let out a breath. Finally, it was over. Switching up our vehicles would probably help cover our tracks, too.

I glanced over at Kira, who was staring out the window. One hand on the steering wheel, I reached into the glove compartment and passed her a package of hand wipes. “Here.”

She took them and began to wipe the blood from her hands and face. She hadn’t said anything since she’d muttered the spell to fix the windshield.

I cleared my throat. “Don’t be hard on yourself. Killing for revenge doesn’t always make things better.” It certainly hadn’t helped me feel better after Ava had betrayed me. It was hard to imagine ever doing that again. Killing her sure as shit hadn’t brought my mother back.

Suddenly, the glare from a pair of headlights filled the rear of the car, and I jammed on the brakes.

Another vehicle pulled up next to us, and I recognized the driver. Tallis. Was this a trap?

She rolled down her window and held up a hand. “I’m alone.”

We both pulled off to the side of the road, and I got out of the car to walk over to her. “What do you want?

“I came to warn you.” She leaned over the edge of the driver’s side window. “You two had better be careful now. The Blood Moon never takes kindly to anyone who kills their kind.”

I scoffed. “And?”

“*And*,you’ve both been marked.”

**Episode 1398**

CHARLIE

I pushed down the panic that rose like fire in my chest as I started toward the jagged hole that Sophie had fallen into. I couldn’t ignore the chilling sound of ice cracking beneath me, and I realized with no small amount of trepidation that my skates wouldn’t allow the precision I needed to get close enough to the hole without falling in myself.

I dropped to my knees and edged closer to the hole, forcing myself to take deep, calm breaths. I’d staked murderous vampires and dealt with becoming a werewolf—after all that, I could handle anything. Somehow, that still didn’t fill me with the confidence I was looking for. There was still no sign of Sophie in the water. No bubbles. No nothing.

I leaned over and thrust my hand into the ice-cold water, stretching it in as far as I could while still maintaining my balance. I felt around frantically, holding my breath, hoping to catch onto some piece of her. I held on to the hope that she hadn’t drifted down too deep for me to get to her easily. No such luck.

*Maybe I should dive in after her?* I thought. But how was I going to help anyone if I froze to death, too? No, it was better for me to stay here on the ice, otherwise we’d both be goners. I plunged my hand in again and felt around. She had to be close, she just had to be.

And for just an instant, I felt something brush against my ice-cold fingers.

“Sophie!” I cried out as I felt her hand clasp onto mine. In her panic, she pulled at me with such force that I slid dangerously close to the edge of the hole as the ice around it cracked with menace beneath my weight. If she kept pulling me like this, I’d be dragged down into the water with her.

It was instinct in that moment to shift. Life or death, survival or surrender. My werewolf blood demanded I do something to keep us both alive. My newly emerged claws dug deep into the ice, anchoring myself. I took a deep breath and pulled Sophie’s hand with my still-human one with every ounce of strength I had.

After a few painstaking seconds, Sophie’s head splashed up to the surface. Her eyes were wide with naked terror and she gasped, spitting streams of water out of her mouth. I gave her hand another hard pull, and her torso came up through the shrinking hole over the lip of the ice. As soon as she came through, the hole began to freeze back over.

She was still panicking, pulling at me so hard that I had no doubt that if I didn’t pull her clear soon, we’d both be in the water and trapped under the ice.

“Stop resisting!” I screamed. “I’m going to get you out, but you have to relax!” I knew this was a hard request to make of someone who was dangerously close to being entombed in a frozen lake. I could tell she was too frightened to heed my words. Her teeth were chattering like crazy, and she was frantic with terror—and probably chilled through to the bone. It was only my werewolf blood keeping me from freezing over, too.

I started to wonder if perhaps her skates were tangled in something under the surface, like a submerged branch. No matter how hard I pulled, I couldn’t yank her out. But that didn’t matter—I had to tear her free.

I gritted my teeth, renewed my claws’ grip on the ice, and wrenched backward. Finally, Sophie jerked free of the icy lake’s hold and slid out onto the ice, her body quaking with violent shivers as she gasped for air.

I was about to pull her into a hug before I remembered that my one hand still had wolf claws. I shifted it back immediately, praying that Sophie hadn’t seen. Once I was wholly human again, I pulled her close and began to rub her body briskly, trying to restore some of the heat that she’d undoubtedly lost while in the frigid water.

“Hey, are you two okay?” Zachery yelled as he came running toward us. I held up my hand to stop him in his tracks. The ice was weak, and I didn’t want to have to save another person from the lake’s clutches.

I wrapped Sophie tightly in my left arm, and we remained in a seated position while I used my right hand and the sides of my skates to edge away from the hole, which was now completely iced over.

“How did you d-do that?” Sophie sputtered. She had a dazed look in her eyes, and she was so cold that her chill was transferring to me, making me shiver as well.

I shrugged. “We were just lucky that the water wasn’t too deep,” I said.

Other people were running out onto the ice now, and I called out to them, warning them to keep their distance. The ice was still forming hairline cracks beneath our weight as I continued to drag us farther away from the fragile area.

I shrugged out of my jacket and wrapped it tightly around Sophie’s shoulders. With the utmost caution, I finally got us back to shore. The moment we were back on solid ground, people were shoving mugs of steaming hot chocolate into our hands.

A girl ran up with a petrified look on her face and gathered Sophie into a tight hug. “I’m so sorry!” she said. “I checked the ice, and I thought it was okay!” I could tell she was moments away from crying. I assumed that this was Tina, and I reminded myself to never trust her opinions on ice again.

“Had to play the hero again, I see,” Chad said, sidling up to stand beside me. *What the hell was with this guy?*

“Really?” I said. “She almost drowned. Are you serious right now?”

Aisha jumped into Chad’s face, putting herself between us. “Back off, Chad!”

Chad rolled his eyes in response and sucked his teeth. This guy was a new brand of douchebag.

“Dude, forget him. That was fucking awesome!” Zachery said, his eyes wide. “I mean, it wasn’t—but it was. You know what I mean!” Zachery slapped me on the back as others gathered around, congratulating me.

I shrugged it off. “No big deal, everybody,” I said.

All I could think was that this was another thing that would piss off Romilly, and that she would no doubt tell my mother about. But what was I supposed to have done? Let Sophie turn into a popsicle?

“Sophie, let’s get you indoors,” Tina said, taking Sophie by the arm. “We need to get you warmed up.”

Someone else suggested that we take her to the nurse, just to make sure everything was okay. The three of us trooped over to the infirmary in the center of camp, only to find that it was closed.

“I’ll go look for the nurse,” Tina said, hustling off and leaving Sophie alone with me. We stood there in silence for a few moments, the gravity of what had just happened finally hitting us.

“How you holding up?” I asked. I rubbed my arms, trying to use friction to build my body heat back up. I was still quite cold, and I could only imagine how Sophie had to be feeling.

“I’m still pretty cold,” she said with a wry smile. “I would die for a hot shower and some dry clothes right now,” she said. “Ooh, I probably shouldn’t say die, right? Too soon?”

I laughed. “Too soon.”

Sophie took my hand into her icy cold grip and gave it a squeeze.

“Thank you,” she said. “You saved my life, Charlie.”

I gave her a stiff nod and gently pulled my hand away. This was NOT a date. I didn’t want to give her the wrong impression.

“Anyone could’ve done it,” I said. “I just happened to be there.” I thought back to how hard it had been to pull her out, and the weird sensation that something had been trying to pull her back down into the water. “Hey, was your skate caught on something under the water back there?” I asked.

Sophie closed her eyes in thought, biting her lip slightly. “I don’t know. Everything was so crazy and happened so fast… I was trying not to panic and focus on reaching the surface, but it was turning into ice—it was so frightening,” she said. Her eyes misted over like she was about to cry. I knew that she would never forget today. I didn’t think I would either.

“It’s okay,” I said. “I’m so sorry that happened to you, Sophie,” I said. An awkward silence slid between us, and I looked down at my feet, trying to let the moment pass.

Oh! I had nearly forgotten in all of the chaos. I reached into my pocket and pulled out her phone. “Hey, here’s your phone. Someone found it on the ice. With everything that was going on, I forgot to give it back.”

Sophie took it, our hands grazing for a split second. Her eyes stayed riveted to my hand for a beat past normal, and my heartbeat quickened.

“Charlie, I saw what you did when you saved me,” she said. “I saw what you… *are*.”

**Episode 1399**

Ava looked at me with a blank expression on her face. “What are you talking about?” she asked.

Maybe she hadn’t heard me. Maybe she was playing dumb. Either way, I repeated myself. “Who. Were. You. Talking. To?”

Ava shrugged and gave her hair a little flip that made me want to grab it and pull, but I resisted the urge. “You feeling alright, girl?” she asked. “Hallucinating things?” Okay, if she mocked me one more time I was going to smack her sideways.

I thought back to when I’d seen Ava the night before, when I’d been following the wisp to what had turned out to be the pond of nightmares. I hadn’t seen anyone with her, but she’d definitely been having a discussion of some sort.

“Ava, I heard you talking to someone,” I said, trying to keep my voice as calm and even as I could manage.

Finally, she scowled, and I could tell she knew I wasn’t going to let her wriggle out of this. “What, were you watching me? I knew I heard something. And I smelled you,” Ava said. She looked me up and down, her face scrunched up into a mask of disgust. I felt the exact same way she did—if only she knew how much self-control I was using to not grab her by the neck and toss her ass out of here. “So, you were spying on me?” Ava spat.

“I don’t know—were you doing something worth spying on?” I shot back.

There was no doubt in my mind that Ava had been up to something shady. Being shady was Ava’s default. Greyson didn’t trust her here anyway, and that was for good reason after the stunts she’d pulled.

Still, I knew I had to tiptoe around whatever it was. If things came to blows and Ava ran off, it would be bad. She’d already been used by a vampire once, and I knew all too well how that could turn out.

“Listen, I wasn’t spying on you,” I said. “But you have to admit that you’ve kind of earned the question.”

Ava crossed her arms over her chest. “I don’t forget that Greyson did me a solid giving me a place to lay low after my fight with the vampires. I wouldn’t do anything to fuck that up.” She shrugged. “You can believe me or not.”

I absolutely didn’t believe her. Not one bit.

“I stepped outside last night to take a call from an old member of the Samara pack. I was on the phone,” she said.

I was itching to ask for her phone so I could check and see if what she was saying was true. I was surprised when she actually took her phone out and held it up to me. “You want to actually see it? Look through my texts? My call history?” Ava asked.

“No,” I said. I didn’t want to play this game with her. I just wanted her out of our fucking lives, for good.

“What, why not? Afraid that you’ll see Xavier’s name?” Ava said with a smirk.

I bit the inside of my cheek so hard I was certain there would be blood, but I wasn’t going to give her the satisfaction of thinking that her little comment had affected me in the least.

I thought back to what Xavier had told me about breaking his mate bond with her. I had no reason not to trust Xavier. We had worked hard to get past our issues and to put all of our secrets behind us. I knew that he was telling the truth, and that the woman standing before me was a snake. I just didn’t know what color snake she was—or however the saying went.

The conversation was at an awkward standstill. There wasn’t really anything else I could reasonably accuse her of. I could barely get the words out as I finally said, “Well, maybe I was wrong.”

God that was painful. It made me feel like I was choking on glass. I didn’t think I was wrong in the least, but I thought of Greyson and knew that the best plan of action was to just play nice.

Ava flashed a sweet smile. “Apology accepted,” she sang.

“I didn’t apologize,” I snapped back. I waved a hand, dismissing the whole thing. I’d had enough of Ava already and it had only been like two seconds. “Whatever,” I said.

I turned to leave and immediately bumped into Greyson right outside Ava’s door.

“Hey, everything okay?” he asked. I took him by the arm and pulled him down the hall to his room, shutting the door behind us. I was just grateful to get away from that witch.

“I know you don’t trust Ava, and I think she’s planning something,” I blurted out, unable to stop myself. I was more than tired of our Ava problem, on top of everything else. I couldn’t believe that after everything she’d done to warrant us never having to see her stupid, annoyingly pretty face again, we still had to deal with her. I was really starting to question my luck.

“Oh, has Cali been spying?” Greyson said with a teasing smile. He was enjoying this too much. Now was not the time to play around—not when something serious was going down and Ava was most likely involved. I knew that we had to keep her close to watch her, but having her in the house was starting to feel just as dangerous.

I shot him an icy glare that wiped that smile right off his adorable face. That was exactly what Ava had just accused me of doing, spying on her. As if. If I had it my way, I’d never lay eyes on her again, let alone waste my time following her around “spying” on her.

It wasn’t my fault that she was always lurking around being sneaky and suspicious. It was truly a sad day when Ava and Greyson were accusing me of the same thing.

“Sorry,” Greyson said sheepishly.

“Listen, last night, right before the craziness at the pond, I saw Ava talking to… someone. I couldn’t see who, but just now she tried to say that she was on the phone with someone from the Samara pack. I don’t believe her, but I don’t know what she was doing, exactly. I just know she’s up to something,” I said.

Greyson squeezed my hand. “You’re probably right. We both know she can’t be trusted. I’m glad you’re keeping an eye on things—thanks. This is exactly why I brought her back here. Sooner or later, we’ll figure out exactly what’s going on.”

I smiled, pleased that he didn’t think I was just being jealous and looking for any reason to rag on Ava. I knew that the sooner we found out what Ava was up to, the sooner we’d be rid of her forever.

I just hoped it wouldn’t be too late by then.

I pushed that negative thought out of my head as Greyson leaned down and planted a warm kiss on my forehead. The contact sent a spike of heat racing through my body. It was funny how the smallest touch from him got me so hot and bothered. I thought back to the night we’d just shared, and how good it had felt to give in to him.

“By the way, your dad’s in the kitchen,” Greyson said. “He’s asking for you.”

My dad was probably worried about me. With everything that was going on, it was normal that he would want to check in and make sure I was okay. I smiled to myself. It was nice to have my parents thinking about how I was doing, even if they sometimes pried a little too much.

I left Greyson in his bedroom and went downstairs to the kitchen. My father looked agitated. He was pacing back and forth with his head down. Uh-oh, he looked more than just his usual worrying self. He jumped when he saw me, clearly startled. I was surprised at just how anxious he looked. Clearly there was something big bothering him.

“Hey, Cali, sorry—I didn’t see you come in,” he said. “Do you have a second? Could we chat outside?”

“Dad, yes, of course,” I said. “Is everything okay?” I asked as I followed him out onto the back porch. “Did something happen to Mom?” I asked, my heartbeat quickening in my chest.

“No, no, honey, your mother’s fine,” he assured me. The anxious look on his face had only intensified, however, as if he were struggling to build up the nerve to tell me whatever was troubling him. “It’s me I want to talk about,” he said.

I felt like I was going to pass out with worry, but I didn’t want to press him too much to come out with it. I knew better than anyone that sometimes you had to tell people things at your own pace. I watched him and waited.

“Honey, I know that this is going to be pretty hard to hear, but you know I’ve always been completely honest with you,” he began.

“Dad, come on, you’re scaring me. What’s wrong?!” I asked.

He took my hand in his. His palms were clammier than I could ever remember them being. He looked like he was about to pass out as he finally said, “Cali—I’m a werewolf.”

**Episode 1400**

There was no way I’d heard him correctly.   
“I’m… sorry, but… *what?*”

“I’m a werewolf, Cali,” he replied. “You remember when I got bitten? Since then, all these strange things have been happening to me.”

He looked like he’d just unloaded a thousand pounds from his shoulders—and dumped it straight onto me. I was in shock.

“Son of a biscuit! Is *everyone* a werewolf but me?!” My dad gave me a strange look. *Shit! Did I say that out loud?* I sighed. “Sorry, Dad. How do you feel?”

“Well, not normal, I guess is the best way to describe it. I’ve been having these strange dreams—mostly about the moon from what I can remember. Oh, and I’ve been doing weird things. For example, I tried steak tartare the other day—since when have I ever eaten anything but fully cooked meat?” he said. “But honestly, other than stressing about the idea of becoming a werewolf, I feel okay. In fact, I feel better than okay.”

“Really?” I asked.

“Yeah, my hip doesn’t bother me anymore, and I don’t need glasses to read,” he said, doing a little hop on his toes to demonstrate his newfound dexterity. Definitely impressive.

“What does Mom think about all of this?” I asked.

He flashed me guilty look. “I haven’t told her.”

“What?! Why? Maybe she can help.”

“I know. But… I was hoping that I was wrong. That maybe it would just pass,” he said.

I thought about how I’d felt when I’d learned that my mother had kept my Fae heritage from me for all those years. I’d felt cheated, deceived, and everything in between.

“Dad, you remember how rough it was when we found out that Mom hadn’t told us about the Fae stuff. I don’t think you want to put her through that,” I said.

All of that felt like a lifetime ago. Now, it was like I’d never *not* known that I was Fae. No matter how I would’ve responded, or how shocking the news might have been, it would have been better to have known about it all along. I was learning more and more how important it was to tell the truth as soon as you learned it.

“I agree with you, honey,” he said. “And the full moon is coming in a few days.”

“Right, so you have to tell her before you turn,” I said.

“I was hoping you could be with me when I tell her.”

I hugged him. “Of course, Dad.” Then a horrifying image shot through my mind. When and if my father shifted, he’d be naked. I’d be scarred for life! I’d have to make sure to be as far away as possible when that happened while also doing my best to offer any moral support that he might need. This was going to be… *Tricky* did not seem to be a strong enough word.

“Thanks honey,” he said. “I think we should go talk to your mom right away. I know she’s worried about your sister, and while I don’t want her to have someone else to worry about, she needs to know.”

I nodded in agreement. “Yes, and Mom’s strong. She’ll be able to handle it,” I said. In fact, over the last few months I’d learned that my mother was stronger than I’d ever imagined.

“You know she’s always been my rock,” he said, smiling at me.

My heart swelled at his words. What my parents had was true love, and somewhere deep down I ached to have the same with my mates—if only we could clear up all this *due destini* confusion. I dismissed that thought, not wanting to go down that road right now.

I reminded myself that Artemis had been feeling left out—she should be in on this revelation as well. It felt good to have someone other than my parents to share this type of stuff with. Artemis and I could decide together how to help both of them through this new chapter of their lives.

We went back into the house and made our way to Artemis’s room. I was sure my mother would still be there, too, as she’d gone to check in on Artemis not long ago.

“You know, it wouldn’t hurt for you to talk to Xavier or Greyson about all this,” I told my dad. “They could help you learn what to expect, how to deal with all the changes that will take place.”

Now that he’d made his shocking revelation, I could see the changes in my father from the way he walked, to the look in his eyes. There was a new strength to him that hadn’t been there before, though he’d always been strong and capable in my eyes.

He laughed. “I already did that when I first suspected.”

I stopped short. “What? You talked to Greyson?”

“No,” he said. “I talked to Xavier.”

I was stunned. Why hadn’t Xavier told me? I thought mates told each other everything… Or almost everything. It was a good thing that he wasn’t here right now, or I’d have wasted no time in confronting him about this newest bit of secrecy—just when I’d thought we were past keeping things from one another.

We entered Artemis’s room to find her sitting up on the bed with my mother, hand clasped firmly in hers, with Rishika sitting at her side.

Artemis looked better. A lot of the color had returned to her face, and she didn’t look like she was about to pass out or puke at any moment, which was a drastic improvement. She didn’t quite look one hundred percent, but any improvement was probably a good sign that she was on the road to recovery.

“Hey there. How’s our patient?” I asked.

“Good timing,” my mother said. “Artemis was just asking for you, Cali.”

Artemis shot me a look. “Never give me that shit again. It tasted vile.”

I grinned at her. Yup, she was feeling better. Thank god my little concoction wasn’t actively killing her. One less thing to worry about—now I only had a little under a million other things on my plate.

My dad shot me an anxious glance, and I was reminded that we’d come up here on official business. “Um, we actually wanted to have a bit of a family meeting,” he said.

“Oh—sure, sorry!” Rishika said, her eyebrows arching up as we all turned to look at her. “I’ll go grab some more water for Artemis.”

After Rishika was gone, I gave my father a look. My mother picked up on it immediately, her brows knitting in concern.

“Tom?” she said. “Is there something wrong? You’re acting strange.” She turned to me. “Are you okay, sweetie?”

I was just about to reply when my father cut me off, blurting out, “I’m a werewolf!”

Well, that was one way to rip the Band-Aid right off.

Artemis raised her brows in surprise. The room was so quiet that you could’ve heard a pin drop. I don’t think a single one of us knew how to respond to that piece of news.

In the grand scheme of things, I was sure that we were a tad less surprised than we would have been before everything in our world had gone completely off the rails.

However, I was surprised by the smile that spread across my mother’s face. “Well, okay then,” she said with a shrug.

*Wow*. Sure, I knew that my mother was strong and could handle almost anything that came at her, but I hadn’t expected her to take the news *that* well.

“What gives, Mom?” I demanded. “Dad tells you that he’s a werewolf and that’s your reaction?”

Mom sighed and reached out for Dad. “Tom, you could be a duck, a wild boar, or a vampire, and I’d still love you,” she said. I was glad he was a werewolf and not a wild boar. I might not have been as accepting of that as my mother—those things scared me.

“You sure you’re not upset?” Dad asked.

“Upset? No. What good would being upset do? We’re a family. We’ll deal with this as a family,” she said.

Seeing the love between my parents filled me with an overwhelming surge of happiness. I’d learned to appreciate the bright spots in our lives all the more since we’d been faced with so many dark events. I was glad that the problems that we’d had within our family unit finally seemed to be resolved. Having Artemis here with us truly made everything better.

“How about a family hug?” I suggested. Artemis groaned, but Mom and Dad pulled her toward them and beckoned me closer, their arms wide open. I stepped toward them, but then something strange happened. The closer I got, the more it felt like I was being pushed away. It was like we were two identical sides of a magnet, pushing each other apart.

I paused, trying to determine whether I was imagining things. The three of them were all in arm’s reach, but it was weird—no matter how hard I tried to close the small space between us, I couldn’t get nearer.

Completely confused, I stepped back, shaking my head. Everyone looked equally bewildered. Why couldn’t I get close to my family?

**Episode 1401**

XAVIER

“Marked? What the fuck does being marked mean?” I asked Tallis, knowing that it couldn’t be anything good. Being marked was as good as saying I was fucked.

“It means that the Blood Moon won’t stop until it avenges Garren,” Tallis said. “So, pretty much, you’re on their hit list.”

“What? You didn’t think to tell me that before we killed him? I thought you said that it would all be fine if the murder happened during the race!” I said. I was pissed. Why was nothing ever straightforward?

“Yeah, but I figured you’d be a bit more discreet about it,” Tallis said.

“What? How would that have even been possible? We were racing to the death right in front of a crowd of spectators, for shit’s sake. Besides, the bastard was trying to kill me. What did they expect?” I asked. Who knew that a bunch of werewolves who sponsored crazy death races would be so particular about how its participants got dispatched?

“What I said was true—if someone happened to be killed during the race, nobody would question it,” Tallis said. Then she glanced at Kira. “But then your witch ran up and murdered Garren when he was defenseless, right in front of his crew.”

“I repeat—he was trying to kill me. Besides, he deserved it,” I said. It’d been my entire mission with Kira anyway. Garren wasn’t a good person—not that I was, but being a good person in a werewolf’s world was relative sometimes. Garren was a power drunk, sadistic asshole who’d been little more than a waste of space, and I was certain that no one but his mindless friends would miss him.

“Hey,” Tallis said, holding up her hands, “I agree with you. I hated his guts. Wish I could’ve been the one to blade him—props to your witch.”

“She’s *not* my witch!” I said, my irritation level reaching a fever pitch.

“Splitting hairs,” Tallis said. “The point is, you’re marked. I thought you should know. Consider it a professional courtesy.”

“I could kill you right now,” I fumed.

“I mean, fair. You probably could. You held your own pretty well during the race, but it wouldn’t do you any good. It’s the others you should worry about. You should probably save all your murderous rage for them,” she said with smirk. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to get back. There are going to be a lot of attempts to take our dear departed Garren’s seat on the council—and I’m going to make sure it has my name on it.”

With that Tallis pulled off, leaving a cloud of dust and the unmistakable feeling of dread in her wake. This was supposed to be a clean operation, and it was turning into a huge sticky mess.

Back in the car with Kira, I took a moment to fill her in, making sure to put proper emphasis on the part about us being marked for death. She finally seemed to be coming out of whatever haze of bloodlust she’d been in. She even went so far as to apologize for her role in botching everything.

“I’m really sorry about all of this. I don’t know what came over me. I wasn’t really thinking when I killed Garren. All I saw was red,” she said. “I truly am sorry that I’ve caused you all this trouble.” She sounded sincere, and I softened just a bit, sighing.

“Yeah, well it’s not entirely your fault. I should have been smarter about things and just killed Garren on my own—and without all the spectacle of that fucking race. I should’ve known better,” I said.

I was kicking myself. I’d always prided myself on being efficient and discreet, and the way I’d dealt with Garren was neither of those things. Now I was paying dearly for my mistake. How could I have been so stupid? All I’d needed to do was stalk him while he was alone and take him out without a sound. No muss, no fuss. Especially since he’d been blitzed out of his mind most of the time. It would have been a piece of cake to get the jump on him.

“God, this is such a mess. I’m so sorry,” Kira kept saying. She was holding her face in her hands, and she was bent forward, sagging against the dash.

“Stop it,” I said, harsher than I intended. “Your sorrys don’t help anything. Now I’m fucking marked, and I didn’t even get the pleasure of killing that wolf. You should have just let me do it.” I could feel myself getting mad all over again. I’d made so many missteps with this that I couldn’t even count them all.

Kira went silent. I felt bad when I saw the pain on her face.

“Listen, don’t let this eat you alive,” I muttered. “Murder can do that. Like I told you before, this isn’t for everybody. It’s too bad you have to go through this, but you chose it,” I said.

Kira nodded. “I’ll try to remember that,” she said quietly.

A thought occurred to me then. All I’d wanted to do since this whole adventure had started was honor my obligation to Kira so that I could be with Cali. But was that a smart idea, now? Would going home put the entire pack in danger? Put Cali in danger?

Greyson wanted me back because the pack was already facing threats, and now it looked like I would be bringing even more trouble to our door. There was no doubt that the Blood Moon gang wouldn’t care about collateral damage. If they were really serious about avenging Garren’s death, and I was sure that they were, they wouldn’t hesitate to hurt anyone who got in their way.

The only thing that was completely clear to me was that I had to take responsibility for keeping the Redwood pack out of harm’s way. After all, I was the real Alpha.

I wasn’t sure what to do. I glanced at Kira.

“What do you want? Should I drop you off somewhere?” I asked. “Probably best to stay clear of Spokane or Portland—those places are crawling with Blood Moon.” I could just see them now, probably getting completely wasted in some bar somewhere and throwing darts at a picture of me. I didn’t know where they’d get my picture, but I was sure they had their ways. There were no limits to what a bored, bloodthirsty pack of werewolves was capable of.

“I don’t really know,” Kira said. “To be honest, I hadn’t really thought past killing Garren. Now that it’s done, I don’t know what to do.”

I groaned internally. Great. First, I’d wound up marked for a murder that I didn’t actually commit, and now I was stuck with a witch who hadn’t planned for a life past getting vengeance. I wondered whether I could just drop Kira at a rest stop somewhere, but I struck that idea from my mind as soon as it formed. I knew that if Cali found out, she’d be pissed to hear that I’d done something so cold and unfeeling.

It was kind of a drag being thoughtful and considerate of other people’s well-being, but I always felt better in the end when I did the right thing. Scoring points with Cali for being a standup guy was just a bonus.

I wished that Colton were here with me. Together, we’d be able to handle these Blood Moon bozos without breaking a sweat. I sighed. Working with Colton wasn’t an option, though. Things had changed so much since it had just been me and Colton on our own, snapping necks and taking out anyone who dared challenge us.

That all felt like a lifetime ago, and it pained me to reminisce about how much sharper I used to be as I thought again about how badly I’d bungled this Garren thing.

The one thing I definitely had to do was think like an Alpha, even if I wasn’t one officially. And an Alpha would never knowingly put their pack in danger.

I picked up my phone and called Cali, thinking that she wasn’t going to like what I had to say. I didn’t care, though. I just needed to hear her voice. I knew it was the only thing that would make me feel even marginally better. It would also reassure me that I was doing the right thing.

Cali answered on the third ring. “Are you okay?” she said without bothering to say hello.

I pictured her, standing there looking all cute and innocent and sexy with that worried look on her face.

“I’m fine,” I said. “I finished what I set out to do.” I took a deep breath, trying to build up the courage to say what I had to next.

“I’m glad to hear it,” she replied. I could hear the excitement and expectation in her voice. “So, when are you going to be back?”

Oh man, this wasn’t going to go over well… “I’m not.”

**Episode 1402**

CHARLIE

My blood went cold. I couldn’t feel my arms or legs as panic seared through my body.

“Oh? What did you see, exactly?” I asked, trying to keep the tremor out of my voice.

The memory of Sophie bursting through the surface of the water flashed through my mind. She’d been way too overwhelmed and panicked to have noticed my claws… right? Before Sophie could answer, the nurse walked up and introduced herself. She was dressed casually in jeans and a puffy coat, and her cheeks were red from the chill in the air.

“How are you feeling, Sophie?” she asked. “Tina filled me in on what happened. I’m sure that gave you quite a scare. Let’s get you inside and warm you up.” She unlocked the door and ushered Sophie into the darkened infirmary.

I was about to follow, but the nurse stopped me. “Sorry sweetheart, you need to leave. I have to check her over—unless you’re her boyfriend? Are you okay if he stays?” she asked Sophie.

Sophie nodded.

“Uh… Nope, we’re not… Yeah, I’ll leave,” I sputtered, backing away. I watched them go inside and shut the door. I turned on my heel and smacked my hands to the sides of my face as my composure slipped.

I paced back and forth, freaking out. What had she meant? Had she seen that I’d shifted? Had anyone else seen? How could I have been so reckless? I played the rescue over and over in my mind, moment by moment, but there was no way for me to pinpoint when she might have laid eyes on my claws. It had all happened so fast.

I was hands down the biggest idiot in the world. Leave it to me to shift in broad daylight in a camp chock full of gung-ho hunters of the supernatural. I took a deep breath and bent over with my hands on my knees. I felt like I might pass out.

If I hadn’t shifted, Sophie would have died in an icy grave, there was no question about that. But if she had seen what I’d done, why hadn’t she told anyone? There’d certainly been plenty of time for her to do so in the aftermath.

I knew what most of the campers thought about werewolves. They considered them yet another threat to humankind, worthy of being exterminated by any means necessary. I paused, wondering if I should be running back to my dorm, packing my things, and getting the hell out of here before they came after me with pitchforks made of silver and burning torches.

That thought sent my panic into overdrive. I stood up straight and attempted to steady my breathing. Staying calm was the first step toward self-preservation. *Think Charlie, think!*

If I escaped the camp now, I could shift as soon as I got far enough away and make my way to the airport. I could get a flight back to Oregon. Back to Violet. I never should have come here in the first place. Me coming to this camp was like a sheep taking up residence at the Redwood pack house: it was bound to end in a bloodbath sooner or later.

I was weighing my options when the nurse stuck her head out and motioned for me to come inside.

“Hey there, your girlfriend wants to talk to you.”

I was about to tell her again that Sophie wasn’t my girlfriend when she cut me off with, “And no making out in my office!”

Anything I could have said to contradict her got lost in my inaudible stammering.

I followed her inside as she led me to a small examination room where Sophie stood, drying her hair with a towel. The nurse left us alone, closing the door behind her.

“Hey, how are you feeling?” I asked.

Sophie put the towel down and gave me a weak smile. “I’m warming up, finally,” she said. “But there’s something that’s been bothering me. You’ll think I’m crazy, but I could have sworn…” She trailed off and stammered out a nervous laugh.

I held my breath, waiting for it.

“No, it was probably because I was so scared,” Sophie said. She shook her head and stared up at the ceiling as if she were playing it all back in her mind, just like I had.

“You might as well tell me,” I pressed. “We’ve all seen some crazy things.” I felt eerily calm at that moment, like I was resigned to whatever was going to happen next.

“When you pulled me out of the water—it looked like your hand… It wasn’t human,” she finished.

I swallowed more audibly than I would have liked, but it was all I could do not to faint right there. I felt my throat constricting—the lightheaded feeling returned with a vengeance, intensifying to the point that the room appeared to dim around me.

“See? I told you I was losing it. You should see your face!” She laughed, punching me lightly in the shoulder.

“Ha, what, you think I have wolf hands or something?” I asked, followed by a laugh that I hoped sounded less nervous to her ears than it did to mine. “That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard.”

Nope, I definitely sounded like the nervous wreck I was. So much for me having a good poker face. I made a mental note to work on that if I got out of this whole mess alive.

Sophie suddenly looked serious. “What? I never said anything about wolf hands…” Her eyes went wide. “Why would you say something like that… oh. Oh. My. God.” She gasped in complete disbelief. She shrank away from me, a mix of disgust and terror flooding her face. “Are you… a werewolf? Stay away from me or I’ll scream!” she said, her voice getting louder with every word.

Wow. That had gone south faster than I’d expected.

I panicked and clamped a hand over her mouth, trying to figure out what I should do. I imagined the nurse bursting through the door at any second.

It didn’t take me long to realize how stupid I was to try and hold off a hunter. Sophie had me by the wrist and, with a couple of deftly executed surprise moves, she had me pinned with my face smashed against the wall. She had my arms bound up in a pretzel as she held me from behind.

“Don’t do that again,” she warned me.

I would have been thoroughly impressed by her skills if I hadn’t been the one she was using them on. “Listen, I don’t want to hurt you, I just want to talk,” I said, my words muffled against the wall.

“I don’t talk to werewolves,” she snapped.

“Please.” I knew that this was a longshot, but I had to try to reason with her. Knowing that it was now or never, I twisted out of her grasp and used a couple of impressive moves of my own, reversing our positions so that *her* face ended up pressed against the wall. I took care not to hold her too tight, but tight enough that she couldn’t get the jump on me again. I didn’t trust her to be so gentle the next time around. “You have to let me explain,” I said.

Sophie said something, but her voice was muffled against the wall.

“What?” I said, leaning close, expecting her to try and re-pin me any second. “I’m going to release you,” I said. “But I don’t want to fight, okay?”

Sophie nodded and I let her go. She jerked her arm free and glared at me. It was crazy how fast the tables had turned. Only a few hours earlier she’d been inviting me for a flirt fest on a deadly span of ice, now we were behaving like mortal enemies.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” I said. “I’m not here to hurt anybody.”

“I’m not stupid,” she said. “Why should I believe you?”

“Because I could have let you drown.”

“You’d have to be a monster to do that,” Sophie snapped.

“That’s my point exactly,” I replied. “I’m not a monster. In case you didn’t notice, no one else tried to save you. Not even Chad.”

Sophie rolled her eyes. “Well, Chad’s a douchebag.”

“That’s something we can agree on,” I said. We stood there and stared at each other. “If you’re going to turn me in to Sergeant Pepperdine, can you at least give me a head start?” I asked.

Sophie said nothing.

“Come on. It’s the least you can do to pay me back for saving your life,” I said gently. I could tell she was thinking it over. *Please can I catch* one *break today?* “Just give me an hour to get my stuff so I can get out of here,” I pleaded. “I’ll be out of your life forever. You’ll never see my face again. What do you say? Will you give me a head start?”

I hated begging her, but what other option did I have? I held my breath, waiting.

Sophie looked me in the eye and shook her head. “No.”

**Episode 1403**

My heart pounded frantically. *Xavier’s not coming back? What? Why? I don’t understand!* His call had totally saved me from the weird Cali-repellant family hug that was going down right now, but I hadn’t expected him to deliver this type of news. I held up a finger in response to the confused looks on everyone’s faces as I slipped out of the room and into the hallway.

I felt awful for skipping out on them at such a tender moment so that I could speak to him, but a call from Xavier was not to be missed when he wasn’t around. Besides, I wasn’t ready to face whatever was going on between me and my family. What the hell was up with that, anyway? Why couldn’t I get close to them? It was like there was an invisible force field between us, driving us apart. I’d really wanted that hug, too.

I pushed this latest bout of weirdness out of my mind and turned my attention to the bomb that Xavier had just dropped on me. I’d hoped that his call would be good news when I’d seen his name flash across the screen. I’d hoped he was going to tell me that he was on his way back to me, but that was apparently too much to ask for. Silly me, thinking that his latest excursion would go smoothly and bring him back to me quickly, safe and sound.

“Cali, are you there?” he asked.

“Uh, yes,” I said, finding my voice. “What do you mean you’re not coming back? I don’t understand. You told me that you were coming back when you were done. So what’s the hold up? Did you handle whatever Kira wanted?”

“Yes, it’s all taken care of,” he said. “But things got a little… complicated.”

*Of course.* I was beyond annoyed. Why were things *always* complicated? Why couldn’t things ever be easy? I sighed through my teeth and massaged my temples with my free hand. I felt a headache coming on.

“I want to come back Cali, more than you know, and I will. But not right now. Me coming back could put you and the pack in danger, and I’m not willing to risk it,” he said.

I could hear the concern in his voice, and I knew that he wasn’t making this decision lightly, but I didn’t care. I was pissed.

“I *am* the pack!” I snapped. “If the pack’s in danger, then we’re all in danger. You don’t need to separate me out. Just because I’m not a werewolf—”

Just then my dad poked his head out of Artemis’s bedroom. “Everything okay?”

I nodded at him and gave him a stiff smile. “Yes Dad, I’ll be right back in,” I said, waiting for him to disappear back into the room so he couldn’t overhear us.

“Sounds like your dad needs you,” Xavier said, sounding like he wanted a good excuse not to directly answer my questions.

Suddenly remembering what my father had told me about his little chat with Xavier, I stepped away from the door and lowered my voice. “Yeah, something like that. Speaking of which, why didn’t you tell me that he’s a werewolf now?”

There was a sigh on the other end. “I didn’t think it was important.”

I pulled the phone away from my ear for a moment and stared at it in shock. “You mean to tell me that my dad told you he’s a fricking werewolf and you didn’t think it was important?” I said. Yup, he was really pissing me off.

I was starting to feel like he could stay gone, for all I cared. No, that wasn’t really how I felt, but why was he so hellbent on keeping things from me? Even things that directly concerned me? This was about my father, after all. I deserved to know what was going on his life, no matter what.

“Cali, that’s not what I meant,” Xavier said.

“Well you’d better explain yourself,” I barked.

“I’m trying to,” he replied. “One, I thought he was just being paranoid. Two, there’s a lot going on, in case you haven’t noticed. And three, I didn’t think it was my place to tell. It was your father’s secret.”

I opened my mouth to reply, but realized I didn’t know what to say. I wanted to be mad at him, but he’d made a good point—well, a few good points. The main one being that he was honoring my father’s wishes.

“I’m sorry,” Xavier continued. “But I didn’t want to break his trust in me. I hope you understand—I want your parents to feel like they *can* trust me.”

No matter how much I wanted to stay mad at him about this, that moved me. He really cared what my parents thought of him, and it was clear that he was trying to form his own relationship with them for my sake. My heart melted.

“It’s so annoying that I can’t stay mad at you,” I said, pouting.

Xavier laughed. “Are you trying to?”

I smiled. “It’s not like you don’t make it easy, but then you go and say things like you want my parents to *like* you, and *trust* you. You should stop doing that.”

“So, we’re good?” he asked. I could hear the faintest rumble of his laughter from the other end of the call.

I was about to assure him that we were when I remembered the reason for his call. “No, actually, we aren’t. Why was it that you’re not coming home? And don’t give me that ‘it’s complicated’ bullshit.”

Just then, my mother stepped out into the hallway with a stern look on her face. “What are you doing? Your sister needs you! Why are you on the phone right now?”

Struck with guilt, I promised her that I’d be done in a moment.

“When your family needs you, Cali, nothing else matters,” she said, before going back inside.

“Xavier, hold on.” I went into my bedroom where I wouldn’t be interrupted again, shutting the door behind me. I knew I had to get back to my newly untouchable family, but I had to get to the bottom of this first. “Now, explain,” I said.

As he spoke, I realized that I was almost content just hearing his voice. I closed my eyes and imagined how his mouth would look as the words flowed from his lips. I pictured his teeth and his tongue and the way he closed his eyes when he was thinking hard about the right words to say. It felt like he’d been gone for ages, even though it had only been a few days. Time seemed to move so slowly around here, even though so many things tended to happen in a matter of hours.

“It’s this gang I’m tangled up with out here, the Blood Moons,” he said. “Long story short, I was an accessory to the murder of someone very important to them,” Xavier said with a dull lilt to his voice.

No matter how much violence and death seemed to follow me, it was still strange to hear Xavier talk so nonchalantly about killing people.

“Who got murdered?” I asked. “The guy who killed Kira’s husband?”

“Bingo. So now that Kira killed the guy—Garren—right in front of them, they’re ultra pissed, thirsty for revenge, all of that. In fact, they’re so mad that they’ve marked me for death,” he said. He sounded as over it all as I was. “So, that’s why I can’t come back. They’re breathing down my neck, and if I come back there now, I’ll lead them straight to you—I mean, straight to the pack,” he said, correcting himself at the last minute.

I appreciated that he was trying to take my feelings into account. I was tired of being othered by everyone just because I didn’t howl at the moon. *Like my father* *does* *now*, I thought.

“I promise, once I deal with the Blood Moons and get this target off my back, I’ll be back,” he said.

“I get why you’re afraid to come back, but what you’re forgetting is that you’re also a member of the pack—and you know that the pack is at its best when we’re all together,” I said.

I thought about what my mother had just said. She was right. Family mattered above all else. A pack was just like a family—which meant that Xavier should come home so we could protect him.

“You need the pack, and the pack needs you,” I said. I pictured Xavier thinking this over, weighing his options, trying to find the holes in my argument. Trying to find some way to make me feel okay with the idea of him being gone for longer than he’d promised. I wished that he were here with me right now. It would’ve been so much easier to sway him. I missed him like hell.

“So, what do you say?” I asked. I waited, confident that he was going to see things my way, for once. That he missed me enough to take the risk that we could fight whatever was coming for him together.

But before he could say anything, there was a piercing scream on his end of the line, and the call cut out.

**Episode 1404**

GREYSON

I set a steaming cup of black coffee in front of Mace and took a seat across from him with a hot cup of Earl Grey in hand. We sat there in silence for a few long moments. Mace probably appreciated the quiet after the craziness he’d just been through.

Mace looked like a complete mess, but given what he’d told us about Pip, that was understandable. I knew that if Cali ever ended up in some sort of coma, I’d be beside myself, too. Especially if the coma was brought by the revenants.

“Thanks for the coffee, man,” Mace finally said, blowing into his mug before taking a tentative sip.

I was doing my best to keep Mace calm while we waited for Pip to be brought over from the Blue Blood pack house, especially since we couldn’t give him exactly what he wanted.

“Sorry we couldn’t just let you take off with Big Mac,” I said. “With everything that’s going on, we can’t afford to be without a witch right now. We’re lucky to have one at all.”

“That’s the truth,” Mace grunted. “If we had one, maybe those things wouldn’t have gotten to Pip the way they did.” He had a far away look in his eyes, and I noticed that he was shaking just a little.

“I know this is difficult, Mace, but I need you to tell me more about this. What exactly happened with the revenants? How did they show up?” I thought back to our encounter with them—they’d seemed to come out of nowhere, and they were scary as hell, too.

Mace looked like he’d seen a ghost as he started to tell me what happened. “They came right out of the ground. Out of the field. I saw my father… dig himself out of his own grave,” he said. “He looked… disgusting. Decayed and falling apart. And the smell…” He trailed off.

I could see how rattled Mace was. I wondered how I’d feel if Silas dug his way out of the ground. Probably not good, but for vastly different reasons. At least it would give me an excuse to kill him all over again. I doubted Mace felt the same way about his father.

“What can do that sort of thing? And why?” Mace asked. “What kind of presence from hell has that power? To bring the dead back to terrorize the living?”

A chill raced up my spine. “Honestly, it sounds absolutely horrible. I’m sorry you had to go through it. Were you all able to burn the bodies? I’m guessing that’s how the revenants stay dead.”

Mace nodded, his eyes fixed in an empty stare.

Cali came running into the room. “Sorry to interrupt,” she began, but before she could continue, Pip was carried in by a few spooked-looking members of the Blue Blood pack. I directed them down to the basement, and they laid her out on a bed in one of the rooms for the time being. I was surprised by how shaken I felt at the sight of Pip’s motionless body. She looked as pale as a corpse.

Big Mac stormed in, took one look at Pip, and ordered everyone away. Mace stood his ground and refused to leave, his eyes riveted to Pip.

“Fine, stay, but don’t get in my way,” Big Mac warned.

I was eager to find out what had Cali so excited. “Let me know if you need anything,” I said to Big Mac. She nodded and rolled up her sleeves, preparing to get to work. I went back upstairs and found Cali waiting for me in the kitchen. I took her arm and led her into the den.

“Pip looks like she’s in bad shape,” Cali said. “Is she going to be okay?”

I smiled. It was just like Cali to be so worried about everyone else when she had more than enough to worry about herself. It was so refreshing every time she showed how compassionate she was—even about people she didn’t like very much. I wasn’t sure that I could say the same about myself.

“To be honest, I have no idea,” I answered. “Let’s just hope that Big Mac can work her magic, literally. You were about to say something when you came into the kitchen. What’s up? Is Artemis okay?” I asked, hoping that she was. I wouldn’t be able to bear seeing Cali distraught over her sister again.

“Yes, Artemis is doing fine, thanks for asking. It’s about Xavier,” Cali said.

I took a deep breath. Of course it was about Xavier. When wasn’t it about Xavier? I forced myself to be pleasant. “Yes, what about him?”

“He called me and told me he isn’t coming home because he got mixed up in some trouble with the Blood Moon gang. He said they’ve marked him for death because that witch Kira killed one of their members—some guy named Garren, the one who killed her husband. He was telling me all about it, and I was trying to convince him to come home anyway—then there was this scream and his phone cut off.”

Great, so someone was trying to kill Xavier again. It was like he went out into the world with a mission to tick people off. I almost said something snarky to that effect, but the angst on Cali’s face stopped me from going through with it.

“Xavier’s a big boy,” I said. “He’s probably fine. Why don’t we call him?”

“I tried,” Cali said. “But it keeps going straight to voicemail.”

Of course it did. It was just like Xavier to be unreachable at a time like this. I knew it was most likely because he was in serious danger himself, but I couldn’t just drop everything and chase after my brother. Although, I did need Xavier here right now to help deal with the revenants and—as much as I hated to admit it—to help protect Cali.

Cali’s phone rang, and her face lit up. “It’s Xavier!”

“I’m going to step out,” I mouthed to her, motioning to the door. I didn’t need to witness her feelings toward my brother. I already knew well enough how things were. I was nearly through the door when Cali stopped me.

“He wants to talk to you,” she said, holding the phone out to me.

I sighed and took the phone from her. “What do you want?” I asked.

“Hello to you, too. I’m heading back that way, but there might be a little bit of trouble on my heels—”

“Yeah, yeah, because of the Blood Moon gang,” I said, cutting him off. “Cali filled me in. You just can’t keep your ass out of trouble, can you?” I said, unable to stop myself from giving him just a little bit of shit about this newest spate of problems.

“I can’t argue with you there,” Xavier said. I almost dropped the phone. I’d expected some bitter retort, or at least for him to tell me to shut the fuck up. Maybe things were calming down a bit between us. I wouldn’t have minded cutting out our constant feuding for a while, all things considered. We had plenty of other shit to deal with outside of our constant bickering.

“Listen, we’ll handle the Blood Moons. Just get your ass back here, all right? We need you.” I watched Cali closely as I said this. She was probably thinking about how much *she* needed Xavier. Before I got too annoyed at the thought, I reminded myself that she couldn’t help it—thanks to the fucking curse.

I ended the call and handed the phone back to Cali. Our hands touched, and we lingered that way, locking eyes. I resisted the urge to lean forward and kiss her. It was like that whenever I was around her. No matter what craziness was unfolding around us, I always just wanted to have her next to me, against me.

“I know this is hard for you,” Cali said, her voice soft and sweet.

“Nah, don’t worry about it,” I said. “I’ve accepted that this is the way things are. You should too.” I was surprised by how mature I sounded.

I thought about the witches’ offer—how I could change things, be with Cali, leave all this confusion and the constant back and forth behind. I wasn’t too keen on taking them up on the offer. I wanted to know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Cali wanted to be with me. That I was the one she chose. I wasn’t the type to try to manipulate someone into being with me—that wasn’t my style.

As frustrating as it was, I still wasn’t sure where she stood. And I didn’t know if that was because she didn’t know, either. She’d insisted that she was broken up with both of us—which was her attempt to outsmart the curse—but what about now? Had our sleeping together the other night changed that?

I knew that for me, it had only made it clearer how much I loved her, how much I wanted her all to myself. My heartbeat quickened as my thoughts drifted to memories of that night, how sweet she’d tasted on my lips, how well we’d fit together, moving as one…

I cupped her chin in my hand and stared deep into her beautiful eyes.

“When Xavier comes back,” I said, “is anything going to change between us?”

**Episode 1405**

VIOLET

I watched as Pip was carried through the kitchen and down into the basement. She was totally out cold, and as pale as new snow. What was going *on* today? Everyone was either comatose or sick.

I’d run into Marta a few hours ago in the living room and was happy to see that her color was starting to return. I wanted to talk to Lilac, but to do that I needed to talk to Marta. Would it be selfish of me to ask Marta about Lilac? Would she think I was being insensitive?

On the other hand, Lilac was my brother. What kind of sister would I be if I didn’t at least try to talk to him while I had the opportunity? I went upstairs and knocked gently on Marta’s door.

“Hey, how are you feeling?” I asked, sticking my head in once she told me it was okay to enter.

Marta sat up in bed and arched an eyebrow at me. “You want to talk to Lilac, don’t you?” she asked with barely concealed exasperation.

Wow. She sure had me figured out.

My cheeks warmed in embarrassment. “Yes, I do. But only if you’re up for it,” I finished quickly. I knew she was getting tired of me, but I couldn’t help myself. Seeing Lilac in the flesh—more or less—last night had reminded me of just how much I missed actually seeing him. Talking to him through Marta was the next best thing, for now.

“You know, your brother can be a real pain,” Marta said. She looked to one side of the room. “Yes, you can,” she said, presumably answering a question that Lilac had asked.

“Is Lilac here?” I asked, hopeful. I looked in the same direction as Marta, but of course, saw nothing.

“Like a rash, he never goes away,” Marta quipped. She got up from the bed. “If we’re going to do this, let’s do it somewhere else. Something about the color of the walls in here is starting to remind me of Bert’s house.”

“We could go to Colton’s room,” I suggested. “It’s big, there’s floral wallpaper, and there’s Colton’s old laptop. We can watch YouTube, or Netflix, or something,” I said, getting excited. It would be just like old times! Kind of…

“Well, I’m digging the wallpaper part, but I have no idea what a laptop is,” Marta said with a blank expression.

I nearly laughed, but then I stopped myself. Was she serious? I guess she wouldn’t have that much experience with modern tech being trapped in a poltergeist’s house. “Well, it’s a computer. That fits on your lap.”

“Get out,” Marta snorted, narrowing her gaze at me. “And you asked me if *I’m* okay? The last computer I saw was so big that it would’ve crushed your legs to dust if you were to put it on your lap.”

I laughed. Marta really was a hoot sometimes. “Well, things have changed a lot since 1970,” I said. “Come on, I’ll show you.”

I led her down the hall to Colton’s room.

Marta looked around, admiring the wallpaper. “Yes, this will do. I like the energy in here. It’s calm, relaxing,” she said. She plopped down on Colton’s bed and bounced on it. “Nice mattress, too.”

I, meanwhile, had to stifle a laugh at the idea of anyone referring to Colton’s energy as calm or remotely relaxing. But I was pleased that the room was to her liking, and impatient to speak with Lilac. “So… how’s my brother?” I asked.

Marta cocked her head to listen. “He says he’s fine. A little shaken up from what happened at the pond.”

I thought back to the ordeal, and then a bell rang in my head. At the time, I’d been so focused on being able to see Lilac—and then not being able to see him anymore—that I almost forgot about all the spirit stuff. When he vanished, he’d been in the middle of saying something.

Cali had asked him how to stop the spirits from coming here, and he’d said…

“What was he saying back there?” I asked Marta. “He said the spirits are waiting… for what?”

Marta paused for a moment, listening, and then she said, “They’re waiting for the signal.”

“The signal?” I repeated. “I have no idea what that means.”

“We don’t know, but it doesn’t sound great,” she replied.

*Well, then.* We fell into an awkward silence. Finally, I cleared my throat. “Well, okay, how about we watch something?”

“Lilac says there’s that new series about the paranormal investigator.” Marta shrugged.

“You know that’s a bunch of crap, right? How about *Gossip Girl*?” I said. Apparently even in death, Lilac had a thing for trashy television. I remembered how fiercely we used to fight over the remote growing up. What I wouldn’t give to hide it from him one more time. He’d always hated when I did that. I’d been grounded for doing it once or twice.

Marta cocked her head, listening again. “Lilac’s already seen it—twice,” she said. “He says it’s overhyped.”

“Overhyped?” I repeated.

“I know, so why did he watch it twice then?” Marta said. She giggled at something Lilac said in response.

“What did he say?” I asked.

“Oh, that was meant for me,” she said.

I was getting a little annoyed, now. I hated that we had to talk through Marta.

“Hey, is there any way that Lilac can appear again like he did when we were by the ghost pond? It would be so much easier to chat with him. Is there any way we could do this face to face?” Why couldn’t we harness the power of the pond? We weren’t even that far away from it.

Marta rolled her eyes. “Sign me up. Being a medium is tiring. I always feel like the third wheel,” she said. She turned away and looked like she was listening to Lilac again. “He wishes that he could hold you,” Marta recited in a monotone.

“He does?” I said. My heart ached. What I wouldn’t have done to be able to do that. There were so many things we were missing out on, so many shared experiences that we would never be able to connect over. This wasn’t fair.

“Well, if that’s it,” Marta said, standing up to go.

“Wait! The laptop!” I said. I rushed over to Colton’s desk and flipped open his laptop. Marta came up beside me.

“For real? This is a computer?” Marta asked, her face a mask of barely contained surprise and excitement. She reached out and ran her finger over the screen, then she picked it up and hefted it up and down a few times. She smirked, impressed. “Well I’ll be.” She sat it back on the desk and stepped back to admire it from afar.

“Like I said, a lot has changed since the 70s. I just hope I can connect to the internet. The WiFi’s not so great up here,” I said, clicking it on. It was password protected, but Colton was a simple guy. I typed in “password” and was not surprised when I gained access.

“Internet? WiFi? I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Marta said.

I clicked open the web browser. It opened to a dating website. I stared at it as Marta and Lilac chattered back and forth.

“Wow, so WiFi is short for Wireless Fidelity? You’re so smart,” Marta said to Lilac. “So is WiFi the internet? Oh, you use the WiFi to connect to the internet? *Oh*. Google? Why are you talking like a baby, Lilac? Oh, it’s a website to search things? What types of things?” Marta asked.

I was just about to click out of the dating website when I realized something. Was that Cali’s picture? I scrolled through the page until I came to a text box that read “No Longer Available.”

“Whoa, so was Colton looking to date Cali?” Marta asked, leaning down, staring at the screen. “Lilac gave me a crash course about dating sites,” she said. “Why was Colton creeping on Cali on a dating site? Isn’t he spoken for?”

I clicked the tab closed. “It’s complicated,” I said.

I opened Google and started to search for ways to make a spirit’s presence stronger. I got a bunch of hits. There were YouTube videos, wikiHows, listicles—the works.

“It’s amazing how all of this information is right at your fingertips,” Marta said. “Do public libraries still exist? Do people still read books?” she asked. “Do you have a library card? I do,” Marta said, pulling a tattered square of laminated paper out of her pocket. I was shocked that it was still intact. “I keep covering it in shipping tape, works like a charm,” she said to Lilac.

I focused in on the results of my search, trying to filter out the obviously ridiculous entries in favor of anything that seemed halfway professionally researched. “Lilac, which of these seem legit to you?” I asked.

I waited for Marta to respond. “What about the Rain website?” Marta asked.

“We’re not searching for the weather forecast,” I replied.

“Go back,” Marta said, relaying Lilac’s directions. “He says there’s a different site, and it’s about paranormal stuff, not weather.”

I searched “Rain” and found what Lilac was talking about. It was a blog with all sorts of paranormal information. The landing page showed a picture of a werewolf dancing with a fairy on top of a vampire’s head. I laughed. It had been so long since I saw such bad clipart. I didn’t think anyone still had those on their sites anymore. This looked like a relic from all those old sites I went on as a kid.

Marta pointed at the screen. “Lilac thinks that we should try that one,” she said, gesturing to one of the suggested rituals for contacting spirits.

“Why that one?”

Marta sighed. “He says that it requires cinnamon, and he loves cinnamon.”

I looked up at Marta, my brow scrunched up with concentration. I was already searching my memory banks to see if I remembered seeing cinnamon in the kitchen downstairs. With Tom running the kitchen, I was sure we had some somewhere—probably a pound of it.

“So,” I said. “What do you think? Should we try this?”

**Episode 1406**

XAVIER

I ended my call with Cali and Greyson, turning back to Kira. She was still shaking from her nightmare. Her eyes were wide, and her cheeks were streaked with mascara. She looked like she’d just seen death itself.

She’d woken up screaming bloody murder and when I’d tried to calm her down, she’d socked me in the face, knocking my phone out of my hands while I was talking with Cali. I had to admit, she had a mean right hook. I shifted my jaw around. I could still feel the impact, though I’d definitely been hit with worse. Even then, I’d still had to shake her to wake her up fully and bring her back to reality. Now she was crying hysterically.

“So, you ready to talk about it yet?” I asked, even though that was literally the last thing I wanted to do.

“It was awful,” she cried. “I dreamed about the night Geoff died. Except it wasn’t a dream but a nightmare, because this time *I* killed him.” She looked like she was about to completely lose it.

I reached out and gave her a few awkward pats on the back. I sighed. Apparently, it was time to add “Witch Therapist” below “Mercenary” on my resume.

“You’re okay, Kira,” I said.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I don’t think I am. I’ve dreamed about the night Geoff died before, but this time it was different. I killed him—the same way I killed Garren.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. I knew how hard it was to kill someone, not just in self-defense or by accident, but planning on killing them and then actually doing it. It was a hard thing to come back from, especially if you weren’t used to it.

Still, it surprised me that she was *this* shaken up by it—she’d worked for Iñigo, for fuck’s sake. She had to have seen some crazy stuff in his employ—including me being tied up and fed upon to within an inch of my life. But I had to remember she was a healer, more of a hedge witch than Big Mac with all her powerful rituals and spells. The most I’d seen Kira do was use her magic to revive and close wounds—outside of that brief psycho-barrage of power when it came down to facing Garren.

“I used to dream of killing my father, Silas—mostly about how glorious it would be,” I told her. “In those dreams I reveled in my savagery. I laughed, cheered, and clapped for myself while people threw flowers at my feet. Great dreams, all in all,” I said, smiling as I remembered them. “But when it really came down to it, I was just happy that it was done,” I said. “I didn’t feel the same way as you afterwards, but I don’t know if killing him made me stronger. I certainly wasn’t made stronger by killing Ava.” *Real comforting stuff, Xavier, way to go.*

“That must have been a hard time,” Kira said.

“Yeah, it sucked, but I got through it. You will, too,” I said. I was thinking that we were done with this conversation. It wasn’t exactly part of our deal. Either she’d figure things out or she wouldn’t—it wasn’t my problem. I had enough to worry about.

“Are you sure it’ll be okay with your pack if I stay with you all for a while?” Kira asked.

“It doesn’t matter, I’m taking you to the house. I don’t care what the pack thinks,” I lied. Of course I cared what they thought, but Kira was a good person, and it couldn’t hurt to have another healer amongst the pack for a bit.

“I don’t want to impose,” Kira said. She’d wiped the tears and mascara off her face and was finally beginning to look normal again. That haunted look had even left her eyes.

*She worries too much*,I thought. I looked up as a light flashed in the rearview mirror. I pushed down on the gas, increasing our speed a little. My pulse quickened as I realized that the light was getting closer, and that there were now several more lights. Motorcycles.

“Brace yourself,” I said. I stomped down on the accelerator. When I had gained a bit of distance from them, I let out a loud breath, relieved. “Maybe I was being paranoid. I thought we were being followed.”

“Better safe than sorry,” Kira said as she reapplied her mascara.

I thought about my call with Cali. I wished I hadn’t worried her so much when I’d hung up so suddenly. When Kira had punched me, the phone had flown under the seat. The road we were on was bordered by a narrow shoulder, so I’d had to wait for a rest stop to pull over and fish it out.

I glanced at Kira. I hoped she wouldn’t scream like that ever again. She’d scared the shit out of me. I hadn’t even realized she’d fallen asleep in the first place, and I’d nearly driven the car into a ditch in my surprise.

I looked up at the rearview mirror, squinting against the shine of the lights reflecting at me. They were gaining on us, and I smelled werewolves.

“What is it?” Kira asked, her voice tinged with fear.

“I think we have company,” I replied. “And not the kind you want to invite over for dinner.”

Kira spun around in her seat to look. “Blood Moons?”

I eased up on the gas.

“Why are you slowing down?” Kira yelled. “They’re right behind us!”

“You might want to hang on.”

I watched as the Blood Moons got closer and closer, their lights so bright now that they filled the car, nearly blinding me. I counted to three, then I jammed on the brakes. The car shook with the impact as a couple of bikes slammed into the back of us with a loud screech of metal against metal. I heard a few screams rise and fall in the wind that whipped in through the open windows. I pumped my fist. *Take that, fuckers!*

One of the Blood Moon’s flew up the back, down the windshield, and onto the hood. I wasted no time gunning the engine again. The tires squealed, and the rear end fishtailed as we peeled out. I could smell burning rubber on the breeze.

The biker was still on the hood, holding on for dear life. He was starting to shift. I gave the steering wheel a violent yank and the car swerved, flinging the biker off and onto the road.

“Shit!” Kira exclaimed, her hands braced against the dashboard.

I pressed down on the gas, trying to put as much space as possible between us and the bikers who had reassembled around us, closing in. I yanked the steering wheel again, trying to sideswipe a few of them. The tires squealed against the pavement, and there was a loud thud, then a pop. The car swerved as I struggled to maintain control of the steering wheel, and I realized that we’d blown a tire.

“We’re not out of the woods just yet,” I grunted.

We careened off the road, bouncing over a small ditch and heading straight for a dark cluster of trees. *Why* did they have to attack me in this car? It was one of my favorites. If I could just keep it from crashing, I’d be able to keep moving.

That thought was interrupted by another loud pop, this one louder than the other. A plume of smoke shot out from under the hood. Welp, so much for the car.

I managed to swerve at the last second, saving us from certain death by trees, but I did manage to fling a biker into that very fate before rolling to a stop in a cloud of thick smoke.

“What do we do now?” Kira shrieked. She was still holding onto the dashboard, and her eyes were wild with fear. Somehow, though, she still didn’t look as scared as she had after her nightmare.

I unfastened my seat belt. “We fight them,” I said. “And you don’t get in my way this time.”

I maneuvered out and up through the open window and was preparing to confront the Blood Moons when the sharp smell of death caught my attention. I turned toward it just as a car pulled to a stop in front of us.

“What the fuck?” I screamed into the wind. I just couldn’t catch a break—today, or any day.

I watched in horror as a bunch of vampires piled out of the car. There were so many, I couldn’t believe it. They were in a tiny black sports car—how had they all fit in there? It was like a clown car.

I nearly gagged at the stench of them. They were milling around like the sadistic killers they were, gnashing their fangs and rubbing their hands together like they were about to enjoy a delicious meal. One of them had a cat o’ nine tails in his hands, and he was swinging it back and forth as he watched me, licking his chops. Okay, that one definitely meant business.

I turned to see a long trail of motorcycles rolling to a stop behind us. The Blood Moons dismounted from their bikes—a full crew, decked out in torn flannel, chains, leather, shredded denim, and long unwashed hair. Each and every one of them was equipped with a shining pair of brass knuckles.

Marvelous.

We were sandwiched between a pack of Blood Moon werewolves and a team of bloodsucking vampires. In other words, we were fucked.

I leaned back into the car through the open window. “Kira, get out here. I think I’m gonna need your help.”

**Episode 1407**

I stared up at Greyson, taken aback by his question. What did he mean, would things change between us?

“I don’t want to go back to you avoiding me, or god forbid, breaking up with me. I don’t care about Xavier and what you have with him. I know what *we* have is strong,” Greyson said.

There was a new intensity in his eyes, and I couldn’t help but melt into him and his words. God, it felt like it had been forever since I’d heard them. The sincerity in his voice made me shudder, and I couldn’t stop myself from burying my face into his chest as he wrapped his arms around me.

I breathed in his scent and returned his hug. I’d been trying so hard to stay away from both him and Xavier, but it seemed damn near impossible. I wanted to hate myself, but right now denying them felt worse than death. I’d done my best to keep away from them, to do the right thing. I had to give myself credit for that. Still, it hadn’t been enough to keep us apart.

I leaned back and looked up at Greyson. “I don’t want to change anything between us,” I whispered.

Greyson’s eyes flashed at my words.

I hesitated. I didn’t want to force any of us not to feel what we felt. I’d tried that, and it hadn’t worked. We needed to stay open and honest with one another, as hard as that might be. Yet, it didn’t feel fair of me to ask that of them. I’d broken up with Xavier and Greyson for a reason—to protect them, to get away from them. It was becoming clearer and clearer that wasn’t an option.

*Shit*. I felt like I was spiraling right back to square one.

“Cali, what do you mean when you say that you don’t want to change anything?” Greyson pressed.

I felt tongue tied, like no matter what I said, it wouldn’t be the right thing. “I want to keep taking things slowly. I don’t want to hurt you or your brother,” I said, knowing the curse didn’t care what I, or any of my mates, wanted.

“I know that,” Greyson said. “But I just want to remind you that I’m all in.”

He ran a hand along my spine and up my neck to cradle the back of my head. He felt so strong and powerful when he held me like this. It was like there was nothing in this world that could come between us. I was literal putty in his hands, and I could tell that he knew it.

I sagged against him, and my cheeks pulsed with heat. I’d completely given in already. If I really thought about it, I’d given in a long, long time ago. I was trying my best to stave off any self-deprecation about it. Making myself feel bad wasn’t going to help anything.

Greyson tilted my chin up, leaning in close. My heart was beating so fast that I felt like it was going to burst out of my chest at any moment.

“I want you,” Greyson whispered against my lips. I leaned back into his hold. “I want you even if Xavier is a barrier. Even if there’s a war coming. I will show you that you’re mine, and that I’m yours. I’ll protect you, because there’s nothing that will keep me away from you, Cali.”

I bit my lips against the sudden surge of emotion rising within me. I was fighting the urge to close the hair’s width of distance between us and kiss him. But before I could do just that, Greyson pulled away.

“I should go check on Pip,” he said. “It’s getting late, and I need to settle all the guests in.” He’d completely shifted into business mode. My head was spinning. Maybe he could shift gears that fast, but I certainly couldn’t. Then again, maybe it was a good idea he had made the first move to back away. In that moment I didn’t think I could be strong enough to continue my promise to keep away.

I swallowed. “Yeah, yeah, that sounds like a good idea. It’s really cool of you to let Pip stay here,” I said, still trying to regain my composure. “I hope we can help her.”

“Yeah, me too. I’ve never seen Mace look so… *defeated*,before,” Greyson said. He was halfway out of the room when he turned back to me. “Oh, and Cali? I gave Pip your room.”

Before I could object, he was gone.

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A few hours drifted by, and soon the soft light of evening gave way to the inky darkness of night. A chill had blown in from the north, and a few solitary snowflakes drifted against the windows, a foreshadowing of the snowstorm to come.

Everyone was hunkered down inside the pack house. It was a nice, rare moment of peace. I liked how full the house felt; it was quite cozy, almost like we were a family. The air was warm and buzzing with life, even though the mood had a bit of a somber undercurrent. Nearly every room was taken, and there were people in almost every corner, talking quietly among themselves or sleeping soundly under blankets on the couches.

It had been nice to watch Greyson flitting around, making sure everyone was taken care of; that they had enough bedding, enough to eat, enough to drink. I hadn’t known Greyson and Mace to be very close, but it was nice to see how concerned Greyson seemed to be for his fellow Alpha’s well-being after what he’d been through with the revenants.

I’d tried to do my part for Mace as well, sending Mrs. Smith in with her patented bedside manner to make sure he felt at home.

Now, I was in the kitchen making tea to take to Artemis’s room. My cheeks still burned from what Greyson had said earlier. So he’d given my room to Pip, huh? What did that mean? What was he playing at? Did it mean… My cheeks stung with renewed heat. *Am I supposed to stay with him? In his room? Am I supposed to take my toothbrush over there? My underwear*?

I shook my head, dashing all my uncertainty and anxiety away. I’d been distracted by too many things lately. By Xavier and Greyson, of course, but also by Ava and those scary revenants, and whatever was going on with Artemis. Not to mention the repellant thing that had happened when I’d tried to join in on the family group hug.

I’d nearly forgotten about that bit of weirdness, and I hoped it was just a blip—some strange figment of my imagination.

I dropped a chamomile teabag into the steaming mug of water and dunked it up and down. I made a mean cup of tea, and chamomile was one of Artemis’s favorites. I couldn’t wait to take it up to her and finally have some one-on-one sister time. I could admit that I hadn’t been a particularly good sister today—or lately—but I was trying.

I wondered when Xavier was going to arrive. I hoped it would be before the snow hit. I’d checked the weather report, and the snowstorm was supposed to be a doozy. I knew how bad the roads could get.

I picked up the tea and was about to head upstairs when I caught sight of something through the window—a flicker of movement outside. *What the hell?*

I walked up to the window and peered through. It didn’t take me long to realize that it was Artemis. She was walking with slow, jerking steps, almost like she was sleepwalking. I’d never seen someone sleepwalking before.

I watched as Artemis walked up to the pile of ashes left over from York’s funeral pyre.

Artemis dropped down onto her haunches and reached into the ashes. A rumbling of thunder echoed in the distance, and a flash of lightning lit the sky like a floodlight, casting even more clarity on the strange event unfolding outside. I gasped as bright orange embers began to drift up from the pyre, which had long burned out to nothing but cold ash.

Then, to my absolute horror, a figure rose from the newly smoldering pyre. The teacup dropped from my hands and hit the floor, splashing hot liquid across my feet. I didn’t even flinch, too transfixed by what I was seeing.

It was York. He was covered from head to toe in ashes and smudges of soot, but his skin was unmarred—almost as if he’d never been burned at all.

He stepped clear of the mound of ashes, his eyes glowing as brightly as the pile of embers that were now smoldering faintly in the pyre. He turned to face Artemis as the sky opened and snow began to drift to the ground around them.

When I thought things couldn’t get any stranger, I saw the reanimated York kneel down, reverently bowing before my sister.

**Episode 1408**

I watched, shocked and terrified, as York looked up at Artemis.

He was smoldering like a burning log, dead but somehow still alive, his orange eyes fixed on my sister. In a voice that made me shudder, he said, “Mistress of Letifer, I bow before you, your humble servant.”

Astonishment and terror were now sprinkled in with some confusion, because I had no idea what this man/ghost/revenant/living candle was saying. And to make matters worse, Artemis didn’t seem weirded out at all. She actually held out her hand, and York reached for it.

*No! Shit!*

*WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?*

I stifled a scream, certain that Artemis would be burned. But she seemed fine? How was that even possible? I stood there, stunned, while York held Artemis’s hand gingerly and kissed it as the snow swirled heavier and heavier around them.

My voice was caught in my throat, my heart pounding. The shock was so intense that I didn’t move toward my sister. I told myself it was because I didn’t know what to do, but the truth was that I was scared. I was starting to be scared of her. Seemingly unharmed, she motioned for York to rise, as if he truly were her servant.

*What the…*

I was fighting to understand what was happening. I wasn’t sure what to do—if I *should* do anything. But still, this was my sister. I needed to help her, right? Even if I was afraid. Even if I was a little bit afraid of *her*. Maybe she was just sleeping!

*Seriously, Cali?* I scolded myself. *Stop being in denial!*

Taking a deep, determined breath, I started moving toward Artemis. The plan was to pull her away. She didn’t need to be anywhere near this York zombie. But as I moved closer, the more difficult walking became. It was as if something was pushing me back, repelling me.

I let out a sound, like a groan of frustration that I couldn’t control.

Slowly, as if in a trance, both York and Artemis turned their gazes on me.

I froze. York’s orange eyes looked as vacant as ever. And I couldn’t read Artemis’s expression.

Shaking, I said, “Get away from him, Artemis. It’s not safe.”

And suddenly, Artemis’s face twisted into something devious. A smile that looked so terrifying that it made my stomach throb, my heart pound with horror. “You can’t protect me anymore. You are the one who’s in danger.” Her voice lowered. “Flee now or perish.”

Artemis’s words chilled me to the bone. I couldn’t get any closer, no matter how hard I tried. An invisible power kept me away from my sister. I was forced to back away, even though I needed to do something.

I couldn’t just *leave*! Artemis was my only sister, and she needed my help! I glanced back at the house, feeling like I was about to be sick. I needed to ask for help—and the only person who could really help was Big Mac. But even though the witch was powerful, there was a chance she could make things worse.

*Who knows what she would do to Artemis?*

Calling for my mom was the best solution. She had magic of her own, and she loved Artemis.

“Stay where you are,” I told Artemis shakily. “Don’t do anything, okay?”

My sister ignored me. She turned back to York, who had barely looked at me. As long as neither of them did anything outrageous and magical and deadly, I didn’t care. They could ignore me all they liked.

I raced back toward the house, glancing over my shoulder and wincing when I saw Artemis’s dark expression. I was so terrified that for a moment I wasn’t sure if I was running to get help or running away from my sister.

The snow had gotten thick, almost blinding, but then I was on the front porch, and I burst into the house. I startled Torin, who had been putting on shoes.

“Hey! What’s up with you? Did you just build a snowman?” He pointed at his boots. “Because I was getting ready to go outside and do just that.”

Torin’s cheerfulness wasn’t helpful.

“Where’s my mom?” I demanded.

The urgency in my tone made Torin frown. “I think she’s in the kitchen with your dad. But what’s going on? You look freaked out.”

“You have no idea,” I said under my breath as I shook my head, running to the kitchen.

I found my mother talking to Big Mac, of all people. She looked like she was creating some kind of potion, and both she and the witch turned to stare at me. Mom looked concerned as she took in my expression and the fact that I was panting for seemingly no reason at all.

“Cali? Is everything okay?” Mom asked me.

I swallowed my heaving breaths and offered my best smile. I didn’t want to tell Big Mac what was going on. Clearing my throat, I said, “Mom, can I talk to you? In private?”

Big Mac rolled her eyes at me. “Whatever. As if I care about your secrets.”

I wanted to burst into maniacal laughter at her petty tone. If only she knew what was going on. I grabbed my mom by the arm and pulled her out of the kitchen, hoping that we wouldn’t run into Greyson. I looked around, just to make sure. There was no way he wouldn’t be able to figure out that something was going on just by looking at my face.

I did not need to sound alarm bells for anyone else right now, including the Alpha.

Mom looked at me, her expression wary. “What’s going on, Cali?”

“Artemis is in trouble,” I whispered.

Before Mom could reply, I gripped her hand and led her outside. By now, the snow had turned into a raging blizzard, and I couldn’t see anything beyond a couple of feet. I tried to pull Mom from the porch, but she stopped me, scowling.

“Caliana, I’m going to need a little more detail than what you just told me. What’s going on with your sister?” She asked the question firmly, staring into my eyes.

I started rambling, telling her the short version of everything: about Artemis and York, the fire, and the orange eyes. I finished it all off with, “We have to hurry!”

Mom looked like she was holding her breath. Both of us gazed out from the porch, but it was impossible to see anything clearly.

“We’re not going to let the snow stop us,” Mom said, determined. “Your sister is in trouble, and we need to help her.”

She rushed back into the house, grabbed our coats from the hallway hanger, and brought them back out for us to wear. Then she grabbed my hand in a grip that was firm and warm. It created a familiar, comforting feeling that I’d known all my life.

Braving the storm, we stepped off the porch. The wind was howling, and the whipping snow made my face hurt. Saving Artemis was great and all, but I really hoped I wasn’t getting ice burn. I fought to orient myself—the fire had been off to the left… But where, exactly?

*UGH! Where’s a good internal compass when you need one?*

Ignoring all my worries, I led my mom forward, expecting the strange resistance I’d felt earlier to start again as I got closer to Artemis. But this time I didn’t feel it...

Oh my god, was I going in the wrong direction?

*Damn it!*

I paused for a moment, annoyed and scared and unsure of what to do, but then I spotted a faint glow in the sky, moving toward us.

A wisp!

Okay, the last time I’d followed a wisp, I’d ended up attacked by pond ghosts. Excuse me if I’d actually learned my lesson for once and didn’t feel very comfortable following that little flappy glowy thing.

… But what if it really *was* trying to help me this time?

Unable to help myself, I took a chance and followed it, my mom in tow.

Crunching through the frosted ground, pushing against the wind, I tried to keep track of the glow. And then I felt the ground beneath me change, turning uneven.

*What is it this time? WHAT THE HELL—*

I screamed, swallowing some snow in the process, and almost lost my balance as the ground rippled underneath me. Then I saw a figure in the storm—*Artemis?*

I wasn’t sure if I’d screamed her name inside my head or into the void of the blizzard. Either way, Mom and I took off running, the wisp still in front of me, heading toward Artemis.

But then the storm got even thicker. My chest heaving, I looked down. The wisp was providing just enough light to see dark tendrils disappearing into the ground beneath my feet. Feeling my heart drop, I realized that I was standing in the pyre’s ashes, now cold with snow.

The wisp disappeared a second later, and the storm died down for a moment.

I was panting so hard that my chest ached.

“Where’s Artemis?” Mom asked me, shaking.

I looked at her, feeling lost. “I don’t know… She’s gone.”

**Episode 1409**

XAVIER

Kira stared at me like a deer caught in headlights. It didn’t look like she was going to get out of that car. I scowled. I didn’t have the time to deal with her reservations. I’d wanted to believe that killing Garren had shaken her up, had given her the ability to get rid of a threat quickly and permanently.

Emphasis on the *permanently* part.

But now, I could see that not everyone dealt with murder the same way I did.

It was unnerving.

Growling, I turned back to the vampires. There were five of them. Behind me, there were at least seven werewolves. I was the meat in a pretty fucked up sandwich, and I did not like it at all. The biggest question here was this: who was the bigger threat? Vampires or werewolves?

Either way, the odds were stacked against me. The numbers were too high.

If only that witch would snap out of the funk she was in—that would have been much, much better. Cali would’ve been mad at me for thinking like this, for not being more empathetic, but who was gonna empathize with me? I was going to need a whole lot of luck to survive this all by myself.

I wished Colton were here.

The two of us would have been able to handle this; we had figured out how to deal with armies just like these by using effective, combined attacks, almost like choreography. It wouldn’t have been easy or pretty, but at least with my twin here, I would have stood a chance.

Feeling my pulse rise, I looked between the two sides as they started closing in. Even though they were different species, both groups had the same bloodthirsty expressions.

*Fuck.*

I eyed Kira. “A little magic would be helpful, Kira, so you’d better snap out of it.” I leaned forward to look her in the eye. “I *know* you can do this.”

“I don’t think so…” Kira trailed off and blinked rapidly at me, still in the passenger seat, before she looked around wildly.

This was *not* good.

Shaking my head, I looked between the two different threats. I was calculating the odds—if I shifted, should I pounce on the closest Blood Moon, or go for the bloodsuckers? All I cared about was getting out of this alive—I needed to get back to Cali. I needed to be there for her when she needed me.

What kind of Alpha would I be if I couldn’t save my own mate?

That would be fucking unacceptable.

Suddenly the Blood Moons stopped, then started pointing and talking among themselves. One of them, a hulking biker with a scarred cheek, glared.

“Hey!” he shouted gruffly, pointing beyond me to the vampires. “What the hell are you doing here?”

One of the vampires snarked back, “You and your pups had better put your tails between your legs and run. This is none of your business!”

The biker paused. “The werewolf and the witch belong to the Blood Moon. You bloodsuckers don’t wanna mess with us!”

I started to realize that if the tension increased between these two bozos, they could turn against each other and do all the work for me.

I made sure to look at both groups mockingly and scoff. “Wow. Looks like we’re a hot commodity. It’s nice to be so appreciated—thank you.”

The biker growled at me. “Shut up!”

The vampire leader snarled. “Did you just tell me to shut up, you filthy dog?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I’m pretty sure he did. Rude, right?”

“What the fuck?” the biker barked. “I wasn’t telling you to shut up, but even if I were, what’s it to you? What you can do, leech?”

The vampire hissed and started marching toward me—and the werewolves. “Say that again, and I’m going to fucking tear you limb from limb!”

The biker laughed, starting to stride toward me—and the vampires. “I’d like to see you try, cockroach!”

That did it. The two rival groups lunged for each other.

I shifted at the same time as some of the Blood Moon. They attacked the vampires, and I tore into one as well, ignoring the overwhelming disgusting smell of death. I was suddenly struck from behind, and I spun around to face a werewolf who lunged for my throat with snapping jaws.

This motherfucker had no idea who he was dealing with.

I absorbed the blow easily and rolled to the ground, throwing off the werewolf. I slammed him into the passenger’s window next to Kira, who shrieked.

“Oh my god, watch where you’re smashing!” she shouted at me, snapping out of her daze.

“That’s all you have to say?” I growled after shifting back. “Don’t you see that I’m trying to save our lives right now? Get your ass out of that car and help me!”

She blinked at me again, frozen once more. *Jesus Christ*…

As the vampires and werewolves tore each other apart all around us, she was pale and shaking. “I’m sorry, Xavier,” she whispered. “I’m sorry I’m so useless…”

Oh *god*. I was not going to be her therapist while there was actual mayhem going on. She needed someone like Cali for that. Growling, I shifted into my wolf and attacked another werewolf who was lunging for me. I ripped his throat out, sending blood spurting everywhere.

It was too close to Kira.

She screamed in horror.

All I could think about was that she’d better do more than scream, or we would never survive this. That was the last thought in my mind as I got pounced on by a vampire. He clawed at me, making me hiss with pain, and I was trying to throw him off when I heard the car door open.

Kira stepped out.

*Finally.*

She took one look at me, sheer terror on her blood-splattered face, and ran away.

For a moment, I was frozen.

I was fucking furious, disappointed and unable to believe that she would just *abandon* me.

There was a part of me that wanted to excuse her, though. I had pushed her too far. Her genuine terror could only mean that she felt running away was her only option. She had broken down in front of me. She couldn’t help me. She couldn’t help herself, either.

This was such a fucking mess.

I was struggling to handle the vampire, shamefully still shaken that Kira had abandoned me, and that split second I spent feeling shocked gave my opponent the time to strike. He sliced through my shoulder, sending searing pain through me. Around me, vampires and werewolves were going at each other, blood and fur flying. Ignoring the pain in my shoulder, I fought the vampire. I told myself that I had no choice but to win this.

Even if the odds were not in my favor, I needed to survive.

I needed to get back to my mate, make sure that she stayed safe.

When I finally gained control over the beast and was about to tear into his throat, though, I was knocked over. *Hard*. I tumbled off and was pinned to the ground by both a vampire and a werewolf.

*Shit*.

Their mutual hatred for me had literally brought them together. I hadn’t seen that coming. I struggled to escape as my two opponents argued about who was going to finish me off.

“He’s mine!” the vampire snarled. “I’ve been fighting him, and now I’m going to use his fur as a rug!”

The werewolf, only half-shifted, sneered at him. “Your kind is the scum of the earth! I will be the one to end him!”

Meanwhile, behind the two, one of the remaining vampires pulled out a silver blade. Next to him, a werewolf shifted back to human and removed a silver sword from his bike.

Basically, I was fucked.

I was going to break my promise to Cali.

I fantasized about mind linking with her right now*. I’m sorry. I’m sorry I couldn’t come back, I’m sorry I didn’t manage to win this… I’m sorry.*

I realized I might not be able to keep my promise to kiss her again.

The thought was so excruciatingly painful—more painful than the werewolf’s claws digging into my wrists, or the vampire’s venom dripping into one of my wounds.

I wished that I could kiss Cali one last time.

I wished that I could hold her, laugh with her, be with her for one more moment.

Death didn’t matter. Losing Cali was the only important thing.

But as my enemies advanced toward me, raising their weapons while smiling at the sight of me pinned to the ground by their respective comrades, something changed.

Suddenly, there was static in the air.

And then there was a loud clap of thunder, and a blinding streak of purple lightning exploded above me.

**Episode 1410**

GREYSON

The moments ticked by, and Pip wasn’t looking any better. Mace was holding her hand, clearly upset. Seeing the aggressive oaf acting like a lovelorn puppy was a little weird, but there were worse things.

I tried to imagine what Mace was going through. If it had been Cali lying there, I would have been devastated. Falling apart. I might have not been Mace’s biggest fan, but I couldn’t help but feel for the guy.

“What’s the deal with Big Mac?” Mace asked me gruffly. “Is she going to help or what?”

Mace looked like a mess. And just because I would have liked for someone to help me if I were in his position, I couldn’t say no to him. “Let me check. I’ll be right back.”

Mace nodded sharply, and I headed to the kitchen. Big Mac was working on her potion, looking severe.

“What is it this time?” Big Mac asked, glancing over her shoulder. Before I could answer, she said, “You know I don’t like it when people watch over me. Go away.”

I wasn’t fazed. I’d come here to get answers, and a bit of snark wasn’t going to stop me.

“Do you have any idea what’s happened to Pip?” I asked the witch.

Big Mac sighed, turning to face me. “I can’t be sure. My guess is that everything we’re seeing with the revenants, Arlo, Artemis, York, and now Pip is all related. There’s dark magic at the bottom of it all.”

“And that means…”

Big Mac arched an eyebrow. “It means that it’s only spreading, Greyson. It’s affecting more and more people, like a disease.”

I eyed her potion warily. It was a deep green color. A little muddy. “I hope that’s better than the one Cali tried out.”

Big Mac scoffed. “Amateur. She should have never tried it.”

“I know.” I nodded. “But I also know that Cali did what she did out of concern for her sister. I refuse to blame her.”

“She should have come to me,” Big Mac said firmly.

I raised an eyebrow. “Seriously? It’s not like you’re easy on either of them.”

Big Mac smiled icily. “That’s their problem. If coddling is the only way to get through to her, then I guess it’s a good thing she’s got not one, but two foolish boys to enable her while she makes one bad decision after the other.”

“*Hey!*” I said. “You’d better watch the way you talk about Cali. Give her a chance to prove herself, okay?”

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “*Fine*. But Cali was only wasting time. She tried to treat cancer with a Band-Aid.”

“So what the hell do we do now?” I asked her.

“We’re dealing with ancient, very dark magic here that a simple potion won’t fix. We need to do an exorcism.”

That sounded… horrible, actually.

“Do you mind?” Big Mac added, gesturing at her pot. “I have a lot of work to do, and you’re messing with my aura.”

Rolling my eyes at the witch, I headed back to fill Mace in about these creepy developments when I ran into a very disappointed-looking Torin.

“What’s wrong with you?” I asked. The man looked like someone had stolen his puppy.

He pouted. “The snow melted before I got to build a snowman. Like in *Frozen*, you know?”

I rolled my eyes for what felt like the millionth time in the last few minutes. The pack was seriously testing my fucking patience. Ignoring what he said, I asked, “Have you seen Cali?”

Torin nodded. “Actually, she and her mother went out into the weird storm. I didn’t catch why, though.”

Weird storm? Had I heard that correctly?

Grumbling and concerned, I went outside. The last of the snow was melting, and the air was cold. I could hear Cali and Orla talking—shouting, almost. Were they down by the pyre?

I rushed in that direction and found the two of them looking around. Orla was silent but had a frantic look on her face, and Cali was almost hysterical.

*Oh, fuck.*

“What’s—”

“Artemis is missing!” Cali wailed when she saw me. I hated seeing the panic in her face. It made our mate bond tremble.

I pulled her into a comforting hug. “What happened? I thought Artemis was in her room.”

Cali quickly explained, blubbering the words. My stomach dropped. All I could think about was what Big Mac had said, about the dark magic spreading. The rate of the spread seemed to be fast and vicious.

“We need to look for her,” Orla said, her voice quivering.

Before I could say that that wasn’t a good idea, Cali spoke up. “We don’t even know where to look, though! Artemis just vanished, and the snow out there is blanketing everything!”

I glanced between Cali and her mom. “This is no time for anyone to start poking around. We don’t know the extent of the danger yet.” I glanced at the house. “We should go inside, maybe ask Big Mac about this, and try to come up with a plan.”

Orla pressed her lips together. I could see that she was barely holding herself together. But at least Cali was being surprisingly sensible about this. “I agree with Greyson, Mom. We can’t run just off into the forest and wish for the best.”

If the circumstances had been different, I would have laughed. Running off into the forest and wishing for the best was literally Cali’s main strategy for *everything*. But something was different now.

Orla took a deep breath. “I can do a tracking spell. I know so many spells that would help with—”

“Mom!” Cali walked up to her, resting her hands on her shoulders. “Please. I don’t want to lose you too. Think of Dad.”

Those words made Orla pause. She didn’t say anything but nodded sharply.

Finally, the three of us headed back inside. Cali was still shaking. I wished I could take her in my arms, kiss the top of her head, and tell her that everything was going to be okay. But I didn’t want to give her false hope.

Whatever was going on here wasn’t good, and we definitely didn’t have any control over it. This was nothing like dealing with Silas, or vampires. It was something that was crawling toward us like a shadow that we couldn’t grasp.

Big Mac was finishing up in the kitchen, and I checked on Mace, who was still holding Pip’s hand, looking at her with that miserable expression on his face. Astrid, Torin, and Zainab were in the living room, drinking white chocolate mochas without a care in the world.

“Did anyone see Artemis leaving the house?” I asked them.

The three of them shook their heads at the same time.

“We haven’t seen her since she went to her room,” Astrid said.

“And she looked pretty bad,” Torin added helpfully.

“I would definitely have noticed if I’d seen her parading around,” Zainab said.

I scowled. How could nobody have noticed Artemis leaving the house?

I turned Cali. “Wasn’t Rishika with Artemis? Where is she?”

Cali looked lost. “We should check upstairs right now.”

Orla, Cali, and I climbed up the stairs quickly, heading straight for Artemis’s room. I opened the door, only to find Rishika, looking up at me from a chair, clearly surprised.

With Artemis in the bed beside her, sipping water.

Okay, what was going on?

Orla let out a sound of relief and rushed over to Artemis. “Oh my god, are you okay?”

She patted a confused-looking Artemis down, as if to make sure there were no injuries.

“I’m fine,” Artemis said calmly.

Cali seemed ready to run to her sister as well, but then she stopped herself.

She seemed cautious.

She seemed… unlike herself. For once, she was taking a second to process things first before acting impulsively.

Whatever had happened in that blizzard had seemed to change something in Cali.

“What’s going on?” Rishika asked me with a frown. “It’s not like you to barge in without knocking.”

I didn’t understand any of this. And I hated not understanding things. I hated not having a theory about what the hell was going on in my very own house. I motioned for Rishika to join me in the hall while Orla fussed over Artemis.

Cali silently followed.

Rishika looked worried as I closed the door behind me. “What’s going on? You’re freaking me out a little.”

I glanced at a pale Cali and cut straight to the chase.

“Did you fall asleep?” I asked Rishika.

She frowned. “You should know me better than that. Of course I didn’t fall asleep—I’ve been awake and by Artemis’s side the whole time.”

Cali made a choking sound. She and I exchanged a look.

“Are you sure Artemis didn’t go out?” I asked Rishika.

Rishika looked at me like I’d lost my mind. “I’m the best fighter and guard in this entire house. Are you seriously asking me that question?”

Her annoyed look gave me plenty of answers.

But I only had more questions. How in the hell could Artemis have been here and outside at the same time?

I was turning to question Cali when Sage came running in.

“Greyson! Big Mac needs you!” she yelled. “Something’s wrong with Pip!”

**Episode 1411**

CHARLIE

I couldn’t believe this. After I’d saved Sophie, this was how she repaid me? By telling Sergeant Pepperdine?! What kind of ungrateful, horrible person would do this?

I suddenly felt claustrophobic and overwhelmed, panic rising inside of me. I pulled away from Sophie, recoiling. The sooner I put distance between us, the better.

“Wait!” Sophie tugged at my arm, moving in front of me. “You didn’t let me finish!”

My jaw was set. “I think you’ve made yourself perfectly clear. I get it. You’re a hunter, I’m a werewolf. I guess you’re expecting me to attack you right now to shut you up, but I don’t do shit like that. I’m not a monster.”

Sophie’s mouth dropped open. She was alive, safe and sound because of me, and it didn’t matter to her. She wasn’t any different from my mother—at least considering the way Mom had acted at first. I made a move to leave again, but Sophie was still grabbing my arm.

“I said *wait*! I won’t give you a head start to leave, because you don’t *need* to leave.”

I paused. Turned to stare at her.

“I’m not turning you in, Charlie,” she said, shaking her head.

I could barely wrap my head around this. “Really?”

Sophie looked a little bitter. She raised her eyebrows. “I’m actually hurt that you think I would do something like that. You *saved* me, Charlie.”

Sophie looked sad, and I couldn’t help but feel ashamed about being prejudiced against her. Much like my parents had been prejudiced against me. But I also felt weird right now—I never should have shifted like that in front of everybody.

“I hope nobody saw me shift. Nobody else, I mean…” I trailed off.

Sophie shook her head. “I doubt it. They would have freaked out. It’s not like we’re all used to seeing werewolves. Most of us haven’t even seen a vampire.”

I eyed her. “Why didn’t *you* freak out, though?”

Sophie snorted. “I was more freaked out about drowning. Priorities.”

I chuckled at her dry expression. The relief I felt was welcome. This could be fine, right?

Just then, the nurse popped her head in. “You two done canoodling? I have a book to finish.”

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I walked Sophie back to her dorm. It was the least I could do, considering she’d almost died and also agreed not to rat me out. She kept stealing glances at me, fiddling with her hands.

Even though I was still a little wary of her, I decided that she wasn’t a bad person and that we could be friends. “Come on,” I said. “Spit it out.”

She looked up at me instantly. “Okay, I have a question.”

I sighed. “I knew it.”

She smirked. “What’s it like to shift? What’s it like to be a werewolf?”

Before I could answer, I heard a new voice from a few feet down the road. “Charlie!”

Zachery ran toward me with Aisha, Reggie, and a few others, and all of them surrounded Sophie and me. They started asking her if she was okay while Zachery pulled me aside.

“Dude, you did it!” he exclaimed.

My eyebrows knitted. “I did what?”

Zachery glanced over at Sophie and the group of people around her, and squeezed both my shoulders. “Sophie is going to be all over you now. You’re her hero. Just like in the movies!”

*Oh* god*, no…*

I was instantly annoyed and embarrassed, because he didn’t know what he was talking about. Rolling my eyes, I shook off his hands and gave him a look. “I think I’ve told you I’m not here to hook up.”

Zachery smirked. He glanced over at Sophie. “Why not?” He winked. “You stay here a little longer, you’ll change your mind. I’m telling you, don’t waste this opportunity.”

Clearly Zachery had a selective memory. But that would only work in my favor, ultimately. With Romilly watching my every move and reporting back to mom, I had to keep Violet close.

I groaned, shoving him. “I’m not interested in Sophie. Cut it out!”

“Oh, please!” Zachery scoffed. “I’ve seen the way you look at her. And who can blame you? She’s smoking hot!”

I did not have time for Zachery’s bullshit.

It had been a nerve-wracking day, and all I wanted was to go back to my room, call Violet, and hear her voice. Only she could settle me down. Make me feel safe again. If Zachery could just drop this BS about Sophie, I’d feel better. But it was too risky to say something about Violet.

I had enough problems already without adding that to the pile.

Either way, I was lucky that things had turned out this way. I glanced over at Sophie, who was still chatting with the rest of the kids, looking at ease. She seemed like a good liar. I was still a little nervous about her, but it felt like I had no choice but to at least try to trust her.

“I gotta go, man,” I grumbled. “Quit being annoying.”

Zachery said something about me being boring as I headed inside, toward my dorm.

“Hey, Charlie!” I heard Sophie call from behind me. I turned to see her running up to me as if she were shooting some sort of commercial. She really knew how to work her angles, I had to give her that.

“Can I talk to you for a minute?” she asked, biting her lip as she looked up at me.

I sighed, looking around. I didn’t want to answer any of her supernatural questions where everyone could hear. They were already watching us.

“I don’t think this is the time or place,” I muttered.

She arched an eyebrow. “Maybe we can talk in my room?”

She looked so eager, and she *had* almost died today, so it was hard to say no to her. Even though I wanted to. I really did want to head to bed and call Violet. But Sophie seemed so hopeful, and I still felt a little guilty about snapping at her earlier.

I took a deep breath. “Fine, I guess.”

She gave me a massive smile and grabbed my hand, leading me toward her room.

In the background, I saw Zachery giving me a double thumbs up.

The guy was relentless.

A few minutes later, Sophie was closing the door to her room. She made me sit on her bed, then leaned against her desk. “So, I want to know your entire story! Like, why are you here? At hunter camp? You know…” She looked conspiratorial, whispering, “… considering you’re not like us.”

I gave her a look. I was pretty nervous about all this. Could I trust Sophie? It felt like I could. At least I hoped I could. She had promised not to turn me in, anyway, and I was pretty sure that the fact that I’d saved her life had created some sort of positive vibe between us. *Right?*

And honestly, having a real friend here who knew my story would be a relief.

I was just exhausted pretending, so talking to Sophie like this, like I had nothing to hide, could be good. At least she wasn’t like Romilly, a.k.a. one of my parents’ plants.

As I started to tell her about my parents, and how I felt I couldn’t tell anyone—not even my friends—about becoming a werewolf, it felt like a weight was slowly lifting from my shoulders. She listened to everything I said, looking enraptured and empathetic.

“I know it’s risky for me to be here,” I told her. “But my parents didn’t give me a choice.”

Sophie nodded. “I get it. But what you’re describing is incredible. The way I found out that I was hunter was a hell of a lot less dramatic.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“When I turned seventeen, my parents just told me during dinner,” she said, shrugging. “We were having lasagna, and they just blurted it out.”

“Wow,” I said. “I didn’t find out until just a little while ago. I can’t imagine my parents being so casual and trusting.”

Sophie smiled a little. “My parents and I have a very close bond. They can talk to me about anything, and I feel the same way about them. I’m glad there aren’t any more secrets between us.”

I thought about my own parents. I wasn’t sure how close we were, given that I had to lie to them about Violet. And I’d also had to momentarily worry that they might kill me. Fun times.

Sophie moved from her desk and sat down next to me on her bed. She tilted her head to the side. “So. Is it true that you howl at the moon?”

I scoffed. “Really? That’s what you’re going to ask?”

She shrugged, smirking. “That’s what I was told.” She nudged me. “Do you have any other werewolf friends?”

I paused. There was no way I was going to go into the whole pack house thing. And I wasn’t going to say anything about Violet. That was too personal.

I shook my head and pretended that I’d heard something outside. “Was that a horn? Do you have any idea what other training we have coming up?”

Sophie nudged me again, this time with her elbow. “I’m not done asking questions, Charlie.” She leaned in closer, giving me an intense look. “Do you have a girlfriend?”

**Episode 1412**

Greyson rushed downstairs behind Sage. There was something wrong with Pip, and he didn’t hesitate to spring into action. I admired that about him; it was part of what made him an Alpha. And even though I was usually pretty decisive myself, right then, I was so hesitant about what to do next.

I needed to think of a way to talk to Big Mac, which meant that sooner than later, I would have to go downstairs. I glanced over my shoulder at Artemis’s door and decided to check on my family one more time before following Greyson. I walked back into the room and saw my mother and Artemis, murmuring to each other.

And I realized once more that I could *not* get close to my sister.

That same force I’d felt outside was repelling me again.

I wanted to hold Artemis so badly, to make sure that she was really here, that this wasn’t some kind of mind trick. I had seen Artemis outside, but then she’d vanished. And now I didn’t know what was true.

*I can’t believe this is happening…* Why *is this happening?* I wondered with a shiver.

It didn’t seem like my mother was being affected by the force field that was keeping me away from Artemis. *She* could hug my sister. I wondered if I should tell Mom that something was stopping me from getting closer, but I didn’t know if it would be smart to do that in front of Artemis.

I shuddered at the memory of my mother’s panic. I didn’t want to worry her even more. There were so many questions and no answers. I looked around the space. Could York be here? In this room?

Of course not. Rishika would have scented him…

But would she really, if he were a ghost?

*Get a grip, Cali*, I told myself.

I stared at Artemis, trying to get a read on what she was feeling. Her expression was blank, even as Mom held her. Had that scene outside even been real? Or had it been a trick?

“Cali?” Mom said, startling me out of my daze. “Are you going to keep standing by the door? Why don’t you come sit with us?”

*Because I literally can’t*, I answered in my head.

I glanced between her and a blank-faced Artemis. “Sorry, I—I need to check on Greyson.”

I got out of the room, more confused and disconcerted than I had been in a while. After rushing down the stairs, I followed the commotion and found the rest of the pack in the living room. Everyone was yelling at the same time when Big Mac shouted, “Shut up, everybody!”

Mace was trying to hold onto Pip as she convulsed violently on the floor.

“Help me!” Big Mac told Greyson. “Help Mace hold Pip down!”

Greyson grabbed her instantly. Pip’s eyes had rolled back, and she was struggling against Greyson and Mace, almost like she was fighting some inner demon. It was shocking to see two Alpha werewolves, powerful ones, exerting themselves to restrain Pip. The sounds she was making were nightmarish, and Greyson and Mace’s harsh breathing filled my ears.

Marta came in just then, followed by Violet.

“Oh my god…” Violet trailed off, aghast, as she took in the scene.

Marta did the same. Her eyes were wide.

“Stand by!” Big Mac barked at Marta. “I may need you!”

Martin nodded, looking determined.

“Why?” I asked shakily. “What’s happening to Pip?”

Big Mac grabbed me by the arm and thrust a big black candle at me. “Hold this.”

*Huh?*

“But why?” I repeated like a broken clock.

Big Mac glared at me. “Stop asking questions, do as you’re told, and don’t let the flame go out.” She pinned me with her gaze. “It’s important that it never loses its flame, do you hear me? I’m trusting you with this, Cali.”

I nodded sharply, staring at the flame. But…

What kind of calamity would befall us if it *did* go out?

*No! I shouldn’t be thinking that!* I told myself. *I should stay positive!*

I would take care of the flame. I mean, I once had a goldfish that had died because I’d forgotten to take care of it, but I would take care of this flame, damn it!

Big Mac stepped over to Pip. She waved her hands in smooth, almost hypnotic motions as she began to chant something that sounded like a song, deep and mystical, her voice keeping the rhythm with every word. I was trying to keep an eye on the candle while glancing at Pip, whose movements were starting to get more frenetic.

The floor beneath me trembled.

I glanced down, swallowing nervously. Was it my imagination, or had the floor come alive? Why did it look like there were living tendrils squirming beneath it, just like the ones I’d seen at the pyre?

*No! This isn’t right!*

I stumbled slightly, and the candle flickered. There was no way that I would let the flame die. There was no way that I would disappoint Big Mac, who barely trusted me already. The witch stopped chanting and turned to me, glaring. “I told you to watch it, Cali!”

“Maybe I should—”

I shook my head at Violet, not letting her finish her sentence. I wasn’t going to give her the candle and admit defeat so easily. For crying out loud, how difficult was it for me to just hold a fucking candle? I wasn’t useless!

Big Mac kept chanting.

Mace was talking to Pip, his voice much smoother and softer than I’d ever heard it. “Be strong, darling… We’re trying to help you,” he whispered. “Don’t fight us… Don’t leave me, my love.”

It was a devastating thing to witness. I looked at Greyson, and he caught my eye. A knowing look passed between us. I wished I could run to him. I wished he could hug me and tell me that everything would be okay. Seeing Mace and Pip like this ignited the mate bond within me, making it throb.

*You can do this, love*, Greyson told me through our mind link.

I nodded sharply, staring back. I was so thankful for his encouragement.

It was hard to watch Mace and Pip struggling, though. Their connection was like a live wire. The scene was soul-crushing, and all I wanted to do was hold my mates—both of them. The longing I felt was suddenly so intense that my chest ached. The mate bond was thrashing inside me, craving comfort and touch.

*No, Cali, focus!* I told myself. *Don’t disappoint Greyson!*

Right now, it was all about helping Pip. And about keeping the flame burning. The floor beneath me was still trembling, and I was doing my best not to fall. I was doing my best to stand still and do my part.

Then suddenly, Marta spoke up, a vacant look in her eyes and a strange voice escaping her mouth. “It’s fighting back… It’s trying not to leave me.”

Marta sounded like Pip.

Marta was channeling Pip, and I was in awe of her powers once more. But what was *it* that was fighting back? What was holding Pip captive? The thought of an entity inside Pip, taking over her body, her mind, scared me shitless.

The candle’s flame suddenly flickered and grew.

*Holy shit… HOLY SHIT!*

I watched, astonished, as I realized that I could now see everyone’s breath. It was as if the air had gone ice-cold, and yet the heat from the candle increased, became bigger, taller. I looked up, suddenly worried that the flame would ignite the ceiling.

*What the fuck is happening?!* I thought, frantic.

I tried to lower the candle, but Big Mac yelled, “Don’t move!”

I nodded shakily. Greyson and Mace continued doing their best to keep Pip under control as she squirmed and made otherworldly sounds. With those sounds echoing in my ears, something shifted inside me.

I felt someone pulling me toward the stairs.

But when I looked behind me, there was no one there.

As Big Mac continued chanting in that same rhythmic tone, whispers filled my ears. I couldn’t make out what they were saying, but they kept coming and going. It was like they were being carried by a shifting breeze.

Until, finally, I managed to make out some of the words.

*Let us in, let us in…*

My quivering was partly out of fear, now. The windows started to bang, startling me.

But I still didn’t drop the candle, *thank god.*

“Come over, Cali,” Big Mac told me. “Bring the candle here and drip three drops of wax onto Pip’s forehead.”

Oh, *shit*. That sounded very specific.

Feeling nervous—and kind of like I wanted to throw up—I carefully started to move toward Pip. But the closer I got, the more difficult it became. That same resistance that I’d felt while trying to reach Artemis surrounded me. The floor made it even more difficult, moving in ripples, like a million snakes were slithering underneath it.

“Hold that candle up, Cali,” Big Mac ordered. “Get the drops of wax on Pip!”

“I’m trying!” I managed to say. “I can’t move—it feels like I’m swimming against a current right now!”

The moment the words were out of my mouth, the candle’s flame flickered ominously.

*Shit, shit, SHIT!*

Was it going to go out?

**Episode 1413**

XAVIER

I opened my eyes, gasping for air.

Was I dead?

Suddenly, I felt lips against mine—the comforting, perfect sensation of Cali’s lips. Was she trying to give me mouth-to-mouth? But I was breathing. I was alive.

I was alive, with her.

She kissed me lightly again, pressing herself against me. Her arms were wrapped tight around my bare torso. The pressure and closeness felt fucking awesome.

“I wish I didn’t have to go, but my family needs me right now,” she whispered. “I hope you understand…” She tenderly stroked my cheek, her touch soft. “My mom has been moved up the transplant list.”

She sat up, loose hair cascading over her breasts, and her words didn’t register. All I could focus on was the image before me. All I could think about was touching her, kissing her. Feeling her again. I wanted to put my mouth on her, pin her to the mattress, bite her neck as I slowly took her and she moaned my name. I already couldn’t get enough of her.

I wanted to give her pleasure again and again just because I loved it, because I loved feeling her shake underneath me, around me. I gripped her wrist gently, tried to pull her back in toward me. Her skin was still warm and hot.

I smirked. “Surely you don’t have to leave right *this* second.”

I dragged her closer, nuzzling her cheek as I moved her hand from my abs and dragged it lower.

She gasped, offended and annoyed, which was her usual mood when I was being a prick. “Stop it!” She pulled back, smacked me on the shoulder while pressing her lips together to hide a smile. “You’re so dirty!”

I threw my head back, laughing. “And you love it.”

Cali’s face went bright as a cherry, but I didn’t miss when she said, quietly, “Yes.”

Suddenly, there was a flash of bright light that felt like an electrifying current.

I shuddered, opening my eyes once more to find myself staring at Kira’s concerned face.

“Are you okay?” she asked, squeezing my shoulder.

I was panting, choking. My mind was hung up on the memory of Cali. What had that been? Had my life just flashed before my eyes? To the thing—the person—most important to me?

Of course that would be Cali.

It was always Cali.

I wished I could be with her right now, could set things right between us. I vowed that I would treat her better, listen more, be more open, more trusting with her. I would be anything she could ever want me to be. Just for her. Just to keep her.

I felt slightly dizzy. My head was hurting. My bloodied shoulder was throbbing. I looked past Kira and saw that the werewolf with the sword was lying motionless on the ground. The silver knife was lying in a pile of ash where the vampire had been standing. The vampire and the werewolf who had been callously debating who would finish me off were both gone. Somewhere in the distance, a whimpering vampire was running away, limping, his arm dangling.

He looked… *scared*.

I sat up, wincing from the pain in my shoulder. “What the hell happened?”

I looked at Kira. She opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again. Why was she hesitating?

I looked around.

All the other werewolves were dead, and there were a couple more piles of ash. Actually, a lot more than a couple.

This was a bloodbath.

When I faced Kira again, she said, “I’m glad you’re okay.”

My head ached as I fought to process everything. “I remember you… I remember you running away. Leaving me here, alone.”

She cringed. The guilt was evident in her face. She looked paler than usual.

“And then,” I continued, “there was an explosion of lightning.”

She sat down next to me, shaking her head. “I did try to run away. I was really scared.” She looked ashamed to utter the words. “But I knew that I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I left you behind. I decided that I would rather die with you than abandon you after all the things you’ve done for me, so I came back to help. Or at least try.”

I looked around at the chaos of the battle’s remains once more. “But what did you do to help? Did you bring an army?”

She still wasn’t meeting my gaze.

I touched her shoulder. “Kira?”

She moved slightly away from me. “I…” She paused. “I used my magic.”

I gaped. Was that a joke?

“Wait… *You* did all this? You took out all of them?” I asked.

I was stunned. Even though I’d seen how powerful she could be when we’d fought Iñigo, this was too much. This was incredible. This was something that not even I had been able to pull off alone. I would’ve needed Colton, and even then… Even then, it would’ve been hard.

But there Kira sat, unharmed, not a hair out of place.

Apart from her expression.

Her haunted expression said all I needed to know about her mental state.

“How did it happen?” I asked.

She helped me to my feet, clearly shaken. She still didn’t make any eye contact. “I panicked. I lost control.” She shook her head bitterly. “I hate it when this happens.”

Her words were a whisper. I fought to process them beyond the ache in my head. She’d said something about being a healer. She’d made it seem like she’d never killed anyone before Garren. Was that not the truth?

“Wait, slow down,” I said. “You’ve done this before?”

Kira said nothing. She kept looking away, suddenly looking a little flustered. “How about you put some clothes on? This is awkward enough already without all… *that*.”

Her slightly sarcastic tone made me feel a little better. I rolled my eyes and headed back to the car, then dug out some of my spare clothes. As I started to get dressed, feeling my wound healing, I asked, “You’ve got to give me an answer here, though. You know that, right?”

“I’d rather not talk about it,” she muttered, fiddling with her jacket’s zipper. “Besides, shouldn’t we be getting out of here? I don’t want any of the Blood Moon’s friends to come looking for us.”

I nodded in agreement, even though I was still curious about Kira and wanted more information. We did need to get out of here as quickly as possible. I looked around. My car was fucked.

I pointed at one of the dead Blood Moon’s motorcycles. “We should borrow one of those.” I glanced at the dead werewolf on the ground. “I’m pretty sure its owner won’t object.”

Kira got on the bike behind me. I kicked it into gear and was about to peel out when she said, “You shouldn’t leave your car here with a bunch of dead werewolves. It’ll raise too many questions.”

I scowled. “True. But what should I—”

“I’ll take care of it.” Kira snapped her fingers and the car seemingly vanished, right before my eyes. What the *fuck*?

I shot her a sideways glance. She looked back at me innocently, and I just didn’t have the time right now to question this. The car disappearing seemed like the best solution, anyway, so to hell with it.

When we were out on the road, I felt the wind on my face. It was refreshing. My wound was healing, feeling better by the minute. I was still wondering about Kira. Her arms were wrapped around my waist, tight, and I found it oddly funny that she could be scared of motorbikes and still have the ability to take out a dozen men.

Everything about her was just a little funny. As in, *weird*.

She’d had so much trouble killing Garren, had been so resistant to the idea of using her magic to hurt anyone, yet she’d wiped out the Blood Moons and the vampires at the same time. That was insane. Fucked up, almost.

But she had looked so troubled when I’d brought it up. Almost regretful.

Perhaps I’d ask her about it another time.

“Where are we going?” she yelled in my ear.

“Back to the pack house,” I yelled back, the wind making our voices carry as I sped up.

All I could think about now was getting back to Cali.

I couldn’t shake off the vision I’d had earlier. It had felt so real. Like I’d been right there in the moment with her. Maybe it was a sign. The pack needed me, like Greyson said. And I still didn’t like the idea of Cali spending so much time with my brother. When I got back, I vowed to make her mine again.

It would be just me and Cali again, mates. The originals.

But I couldn’t help the doubt that crept into my head.

After all the time we’d spent apart, could it be too late for me?

**Episode 1414**

LOLA

I was frozen, naked in bed with Jay, unsure of what to do, when Irma pounded on the door again. “Open right this instant! I’m not going to ask again!”

Jay stared at me, his eyebrows arched. “Is that Irma the headmistress lady?”

Internally screaming, I scrambled up to get my clothes on. “*Yes*!” I hissed at Jay. “Get dressed!”

Jay nodded in understanding but still didn’t look that alarmed, which was pretty fucking worrisome.

“Lola!” Irma shouted once more, and I started fumbling around like I’d been electrocuted.

“Oh my god, just hide!” I told Jay, who looked confused.

“But where?” he asked, all cute and disheveled.

Groaning, I shoved him under the bed. He finally caught on, and I straightened the covers. Then I quickly put on a dress and whipped the door open, only to come face to face with a murderous-looking Irma. Flipping my hair over my shoulder, I casually asked, “What’s up?”

I was *really* trying not to pant here.

“Don’t lie to me, young lady!” Irma said and stomped into the room. “Where is he?”

I remained the epitome of innocence, giving her my most angelic look. “Where is who?”

Irma glared at me. “Drop the act—I can smell your mate.” With a look full of contempt, she glanced down at the bed. “Come out, young man.”

After three agonizing seconds, Jay crawled out from under the bed, naked.

It didn’t help that he made no effort to cover himself up. Scandalized, Irma stared firmly at his face. “Get. *Dressed*.”

She marched to close the door. I felt like I wanted to die, but Jay just shrugged casually and started to pull his pants on. I had to give it to him, he was cool as a cucumber under pressure.

“I can explain,” I said miserably when Irma faced me.

She raised her hand and kept glaring at me like I’d made the gravest mistake of all time. “You will have plenty of time for that. But you’re going to be late for your *Sanguine Science 101* class. And you’ve already tallied more than your share of late arrivals and absences.”

My stomach dropped at her chastising. It wasn’t my fault that I was kind of late and sometimes absent! It happened, okay? It was always just a bad set of coincidences!

“As for your mate,” Irma said, glancing at Jay with her nose wrinkled, “he needs to leave ASAP!” She marched toward the door, and called over her shoulder, “Come to my office to talk immediately after class, Lola. And don’t you dare be late!”

And then Irma slammed the door behind her.

I turned to look at Jay, helpless.

He cringed. “That was rough.”

He pulled me into a hug, wrapping his strong arms around me as I rubbed my nose against his neck. I instantly clung to him, taking in his scent for comfort. This was such a mess.

“I did *not* like the way she talked to you,” he muttered in my ear, kissing the shell of it. “Nobody’s allowed to talk to my mate like that, but I didn’t want to speak up and make matters worse for you.”

I sniffled. He was just so sweet while everything kept spiraling out of control. First, the feelings I’d experienced for Emmett—those dumb vampire-heat-infused feelings—and now this confrontation with Irma. Jay was the only good thing in my life.

I faced him, stroking his chest, his cheeks. “Please take me with you. I don’t want to be here anymore. I belong at the pack house, with you.”

Jay sighed. “I know, baby. I would love nothing more than to have you back. I miss you all the time.”

I was so hopeful. “Yes! I miss you too! This entire thing here is a nightmare that I just can’t seem to escape, so please—”

“I *want* to have you back, Lola,” he said, cutting me off. “And I know that this is hard for us, but I also know that you need to get your vampire instincts under control. The house is full of people you could hurt by accident.”

“I know,” I said, nodding vehemently. “I promise I will control myself. And if I stray, you can always lock me in a closet, or chain me up or something!”

Jay arched his eyebrows. “Why does that sound sexual?”

“It can be sexual, if you want,” I said, pressing myself against him. The idea of him leaving right now, putting distance between us, physically ached.

Jay shook his head, sighing. “As tempting as that is, I really want you to learn all you can about your new identity. Besides, what good would it do anyone for you to be chained in a closet all day long?”

“I think we just agreed it would be a sexual thing, so—”

“*Lola*,” Jay gently scolded, cupping my cheeks. He stared deep into my eyes, making my knees buckle. “This is not a joke. You know I’m right. Neither of us wants this vampire thing to be hanging over our relationship. Neither of us wants to bring more problems to the pack, right?”

Sniffling, I nodded. “I hate being a burden. I don’t want to mess anything up. It’s just that… being here is so hard.”

He brushed his lips softly over mine, tucking my hair behind my ears. “I know that this is hard, but if you think you can be patient and handle it, I want you to see it through. Do you think you can manage?”

I stared into his eye. He believed in me, so much. This was important to him, and to me as well. This was important to the entire Redwood pack. I hated the idea of disappointing him. And I still felt bad for dragging him into this whole thing with Emmett.

“I can handle it. I want to try,” I said, taking a deep breath.

Jay gave me a half-smile. It was so gorgeous. *He* was so gorgeous. “That’s my amazing girl,” he said.

He hugged me tightly and kissed me again. It felt so good that I wanted to drag him back into bed all over again. Being with him was so incredible each and every time that being parted from him hurt me deeply.

I could tell that he felt the same, and that was the only good thing about this whole horrible mess.

As he headed out, he said, “I expect daily updates. I hope you get everything under control.” And then, he winked at me with his good eye. “Although you might need to save a little of that vampire heat for when you get back.”

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After my *Sanguine Science 101* class, I was dreading going to Irma’s office. I was so fucking embarrassed, and pretty pissed at Emmett. He was such a douchebag. And a creep! Besides, it wasn’t even my fault that Jay had shown up. Not that I regretted it, but why should they blame me? This was all the vampire heat’s fault! These people should be much more understanding toward a new vampire like me, especially one who used to be a werewolf. Basically, I *deserved* special treatment!

Grumbling under my breath, I made my way to the office. As if things weren’t already bad enough, I passed by Jacqueline and her hench-vamps. They all stared at me, whispering to each other. I couldn’t tell if they were mocking me, or if they were jealous. I was pretty sure that it was the latter, because I could still remember the way their eyes had devoured Jay earlier. Not that I could blame them—my mate had the most beautiful dick ever, and I knew that because I had watched a lot of porn recently. Penises were actually pretty ugly.

Anyway, even if they were mocking me, I didn’t care. It didn’t matter, because I was proud to be Jay’s mate, no matter what. That would never change.

We were perfect for each other.

Taking a deep breath, I arrived at Irma’s door. When I knocked, I wasn’t sure what to expect, but I figured that whatever it was wouldn’t be pleasant.

“Come in!” she barked.

Wincing, I braced myself and opened the door.

“Hey, I just finished my class, so I thought I would—”

I stopped talking, losing my composure when I saw Emmett standing beside Irma. *Fuck*.

What the *hell* was he doing here?

“Take a seat, Lola,” Irma told me, her expression blank.

Swallowing, I did as I was told. I could feel Emmett’s intense green eyes following me.

*Oh, no!* This was so unfair. I could only imagine what Emmett had said. What an asshole!

Irma leaned over her desk. “Professor Laurence has explained to me what happened. Based on that, he and I were just discussing your future here at Tottenville.”

My pulse racing, I glanced at Emmett. He averted his eyes.

I was so upset that I turned back to Irma and blurted, “Am I being expelled?”

**Episode 1415**

I leaned toward Pip, but the resistance only grew.

Big Mac snatched the candle from my hands, shooting me an angry glare. “Give that to me,” she said, before dripping the wax onto Pip’s forehead.

I held my breath and watched as each drop bubbled and hissed against Pip’s skin.

She screamed in agony, her whole body convulsing with pain.

“What are you doing to her?” Mace hissed, furious.

Greyson grabbed his shoulder, squeezing to settle him. “*Hey*. Take it easy, she’s here to help.”

I backed off, startled by Mace’s snarl. And immediately, I felt the resistance fading.

What the hell was causing it?

*What the hell is happening this time?*

As my anxiety started to skyrocket, Pip’s shaking and convulsions worsened. I felt helpless, like I had somehow failed Pip. But it wasn’t my fault that I hadn’t been able to drip the wax, was it? Pip was surrounded by some sort of force field. Why couldn’t anyone else feel it?

There were so many questions that I had no answers for, and it felt like if I asked Big Mac anything right now, she would bite my head off.

*And she probably would be right to do it*, I thought bitterly.

Suddenly, Pip let out a loud sigh, and her convulsions stopped. She lay there, lifeless, her chest still. All of us went completely still. No one said anything. I don’t think anyone even dared to breathe.

Oh my god…

*Did Pip just* die*?*

I could feel my heart beating in my throat, and I could only imagine how Mace was feeling. He looked crushed, and like all the blood had been drained from his face. His features were sharp and devastated.

The Luna of the Blue Blood pack was dead… *Shit.*

“Pip? *Pip!*” he screamed, shaking her. He looked up at Big Mac, helpless. “Is she—”

“She’s not dead, if that’s what you’re asking,” Big Mac said calmly. “She’s okay.”

Mace’s whole face transformed. His hope was almost heartbreaking. “Is she better?”

I couldn’t believe my eyes. Or my ears. Whatever this magic was, would it work on Artemis? I needed it to work. Because whatever was going on with my sister… It felt like it was getting worse every day.

“Well,” Big Mac said evenly, “she’s not convulsing, so technically she *is* better. At least in that sense.”

Mace’s left eye twitched. “What does that even fucking mean?”

I could tell that he was getting angry. And an angry Mace was like a bull in an antique shop—he could be relentless. And the truth was, I couldn’t blame him; Big Mac’s answers were always kind of cryptic.

“You, *witch*!” Mace jumped up, pointing at Big Mac. “What have you done to her?” he roared. “We brought Pip here for help—I want her fixed *now*!”

Big Mac stared at Mace passively as Greyson pulled him back.

“Mace,” Greyson said. “You’d better calm down right now. We’re doing all we can.”

Greyson’s grip on Mace was strong. I could tell by the way his knuckles were white, from the tension radiating off him. Greyson had proven how powerful he was back at the Lupo Finale, and Mace knew that.

Mace was an Alpha too, though. The two struggled for a moment, and Mace pushed past Greyson and surged toward Big Mac. Greyson was quick on his heels, but Big Mac held up one of her hands. In an instant, with one twist of her wrist, Mace was stopped in his tracks.

What had she just done? A memory flooded to me when she’d stopped me from moving at the Lupo Finale. Was that what she was doing to Mace?

Mace growled at her, his eyes furious.

“You need to calm down,” Big Mac said in a mild tone. “The immediate danger is over, and the best thing right now would be to bring Pip to one of the bedrooms and let her rest. She’s in some sort of coma at the moment. It’s not unheard of. And if anything happens, come get me.” She glanced at Pip and then more quietly, she added, “Maybe we can try again in the morning.”

Big Mac walked away, lowering her hand. The second she did, Mace moved and Greyson was there, yanking him backward. Mace growled again, but clearly realized that he had no choice.

“You can bring Pip upstairs,” Greyson told Mace. “I’ll lead the way.”

A pained, severe-looking Mace picked up his mate and followed Greyson without another glance at Big Mac. For a moment, the jarring realization that Big Mac was doing so much for us and nobody ever thanked her settled in. But I was too anxious to dwell on it.

“What happened?” I asked Big Mac, unable to help myself.

Big Mac shot a look at Marta. “Nothing. I was unable to draw it out.”

Um, excuse me? That sounded pretty confusing. And weird. “Draw ‘it’ out? What is ‘*it*’?”

I looked between the two women, and Marta spoke up first. “There was a dark, ominous presence. I felt it. Is that what you’re talking about?”

Big Mac looked away. It was one of the rare times when she looked a little uncertain. “Something like that.” Her voice quivered slightly. But only slightly. “I just need to do more research. Whatever was in there, it was in there deep. It’s different than anything I’ve ever dealt with.”

Big Mac stood up, heading toward the kitchen.

I wanted to follow her, to question her more, but I knew Big Mac. Something was troubling her, and there was no way she was going to admit it. At least not to me. Maybe to Mrs. Smith, but that was it. Nobody else would be able to get through to her.

I sighed. I glanced upstairs and realized I needed to check up on Artemis. See if that force field was still in place. After making sure that Marta was okay after the whole thing where Pip had spoken through her—creepy—I headed toward the staircase. But Torin blocked my way.

“Um, hi,” he said awkwardly.

I arched an eyebrow. “What’s going on, Torin?”

“Your dad is acting really weird,” Torin blurted out, looking uncomfortable.

*This is pretty fucking worrisome*, I thought.

I instantly felt fear, an emotion that seemed to be hanging out inside me a lot recently. And then, I was curious. I couldn’t read Torin’s tone clearly, apart from the awkwardness, but this had been an odd day already.

“Don’t you have anything else to add?” I asked. “What do you mean he’s acting weird?”

Torin cleared his throat. “Well. You have to see for yourself.”

He grabbed me by the arm and led me to the door.

“Where are we going?” I asked, confused.

“To your dad,” Torin said, sounding a little alarmed. “He’s been out here for a while now.”

*What? Why would my dad be out here?* I wondered.

I got my answer when I saw my father standing beneath a tree, looking up at something, arms crossed and…

*Is that* growling?

“See?” Torin said, eyes wide. “I told you he was acting weird!”

I grabbed my coat and rushed outside. “Dad! What are you doing out here? You’re going to freeze to death!”

But my father didn’t notice me.

As I approached him, I slowed down. He was growling, but at what? What kind of animal was he trying to intimidate? And why? I followed his eyeline and saw a raccoon.

Why on earth would a raccoon upset my dad? He was a nature guy! Had the raccoon hurt him or something? Ugh, what a mess this day was.

The moment I tapped his shoulder, Dad spun around, startled. He was still growling, though, making me flinch back. What the *hell*?

“Dad?” I choked. “It’s me!”

He blinked rapidly, his gaze focusing on me. He calmed down slightly. “Cali, darling,” he mumbled. Then, he grouchily pointed upward. “The raccoon’s in the tree!”

Oh, *god*. I was so confused. “*And?*”

“The raccoon is a gifted climber,” my father told me seriously.

Okay, then. I glanced at Torin, who gave me a knowing look. Like, “*I told you so! This is WEIRD!*”

It *was* weird. Even for my dad.

I wondered if this had anything to do with him turning into a werewolf. Was stalking raccoons part of the process? But if werewolves channeled their inner dogs, shouldn’t the focus have been on squirrels instead? Or did they just chase all rodent-type things?

I would have to ask Greyson later.

I cleared my throat. “Um. We should go back inside, though. It’s really cold out. Maybe Mom can help. With the raccoon. Or whatever.”

Dad seemed to like that idea, so we thankfully headed back to the house.

*What a day*, I thought, bewildered.

“Hey,” Torin said, picking up something from the grass. “It’s a ball!” He laughed. “Fenrir must have left it behind.”

*Oh, god, don’t remind me.* That kid was cute, but I was so glad that episode was behind us.

“Catch!” Torin tossed me the ball.

I rolled my eyes and caught it. I didn’t want Fenrir’s ball. I threw it toward the lake, annoyed. Without any warning, though, my dad suddenly ran after it.

I was stunned.

*Oh my god, could the lake be luring him like the ghost pond?* I thought, panicked.

“Dad!” I called after him. “Where are you going? What are you doing?”

But my father didn’t answer; he was already too far ahead.

Flashes of revenants filled my mind. York. Something told me he was still out there.

“Dad! Stop!” I called again, but he didn’t hear me.

I ran faster, feeling the imminent danger.

I had to stop him!

**Episode 1416**

VIOLET

I was pretty stressed for various reasons. Apart from the whole thing with Pip and Mace, I was also missing Charlie, and of course I was anxious to try the cinnamon spell with Marta. If it could help Lilac become real Lilac and not ghost Lilac, it would be amazing. He would be my real brother again. But I tried not to get my hopes up.

The idea of it was overwhelming, though.

I almost felt like crying at the possibility of holding Lilac again, of hearing his laugh and his dumb jokes. Of going running with him, going out to dinner and the movies, and other fun little things that siblings did. He and I always used to get along so well—not just as twins, but as friends.

I had lost so, so much when I’d lost him.

I was wondering when Marta was going to return from helping Big Mac deal with Pip. They’d told me to go upstairs as things had become more intense. I hoped for Mace’s sake that Marta had been able to help. I knew what it was like to have to worry about your mate. I worried about Charlie all the time. Constantly. To the point of agony. For crying out loud, he was in a camp full of people trained to kill werewolves.

My heart was clenching at the thought when my phone pinged. It was a text from Charlie!

Oh, he was so sweet, *always*.

I smiled. Here I was, thinking about him, and then he’d texted me. It was just more proof of our shared destiny. I read his text, smiling to myself.

*Do you know when you’re coming? I miss you… :(*

As much as I missed Charlie as well, as much as it hurt to be away from him, I hadn’t booked a flight yet. He was going to be so disappointed. Taking a deep breath, I texted back.

*I’m still looking into it, sorry! I have to deal with the Lilac situation, you know? I really miss you too!*

Charlie’s reply was quick.

*Of course, I understand. I just really want to see you.*

I sighed.

*I really want to see you too*, I replied. And then I typed, *how are you doing?*

Charlie started typing his response. It took a while. Could something be wrong? Or was he just thinking of what to say? Before the twinge of worry could hit me, his reply arrived.

*Somebody asked me today if I had a girlfriend.*

I smirked, wondering what cute thing Charlie had said about me.

But then another text arrived.

*I told them I didn’t have one.*

I choked, almost dropping my phone.

*What?* Why would he say that to anyone? Would he—*could* he be leaning into the fake dating thing, or was there a chance… *No*. No, there was no way Iris had gotten into his head. *Right?* He was just telling me how much he missed me!

I was about to respond when Marta came into the room.

She looked tired, so I was surprised when she said, “Should we give that spell a shot?”

I was still reeling from the bombshell that Charlie had dropped. I wanted to call him, actually, to hear what kind of explanation he had for this. It couldn’t be true. There needed to be some sort of reasonable argument as to why he’d decided to hide my existence! If I hadn’t been so upset, I probably would have been able to figure it out on my own, but this was too messed up and hurtful for me to deal with. I was super upset, but I told myself to calm down so as not to alarm Marta.

“What’s up with you?” I asked her, swallowing nervously. “What happened downstairs?”

Marta sighed. “I just had a really rough time with Big Mac and Pip,” she said quietly. “She’s alive, but we don’t know what happens next. She’s out of it.”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

She shrugged. “I would really like to do something positive, and it’s getting late… So if you want to do Lilac’s spell, we should do it right now.”

I nodded sharply and stared at my phone. “Just a second.”

My reply to Charlie was short and hopefully to the point. Hopefully natural.

*did she buy it? haha*

He had to be joking… Right? But if he was, it was a terrible joke. The worst. Just the idea of him denying my existence made my heart sink.

But I had to hold out. Charlie loved me. Even if his mother didn’t, it would take a lot more than her disapproval to break us apart.

“Let’s go,” I told Marta, putting my phone in my pocket. If I was going to help my brother, I needed to shove every other thought out of my head.

I followed the medium downstairs, and we quietly searched through the cabinets for cinnamon and a few other ingredients for the ritual. Marta looked uncharacteristically somber. I remembered that she’d said the whole situation with Pip wasn’t looking good. It was so sad. Poor Pip. Poor Mace…

It was so horrible to feel that you couldn’t help someone you loved.

“Is Lilac here? Right now?” I asked Marta in a low voice.

Marta rolled her eyes. That was more like her usual sass, so I welcomed it. “He sure is. In fact, he keeps bugging me about doing this.” She glared at the air next to her. “It’s getting a little annoying.”

Lilac must have said something, because Marta snorted. My brother had always been funny, I could give him that. I was glad to see Marta’s mood improve slightly.

As we headed outside, I asked her, “Do you think this will really work?”

Marta shrugged. “I have no idea, honestly. It’s so outside my area of expertise.”

“But it won’t hurt to try, right?” I asked her.

“No, not at all,” Marta assured me.

We found the right spot away from the house. I was glad I’d gotten a coat for Marta, because she would have been freezing to death without it. There was still a little snow out here, especially on this side of the house, away from the porch. I didn’t want anyone to see us, especially Big Mac. I knew how angry she’d been at Cali for trying her hand at witch magic.

At least Marta was an actual witch. Sort of. Well, she definitely had a lot of magic, which was encouraging!

Quietly, Marta and I created a circle with the cinnamon and some of the other spices. It smelled delicious, and I decided that was a good thing. I was grasping at straws, and I didn’t regret it.

Marta snorted again, glancing at the air to her left.

“What?” I asked her. “What’s Lilac saying?”

“That he wants to go to the mall as soon as soon as he’s been de-ghosted—he wants one of those giant cinnamon buns from the food court,” Marta said. “It’s one of the things he misses about being human.”

It was such a sweet thing to think about. Pun intended. It made me feel so tender toward my brother. How cruel would it be, to watch life pass you by without being able to cherish those kinds of little pleasures?

With those thoughts in my head, Marta and I put the last few things in place.

She inspected everything and then announced, “We’re ready now, I think.” She pointed to the spot across from her. “Go stand over there. According to the instructions, you need to concentrate and picture Lilac in your head. Nothing else. No other thoughts, okay?”

I nodded. “Okay, I got it.”

I was filled with a nervous energy as Marta took a deep breath and started chanting something about life, spirits, and forms. She kept going, repeating the words, but I wasn’t listening. I made sure to concentrate, running images of Lilac and me through my head. He was my twin. The other half of me. The first person I’d depended on in my entire life.

I thought of his laugh, of his frown when he was lost in thought, of the way he would look at me from the corner of his eye when he thought someone was being a jerk. It was the same look that Charlie gave me sometimes—a knowing glance.

Charlie. *I miss him.*

I remembered the look in his eyes the last time I’d seen him. I would kill to see those eyes again… And when had we even *kissed* last?

I snapped out of it as Marta’s chanting grew louder, and I focused on Lilac only.

I channeled all my energy into picturing my brother, into bringing all the memories I had of him to life. I was doing such a good job, actually, that it looked like Lilac was standing in front of me.

*Wait…*

Lilac was *standing in front of me*?

He smiled. “Hey, sis.”

I gasped.

*Oh my god. Did the spell work?*

**Episode 1417**

GREYSON

Mace’s anguish was obvious. I tried to think of something to say to ease the pain, but I wasn’t good at this kind of shit. I wished that Cali were here; she would’ve known what to say, how to fix things. How to give someone hope. She would’ve known how to comfort. She would’ve probably tried to give Mace a hug, and he would’ve probably accepted it, because she was just that good at this kind of thing.

I could only imagine the horror Mace was going through. The horror that I would feel if Cali was in the same kind of state as Pip. Watching that strong woman writhing on the floor, fighting for her life, had been a nightmare even to me.

Selfishly, I was glad I wasn’t Mace, and that Cali was okay.

Mace was keeping it together, all things considered. I had told him to calm down earlier, but internally, I’d actually respected the fact that he hadn’t set this whole house on fire in a fit of agony. I respected that he respected us and our efforts to help him. Even though they might not have been working that well.

Clearing my throat, I tried to divert his attention from Pip. She looked so pale…

“The revenants are a threat to all of us,” I told Mace gruffly. “Is there anything that you saw that could help us figure out what to do?”

Mace did not remove his gaze from his mate.

“This is all my fault,” he said quietly, his voice cracking.

I had never seen Mace act like this, so vulnerable and broken.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

He rubbed his face, and a noise escaped him that reminded me of a sob. “She was defending *me* from a revenant, and that was when she was wounded.” He stared at her again, grabbing her hand in both of his. “I’ve been hoping she would wake up so I could apologize.”

His voice broke once more, and the expression on his face was pure pain.

My chest tightened. I thought about how many times Cali had risked her life to protect me. How horrible it would feel to be responsible for harm coming to your mate like that. I thought of Joss. She hadn’t been my mate, but had been my Luna. I still felt her loss acutely.

And I knew if Cali got hurt because of me, I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself. *Ever*.

What Mace was going through was my worst nightmare.

“It must be hard when the one you love sacrifices herself to protect you,” I murmured. “You worry about them all the time, only to discover that they worry about you just as much.”

Mace didn’t speak. He swallowed audibly and moved his hand to his eyes, as if to keep tears in.

For an Alpha to break like this, the world had to be ending.

For a werewolf with his mate in danger, the world *was* ending.

I squeezed his shoulder before heading out. He deserved a moment of solace and silence with the woman he loved.

I closed the door behind me quietly, feeling heavier than I had in a while. I didn’t even have a sarcastic comment to offer. I didn’t know how to deal with this without feeling anxiety rise up inside me, filling me with fear and paranoia about my own mate.

I was heading down the hallway when I heard Cali’s voice. I frowned and glanced out the window. She was outside. Her dad was running toward her…

With a *ball* in his mouth.

What in the hell? I had so many questions. Excusing myself, I went outside.

“Greyson, over here!” Torin called as I joined him and Cali. Meanwhile, Tom was lumbering after a ball. Fenrir’s ball. There was a dull ache in my chest at the thought of the child, but I shook it off. There was no time for that.

“What’s going on?” I asked my mate, who looked lost, and Torin, who looked kind of excited.

“Her dad wanted to play fetch!” Torin said happily.

Full of dread, I watched as Tom grabbed the ball with his mouth and came charging toward us. I blinked slowly, trying to process the image in front of me. Was this really happening, or was it some kind of dream? Or a nightmare? Definitely a nightmare. I wasn’t sure whether to laugh or die from secondhand embarrassment.

“Okay,” Cali said awkwardly to her dad. “Just one more time.”

She threw the ball. Tom yelped and chased after it.

*How* was this real life?

“Cali,” I deadpanned. “Are you going to tell me why you’re playing fetch with your father, or are we just going to ignore the fact that he’s acting like Pluto?”

Cali sighed. “My dad thinks he’s turning into a werewolf,” she said evenly. As if that was a totally normal thing to say. “It was this or he was going to run into the woods where there’s who knows *what*.”

“*What?*” I said. “A werewolf? *How?*”

“Okay, I want you to calm down,” Cali said. She started to explain about what had happened in Minnesota, reminding me that Tom had been bitten by the same Rogue who had turned Charlie. She also told me what her father had recently told her.

And I… had nothing to say.

Seriously, this day was leaving me speechless on multiple levels.

This had not fucking happened to me before. *Ever*.

And then, to top it all off, my mate asked, “Do werewolves feel the need to chase after balls? Or is my dad’s behavior something I should be worried about?”

I blinked at her slowly once more. The whole situation was so surreal, it was fucking outrageous.

At least Cali was taking this pretty well.

“I’ve never felt any desire to chase down a ball. Maybe because I’ve got Alpha blood. But the period before a werewolf turns for the first time can manifest in weird ways.”

Cali paused. “I hope it doesn’t get any weirder. Because playing fetch with my dad is really fucking weird.”

I burst out laughing. Cali gave me a small smile, and that was the first time I’d felt anything good all day.

“Thank you, daughter of mine,” Tom told her, dropping the ball by her feet. “This is actually a good way to stay in shape.”

Nobody spoke for a moment. Until Torin said, “I’ll throw the ball next time!”

After Cali shot him a look, Torin backpedaled.

“Anyway, maybe we should go inside for a snack?” he said. “We can make some grilled cheese sandwiches.”

I smirked to myself. Torin and Tom were the perfect odd pair. Cali and I watched as the two of them headed inside, arguing about the best cheese to use for a sandwich. They should create their own reality TV show, and not involve *us* in it. *Torin and Tom’s Cooking Adventures*,or whatever.

Cali stared at them as they walked away, smiling a little before the expression faded.

“Are you okay with your dad becoming a werewolf?” I asked.

“Not sure,” she said. “If you’d asked me that a year or so ago, I might have not been so accepting. But now…” She shrugged. Then she turned to face me, changing the subject altogether. “How’s Mace doing?” Her expression was tinged with worry. “I can’t imagine what he’s going through right now.”

I stared at Cali, swallowing thickly. “Honestly? It’s horrible. Watching him panicking over losing Pip makes me think that I never want to experience that with you.”

Cali’s eyes glistened at the corners. “I never want to put you in that position. That’s why I’ve tried so hard to keep both you and Xavier away from me. But it’s like fighting gravity.” She looked away, shaking her head. “No matter how hard a fight, I always end up back…”

I reached out, taking her hand. Her skin always felt so soft. “Back where you belong?”

Glancing up at me, Cali allowed herself a smile. It was full of longing. I adored it.

Adored *her*.

“Something like that,” she said ruefully.

I remembered what I’d told Mace earlier—how you always worried about the one you loved. I took in the sight of Cali, my heart drumming. I didn’t have to worry about her right now. She was with me. She was safe. I could breathe.

My grip on her hand got a little firmer as I pulled her close. She let me. She rested her palms on my chest, and I lifted her chin to make her meet my gaze.

“I don’t want you to push me away anymore,” I breathed.

Our eyes locked for a heated moment. She looked so adorable in her winter jacket and rosy cheeks. I couldn’t resist. I thought about what Cali had just said, that this thing between us was like an unstoppable force, more powerful than gravity.

When I leaned closer, Cali moved in sync, as if she couldn’t help herself either. At the first touch of our lips, we melted into each other.

I kissed her passionately, holding her tight. I loved her taste, the feel of her body against mine, her trembling sounds. I was so enraptured that I barely noticed as the ground rumbled…

And thunder filled the air.

The sound got louder, followed by a bright light, so bright that I broke the kiss even though I hated to. I turned around to see a motorcycle pull up.

Who the fuck wasinterrupting us?

Cali shuddered as the bike came to a stop. The man swept his helmet off. His hair was wild, his eyes sharp. We both knew him. Of course we did.

Xavier glanced between me and Cali. “Missed me, brother?”

**Episode 1418**

I blinked slowly at Xavier, hoping I was in a bad dream. Xavier’s angry glare was fixed on Greyson who still stood close to me, his hand around my waist. The sweetness of the kiss he and I had just shared—the one I’d *really* been enjoying—had dissipated, replaced by a feeling of cold, sick guilt. I swallowed and looked down, like I’d been caught with my hand in the cookie jar.

Xavier tucked his motorcycle helmet under his arm, and—looking over—I saw that there was a woman sitting behind him on the bike. Her eyes were visible through the visor of her helmet and they were on me—dark and brooding… Or were they accusing?

I pulled away from Greyson’s embrace as Xavier swung himself off the motorcycle. I could feel the weight of both his and Greyson’s eyes on me.

“Sorry,” Xavier said, his voice like ice. “Hope I wasn’t interrupting anything.”

“Welcome back,” Greyson responded, his tone clipped.

The tension between them felt like a physical thing, and when I darted a glance up, I found them glaring at each other. My stomach clenched, and I could feel my palms starting to sweat, like they always did when I got nervous. God, could this be any more awkward? But I knew awkwardness wasn’t the worst possible outcome here, and the last thing I wanted was for things to escalate between the brothers.

Behind Xavier, the woman on the motorcycle took off her helmet and shook out her hair.

“Kira!” I said in surprise. Grateful for the distraction, I took a step toward her. “Does this mean your mercenary mission thing was a success?”

“Yup,” Kira said, nodding. She looked pale and cold.

“But… wait.” I looked over at Xavier. “If you’re done, why did Kira come back here with you?”

“She’s going to stay with us for a while,” Xavier said shortly, his tone giving away nothing.

Greyson narrowed his eyes. “That’s not really your decision to make, is it, Xavier?”

A muscle in Xavier’s jaw twitched, and he rounded on Greyson. “Listen, I just rode nonstop for hours to get here. You said you needed me back, and I’m back. Kira’s stayed here before, and she’s here again, so cut your Alpha bullshit already.” He jerked his head, motioning for Kira to follow him, and started toward the house. As he passed by me, he dropped his voice, speaking for me alone. “So much for breaking up with both of us, huh?”

His words stung like a slap and I winced, tears pricking at the corners of my eyes.

“Don’t worry about him,” Greyson murmured as Xavier stormed toward the house. He reached out to pull me close, but I stepped away.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “I can’t.” The pain flashing across Greyson’s eyes twisted in my heart like a knife, but I took another step back. “I just need some space.”

I balled my hands into fists at my sides as I headed down to the lake, furious with myself. This *never* ended. I should never have succumbed to Greyson. Or, at least, I should have been more discreet about it. I rubbed my hand across my eyes. Everything about *due destini* made me feel like I was losing my mind because, no matter what—with Xavier and Greyson or without them—I just couldn’t win.

Just as I was really starting to lean in to feeling sorry for myself, I remembered the look of pain in Xavier’s eyes, and I imagined what he must have felt when he’d arrived home to find me kissing his brother.

“*Damn it*,” I whispered to myself as my throat tightened painfully.

As I approached the muddy bank of the lake, I heard footsteps behind me and spun around.

“Artemis!” I said, surprised. “What are you doing out here?” I looked around. “Alone. Are you feeling better? Where’s Rishika?’

Artemis nodded. “I’m okay.”

I started toward her, but the closer I got, the slower my steps grew.

Artemis frowned. “What the hell is going on with you, Cali? Why are you acting so weird?”

“What do you mean?” I asked, even as I pushed against the strange force slowing my progress.

Her frown deepened. “You come to see me, but then you leave right away. You won’t even come near me. Are you avoiding me or something?”

“No, I—” I shook my head. “Something’s happened, Artemis. I can’t get close to you.”

Artemis stared at me. “What the hell does that mean?’

“No, I don’t mean, like, emotionally,” I explained. “It’s a physical thing.” I was about to mention that I thought it had to do with the potion warding away dark magic, but I wasn’t sure if I was ready to mention that. Not yet, anyway. “Can’t you feel it? Like something is pulling us apart?”

Artemis thought for a moment. “Yeah, I guess so.” She took a step toward me, but it was obviously difficult. “Yeah, I *can* feel it.” She stopped and looked at me, ten feet of muddy lake grass separating us.

“Do you have any idea what’s keeping us apart?” I asked breathlessly.

“No,” Artemis said, shaking her head. She looked truly baffled. “I have no idea. The last few days have been… kind of a blur.”

I felt a stab of guilt, remembering how sick she’d been after I’d given her that potion. “Does that mean you’re feeling better? I’m really sorry about that potion, Artemis. I don’t know what I was thinking. I shouldn’t be brewing potions, and having you drink it was really not a good idea—”

“It’s fine, Cali,” she said, holding up a hand to stop my babbling. “You didn’t make me drink it. That was my decision.” Her face grew stony. “One of the few decisions I’ve been allowed to make lately.”

She sounded so cold and bitter I nearly flinched, though I didn’t completely understand what she meant.

I swallowed my anxiety and tried to smile. “Well, at least you did get to decide about the potion. I drank some totally by accident.”

Artemis snorted a laugh. “How’d you do that?”

I rolled my eyes, relieved beyond words to be teased by her again. “I ran into Violet in the hallway and dropped the bottle, and it splashed. But it’s fine. I actually feel pretty good. Not like what happened to you.” I hesitated for a moment. “Actually, it’s pretty strange that we both had some of the same potion—same batch and everything—but had such different reactions to it.”

“Yeah,” Artemis said slowly. “I guess that’s strange.” She gave me an odd look. “What was the potion supposed to do again?”

“Repel dark magic.” I felt my hands start to sweat. Was that what was going on? Was the potion actually working? I thought hard, thinking back to when I’d first felt this strange pushing feeling. It had been when I’d tried to join in on the family hug. Then again, when Artemis—or who I’d thought was Artemis—had been with York by the funeral pyre.

Hit with a sudden wave of fear, I took a startled step backward.

“What?” Artemis asked, looking at me with concern. “What’s going on?”

“It’s repelling me from *you*,” I said, realization dawning as yet another thought hit me. “You have dark magic in you, don’t you?”

Artemis narrowed her eyes. “Are you accusing me of harboring dark magic, Cali?”

“I—”

“You know, it could be *you* who has dark magic,” she interrupted. “The push I’ve been feeling could be because of *you*, not the other way around.”

“*What?* You’re the one who’s been acting weird,” I said, stunned. I was frustrated by her reaction, but also worried. How did she not notice how strangely she’d been acting? “Do you remember going to the pyre?” I asked cautiously. *You know, raising York from the ashes?*

I still didn’t know whether what I’d seen that night was real. What I did know was the look in Artemis’s eyes when she’d been with the group of the revenants out in the forest. Dark magic had touched her—of that I was absolutely sure. But… had it ever *left* her? Was it possible Big Mac’s spell had been wrong?

Artemis looked at me, clearly baffled. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

I stared at her. I wanted to believe her, but I couldn’t. “I know what I saw.”

Artemis’s eyes flashed. “Are you calling me a liar?”

“Not exactly,” I said carefully. “But I don’t think you’re being entirely truthful.” I raised my eyebrows. “Not even with yourself.”

Artemis narrowed her eyes. “Oh, and that’s something you feel qualified to lecture me on, Cali?”

I felt my hackles go up. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

She gave me a mean smile. “I think you know *exactly* what that’s supposed to mean.”

“Listen here,” I started, feeling anger starting to pulse through me. “You—”

“*Hey!*”

Artemis and I both looked over as Rishika strode toward us.

“What the hell is going on with you two?” she asked, stepping between us. “You’re sisters, you shouldn’t be fighting.”

I bit my lip. Rishika was right. I didn’t want to fight with Artemis. I wanted to help her. “She’s right. I’m sorry,” I murmured.

“Me too,” Artemis said quietly.

We both took a step toward each other, only to be repelled by the force keeping us apart. I was thrown back with a cry and fell backward, into the lake.

**Episode 1419**

XAVIER

As I stormed up toward the pack house, I tried to purge the image of Cali in Greyson’s arms—her mouth pressed to his—from my mind, and failed. I could feel bile rising up in the back of my throat as I yanked the back door open. What a fucking way to come home. The worst part of it was the feeling that I’d failed: I hadn’t come back in time to keep Greyson from sinking his claws into Cali.

But then I’d seen her face when she pulled away from him. She had looked so stricken—not just guilty at being caught, but really upset—and I’d known in an instant that it wasn’t too late. She wasn’t *with* Greyson. It was just the *due destini* at work.

Not that that knowledge made things any easier.

I fucking *hated* this curse.

“This way,” I muttered to Kira over my shoulder, stomping up the stairs. I pulled open one of the guest room doors and—checking to make sure it wasn’t occupied—gestured inside. “You can stay here. Make yourself at home,” I added, without any real warmth. I’d just turned to walk away when Kira spoke.

“Maybe it’s you who needs to make yourself at home, Xavier.”

I turned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Kira eyed me for a moment. “It doesn’t take a genius to see that you’re unhappy.” She shrugged. “Not that I blame you—I suppose I would be unhappy too if I came home and found my… *mate* in someone else’s arms.”

A growl rumbled up my throat, and I gripped the helmet I was still holding. “It’s complicated.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Clearly. Listen, I’m no expert when it comes to werewolf mates—and I don’t want to be—but from the little I do know, I can tell that this is messed up.”

“You think?” I snapped.

Kira took a wary step back, her eyes widening with fear. But after a moment she composed herself and closed the distance between us again. “We all have our demons.” She put a gentle hand on my arm. “I’m not trying to make things harder for you. I’m really grateful to you for giving me a place to stay. I’m not sure where I would have gone, otherwise.” She gave me a wry smile. “And if it wasn’t for you, I’d still be some vampire’s witch.”

“Yeah, well, if it wasn’t for you, I might still be some vampire’s blood bag, so I guess we owe each other,” I admitted. “Stay as long as you want, Kira. I know werewolves aren’t your first choice for roommates, but I don’t know—maybe you’ve found they’re not all so bad.”

She chuckled. “Yeah, maybe. Thanks. I’ll just stay until I figure out my next move.”

I looked down at her hand, which was still resting on my arm in a friendly way. What the hell was happening? Was I making friends? With a *witch*?

“I’ll catch you later,” I said, stepping away.

Kira nodded and disappeared into the room.

I turned down the hallway. Part of me longed for a hot shower, but I needed to talk to Cali. I paused, wondering where I might find her, but when I saw a strip of light beneath her door the question was answered for me. When I knocked, she opened the door.

“What the hell happened to you?” were the first words out of my mouth.

Cali stood in front of me, shivering, her clothes drenched, a towel wrapped around her wet hair. “I went for a dip in the lake,” she said through blue lips.

I raised my eyebrows. “In *November*? What the hell for, Cali?”

“Um.” She shook her head. “It was kind of spur of the moment.”

I was about to ask more questions when her teeth started to chatter. Without even thinking about it, I stepped into her room and pulled her close, wrapping my arms around her to warm her up. I could feel her shivering against me as I rubbed my hands up and down her arms.

She was drenched and freezing, but everything about holding her in my arms felt right. *This* was the reason I’d come back: to be with her, to comfort her, to protect her.

Cali leaned back so she could look up into my face. “I’m sorry, Xavier.”

“For what?” I asked gruffly.

She pressed her bloodless lips together. “For what you saw—me kissing Greyson.” She shook her head. “If I’d known you were coming back, I wouldn’t have been so insensitive.”

I sighed and pulled her close again. “It *did* suck,” I admitted. “But I didn’t have to be such a dick about it.”

Cali chuckled and pressed her head against my chest.

“But it’s hard,” I went on. “Where Greyson’s concerned, it’s just… not easy. But I don’t want to play the blame game. Until this *due destini* is resolved, I know there are going to be rough patches.” A wave of cold anger washed over me as the image of Cali in Greyson’s arms came back to me. “And this was one of the roughest.”

Cali sighed and leaned closer.

I shivered and looked down. My clothes were starting to get wet, absorbing the lake water dripping from hers. “You should put on dry clothes. That’s the quickest way to warm up.”

She looked down. “Yeah, of course.”

I took a step back. “I’ll wait out in the hall. I want to talk to you when you’re done.”

“Wait, Xavier, no.” Cali reached out and caught my hand, making my heart thump in my chest. She smiled a little sheepishly. “You can stay. I’ll just go change in the bathroom,” she added hastily.

I watched as she gathered her clothes and shut the bathroom door behind her, thinking how strange this all was. After all the times we’d seen each other naked, it was so weird and unfair that we were acting like it had never happened.

With a sigh of frustration, I ran a hand through my hair. When were we going to go back? When were we going to be able to embrace our relationship again? To accept that we were mates and that we belonged together?

When Greyson’s face swam into my brain, my hands clenched and I had to really concentrate to resist throwing a punch at the wall.

When Cali came out of the bathroom, she was wrapped in a fluffy blue robe, and the color was returning to her face. “You were right; I feel a lot better,” she said, toweling her hair.

I nodded wordlessly. I didn’t trust myself to speak. Looking at her, I felt like I was falling in love all over again.

Cali dropped the wet towel in the hamper and looked up. Finding my eyes on her, she gave me a sad smile and stepped closer. “I really am sorry, about earlier.”

I tried to make my shrug casual. “It was bound to happen, I guess.” I thought for a moment. “I wonder, if things were different—if Greyson was the one who had gone away—would he have come back to find you kissing me?”

Cali’s eyes widened in surprise, and she opened her mouth to answer but then stopped herself.

I immediately regretted asking the question. I knew how hard *due destini* was on her, and how difficult it was for her to be pushed and pulled between the two of us.

Cali’s gaze shifted and her eyes narrowed. “Is that *blood* on your shoulder?”

I glanced down. “Maybe. I may have been bitten by a werewolf. Or a vampire. Or both. I’m not really sure.”

“Oh my god,” Cali said, looking alarmed. “Let me see it. Take off your shirt.”

I pulled my jacket off and then tugged my shirt over my head. “It looks worse than it is,” I said, seeing the horrified look on Cali’s face.

“*Xavier*,” she said, reaching for my shoulder.

I caught her hand. “It’s already healing,” I told her. “It’s fine. There’s no need to worry.” But I didn’t let go of her hand.

She looked down at our joined hands, then up into my eyes. “It scares me to know that you could have been hurt,” she whispered.

“It shouldn’t,” I said, intertwining my fingers with hers. “I promised I’d come back to you.”

She smiled. “And you did. I’m so glad.”

I took a step closer, closing the distance between us. “Are you?”

She nodded, her eyes never leaving mine. “Yes,” she breathed.

With my free hand, I reached for the collar of her robe, running my finger along the inside of it, just barely touching her skin. Listening to the way her breath hitched did things to every part of my anatomy. “Do you remember what I said?”

“About what?” Cali asked, her breathing growing uneven as she followed the path of my fingers along her chest.

“About our last kiss.”

She looked up, wide-eyed, and our gazes locked. There was barely an inch between us, and we closed that gap in a moment as our lips met.

**Episode 1420**

MARTA

Distracted by Violet’s outburst, I stopped my incantation. When I opened my eyes, I saw Lilac, awash with light, standing in the circle. Honestly, I was a little startled—I hadn’t really thought this was going to work. But, as I watched, Lilac’s form began to flicker. In and out, like a lightbulb on the fritz.

I was going to lose him. Focusing every ounce of energy in my body, I concentrated on Lilac and started to chant again. And as I watched, Lilac’s form began to brighten and solidify. I felt like a wrung sponge, but as I looked at his solid form, I let out a deep, satisfied breath. I couldn’t believe it. After that failed exorcism, it felt good to succeed. To actually accomplish something and to do a service for someone. I looked over to Violet, who was looking at Lilac with tears in her eyes. But I knew they were tears of joy, not sadness.

“You’re here,” she breathed, looking at Lilac with wide, astonished eyes. “You’re really, *really* here? You’re not going to disappear?”

Lilac smiled at her and reached out his hand. Violet stepped into the circle and they wrapped their arms around each other.

A tear trailed down my cheek and I dashed it away, surprised at myself. I knew Violet had been longing to see her brother—she had talked of little else—but it was something else entirely to see the closeness between brother and sister. Something about it made my heart twist painfully. I thought of how lonely I’d been, trapped in Bert’s house for all those years. I hadn’t had anyone like this—anyone I’d been close to, anyone whose arms I’d just disappeared into. And if I were being honest with myself, I hadn’t had anyone like that even before I’d been trapped in the poltergeist’s house.

Lilac looked down at Violet. “Do you still remember how to waltz?” he asked, smiling.

Violet laughed, half-crying, and the two of them joined hands and began to dance, moving across the dead grass as though they were in a ballroom.

“How long can you stay?” Violet asked, fear flickering across her face.

“I have no idea,” Lilac said comfortably. “But let’s not worry about that now.”

I glanced down at the burning cinnamon. Maybe we should have gathered more, so Lilac could stay longer. I looked back up at him. He and Violet were so in sync and moved so gracefully together, I couldn’t help but smile as I watched them. I’d always loved to dance, though I’d never been an expert at it. And my own dances came from a different era entirely.

As I watched them, my eyes moved away from Violet and rested on Lilac. I’d always known that he was handsome, but now that he was no longer ghostlike—now that I was seeing him in the flesh—I couldn’t help but notice how really striking he was. It nearly took my breath away.

I glanced away. If only he wasn’t so annoying.

Violet had started to cry again. “I just missed this so much,” she was saying. “This. You being here, with me. How we would just be there for each other, to comfort each other. Make each other laugh. You’re my twin, Lilac. You’re my other half.”

Lilac nodded sadly. “I miss it too, Violet.” He smiled, clearly trying to lighten the mood. “But you have Charlie. How are things with him? I’ve been wanting to ask you.”

Violet shrugged. “I miss him.”

They were clearly having a moment, and I hated to interrupt, but I couldn’t get what had happened to Pip out of my mind, and I stepped forward. “Lilac, can you tell us anything else about what you saw in that ghost pond?”

Lilac looked at me curiously. “I didn’t realize this was a business meeting.” He looked around. “Can’t I just enjoy the moment, Marta? Talk shop later?”

“But what about the signal?” I pressed. “What could that mean?”

Lilac shook his head. “Can we please talk about this later?”

I opened my mouth to argue, but then stopped myself. I thought of the cries of the dead I’d been hearing my whole life. Their pleas to return to life, even for one moment. And now Lilac had that chance, and I was badgering him for information. I glanced down at the burning cinnamon. Time was short, and he and Violet hadn’t had this kind of chance together in a long time.

“I’m sorry,” I murmured, dropping my gaze. Sweat started dripping down my back. I was starting to feel like a third wheel—and a bitter one at that. Maybe it would better if I left the two of them alone. I started backing away, back up toward the house.

“Where are you going?”

I turned to look at Lilac, who was frowning at me. “I-I thought you two might like some space.”

Lilac shook his head. “I wouldn’t even be here if it weren’t for you, Marta.” He held out his hand. “How about joining us for a dance?”

I hesitated, looking down at his extended hand. “But there’s no music,” I said stupidly.

Lilac smiled. “You won’t need it.” He reached out further, and, because I couldn’t think of a reason why I shouldn’t, I took his hand.

When I did, I inhaled sharply. This touch was so soft, so comforting, but also electric, and it sent shivers up my arm.

Violet took my other hand and the three of us gently swayed together as the breeze blew around us.

Lilac was right—we didn’t need music. I closed my eyes as the movement lulled me into a strange kind of trance, and I leaned my head against Lilac’s shoulder. All my worries began to melt away and the tune of an old song flowed into my mind. I began to hum the melody, remembering when I’d last heard it.

It had been decades ago—before I’d met Bert. A middle school dance. I’d gone with a boy with red hair and freckles. I’d liked him, though now I couldn’t remember his name. We’d both been so nervous. His hands had been sweaty, and he’d wiped them on his woolen suit pants. I smiled. It was funny, the things I remembered.

“What’s wrong?”

Violet’s sharp question pulled me back from my reverie, and I stopped humming and opened my eyes. In an instant, I saw why she was scared. Lilac had started to flicker.

His hand slipped from mine and his smile turned wistful. “I guess that means it’s time to go back.” He looked down at the burning cinnamon. “Too bad this stuff doesn’t last forever.”

“Wait!” Violet called. “No! It’s too soon!”

I looked down. The cinnamon was nearly gone. “We can do this again,” I assured Violet, who had started to cry. “It’s just cinnamon. We can get a bucket of it next time.”

This made Lilac smile, and he caught my eye. There was moment where everything else seemed to fade and it was just the two of us, looking at each other. Or I *thought* it was a moment, but time seemed to stretch, and somehow it felt much, much longer.

Something long forgotten began to stir within me. Filled with sudden fear, I looked away, my face flushing.

“Thank you for spending time with me,” Lilac said, turning to Violet.

“Don’t go!” she wailed.

He leaned down and kissed her cheek. He had hardly pulled away when he began to fade. First just at the edges, then entirely, until he was completely gone, as though he’d never been there at all.

Violet looked around wildly. “Is he gone?”

Lilac stepped up next to me. “Tell her I’m still here. I’m not going anywhere.”

I swallowed and relayed the message to Violet, who started to cry harder. My stomach clenched—I was so frustrated that I was back to being the medium between these two. It was the only thing I was good for, apparently.

I rubbed my head, where a headache was building. It wasn’t surprising, considering how much energy this had taken out of me. I just wished there was a way for me to bring Lilac back permanently, but I had no idea how I could do that—or if it was even possible.

Violet’s sobs were starting to grow hysterical, so I put my arm around her shoulders.

“Let’s go back to the house. It’s cold out here, and it’s getting late.”

Violet nodded, though she was still shaking. “Thank you,” she said haltingly, “for bringing Lilac back.” She looked up. “Maybe we can try again?”

“We can try again,” I assured her. “Let’s go.”

Lilac stayed next to me as we walked toward the house. As we drew closer, he bent his head to mine. “I need you to do something for me.”

I looked up at him. “What?”

His eyes were grave. “Tell my sister you can’t bring me back.”

**Episode 1421**

There was something inside me—a manic desperation—that made me cling to Xavier like he was my lifeline and I was drifting out to sea. Somewhere in the back of my head, a desperate fight was going on: I *knew* kissing him was wrong, but—as he slid his tongue along mine and tangled his fingers in my hair—I just couldn’t stop myself. I had missed him so much while he’d been gone—so much more than I’d realized. And besides, I’d kissed Greyson, hadn’t I? It was only fair that I kissed Xavier, too.

Right?

I knew it was a flawed argument, and one I could never justify. It was a no-win situation, and I knew it.

*I wonder, if things were different—if Greyson was the one who had gone away—would he have come back to find you kissing me?*

I hadn’t been able to answer when Xavier had asked me the question, but I knew that if I had tried to resist Xavier’s kiss, I would have failed. But even as I leaned into him, I felt a flash of anger at myself. I *had* to teach myself to be stronger than this, or the vibe here at the pack house was going to get messy—messier than it already was.

With an enormous amount of effort, I pulled away from his arms. I opened my mouth to explain, but Xavier spoke before I could say anything.

“I know,” he said, a sharp edge to his voice. “We shouldn’t be doing this.”

“It’s just that—”

“It’s okay,” Xavier said, putting out a hand to stop me. “I get it.” He took a deep breath. “Someday, when we’re free of all this curse shit, we’ll look back on this and laugh. But right now, just being back here with you is good enough for me.” He leaned forward and pressed a kiss to my forehead.

I sighed with relief. I knew he wasn’t being completely honest—I could *feel* the tension radiating off him—but I would take what he offered, and not question it further. But there was one question that tugged at me, and I peered up at him curiously. “I have to ask—why’d you bring Kira back with you?’

He sighed stepped away from me, running a hand through his hair, and for the first time I could see how tired he really looked. “We ran into a little trouble out there, and it wasn’t safe to just send her on her way all alone. She doesn’t have anywhere else to go. She lost someone a while back, and she’s had it rough for a while.”

I looked at him, frankly surprised.

“What?” Xavier asked warily.

“Nothing,” I said, a slow smile spreading over my face. “It’s just… *nice*.”

He frowned. “What’s nice?’

“To see you caring—like, openly caring—about someone else’s well-being. It’s nice.”

Xavier rolled his eyes. “I wouldn’t read too much into it if I were you.” I laughed, and he chuckled too. “Colton would be straight-up disgusted if he could see me now. Swear you won’t tell him I’ve started to *care*.”

“Scout’s honor,” I said solemnly, holding up my right hand.

He looked at me for a moment more, then sighed again, sounding weary. “It’s the last thing I want to do, but I should go find Greyson. I need to talk to him, find out why he needed me back here so damn urgently. We’ll catch up in the morning, okay?’

I nodded.

“Unless you want me to stay,” he said, stepping closer as his mouth curved up in a wicked grin.

“*Xavier*,” I said, even as my heart started to pound.

His smirk turned into a real smile. “Kidding.” He dropped another kiss onto my forehead and turned to leave.

I hovered by the door, suddenly overcome with the reality that I’d be facing if I walked out. Artemis and the dark magic. I still didn’t know what was going on, and even as I thought about it, my throat was going dry.

I turned around. “Xavier, can I ask you a favor?”

He paused at the door. “Sure. Anything.”

“Would you keep an eye on Artemis for me?” I asked hurriedly, my face flushing.

He frowned, looking confused. “Artemis? Why?”

I thought of the figure I’d seen call forth York at the burned pyre in the swirling snow, and how I couldn’t get close to her—how I’d been *pushed* into the lake when I’d tried. I thought about all the strange, unexplainable things that had been happening and how they all seemed to link back to my sister.

I was terrified for her. For all of us.

“I’m just worried some of the pack might not trust her,” I said. I didn’t have time to get into a full explanation now. “It’d be great to know you had her back.”

He still looked a little perplexed, but he nodded. “Sure. Of course, Cali. I’ll keep an eye on her.”

“Thanks.” I smiled. Knowing he would be gave some much-needed comfort. How long it would last, I didn’t know.

As he closed the door behind him, I fell back on my bed and stared up the ceiling, a thousand thoughts chasing through my brain. I wanted to help Artemis. If only I knew *how*.

\*\*\*\*

The next morning, I woke up with a headache. I’d slept badly, tossing and turning all night, dreaming about Artemis and dark magic—not to mention some very confusing and disturbing dreams about Greyson and Xavier. At some point around dawn, all the storylines had melded together and I’d found myself running through the forest, being chased by all three of them until I tripped and fell into the ghost pond. That was when I’d woken up, head and heart pounding.

I looked around Jay and Lola’s room, where I’d decided to sleep, figuring it would be a nice, neutral location, away from all the drama with Greyson and Xavier. I pushed off the blankets and hauled myself out of bed. I might have been able to talk myself into going back to sleep, but I was too keen to talk to Big Mac, so I headed to the bathroom for a shower.

Twenty minutes later I strode toward her room, determined to ask her more questions about the potion I’d made and all its possible applications. But I paused as I passed by Artemis’s room. I couldn’t hear any voices, but I assumed Rishika was with her. It was still early, so I didn’t knock, and kept walking down the hall.

I stopped again outside the room where Greyson had put Pip—the door was open. Mace was lying next to her in the bed, asleep, but he was turned toward her, holding her hand—attentive, even in sleep. Pip looked… not well. Pale and clammy, she just looked sick, and there was a *smell*. A soft, sweet, sickly smell that permeated the room. It reminded me of the hospital rooms my mother had stayed in as she’d gotten sicker and sicker.

I shivered. I hated hospitals.

I reached for the knob and closed the door quietly, then headed down the stairs and into the kitchen, looking for Big Mac. Instead, I found Kira.

“*Oh!*” I said, surprised. “Hi.”

“Hi.” Kira smiled, looking sheepish. “I helped myself to some tea. I hope that’s okay.”

“Yeah, that’s fine,” I said, thinking quickly about what Xavier had told me, that she’d been having a hard time of things. “Help yourself. I’m going to make some coffee if you want some,” I said, reaching for the beans.

“Tea is great for me,” Kira said, wrapping her hands around her mug in the cold kitchen.

I nodded and turned my attention to the French press. The one good thing about Lola being away at Tottenville was that she wasn’t around to make her terrible coffee in the morning, and I didn’t have to pretend to enjoy it. I ground the beans and poured them into the glass pitcher, then poured boiling water from the kettle on top.

“So,” I started, glancing over my shoulder, “you’re a witch, right?”

Kira, who had settled herself at one of the bar stools ranged along the kitchen island, eyed me warily. “You know that. What do you want now?”

I pulled a mug from the cupboard before I turned to answer. “It’s about that potion—the one you gave me the recipe for. I gave it to my sister, and she had a terrible reaction to it. She threw up, had convulsions. I thought she was going to have a seizure.”

Even recounting it out loud put me back in the moment. I could see Artemis before me. *Helpless*. And I’d put her in that position. She was my sister; I had to protect her with everything I had. That’s how it worked, right?

Kira frowned. “You must have made it wrong.”

“I *didn’t*,” I insisted. “I was super careful. I followed your instructions to the letter.”

“Was the potion a light purple color?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “Just like you said. I made it right. I know I did. I just… I was hoping you’d be able to help me figure out what’s going on. Why she had that reaction.”

Kira took a thoughtful sip of her tea. “Well, the potion will wear off in time.”

I frowned, a bolt of worry flashing through me. “How much time? How long will it last?”

**Episode 1422**

LOLA

I sat in class, barely listening to the lecture, staring down at the scarred wooden desktop, half-relieved and half-disappointed that Irma hadn’t expelled me. On the one hand, if I had been expelled, I would’ve been able to go back to the pack house—to Jay, and Cali, and the rest of my friends. I would’ve been able to get go back to where I felt I really belonged.

On the other hand, being expelled was a pretty shameful way to leave school, and my midwestern upbringing was pretty hard-wired into me—I hated disappointing authority figures, and withstanding Irma’s spectacularly displeased face had nearly killed me. Besides that, I hated to think of how Jacqueline and her little hench-vamps would’ve celebrated if I’d gotten kicked out.

But there was another element to all of this that had to be considered: I was now a vampire, and that was no small thing. I couldn’t be reckless about it, or it was going to come back to bite me in the ass. I *had* to gain control over what was happening to me. The crazy shit that had happened at the pack house had been terrifying—I couldn’t think about how close I’d come to doing *actual* harm without shuddering—and I wasn’t going to go through all that again, just because I couldn’t hack it at some weirdo vampire school. I wasn’t going to attack Cali or bite Jay in some kind of vampire berserker state, just because I’d let Emmett intimidate me.

I sighed and slumped down in my chair. I just wished this whole thing was easier.

And it didn’t help at all that it was Emmett who’d bent the truth and told Irma that she shouldn’t blame me, and that I was having a tough go of it. I mean, he was right, of course—I *was* having a tough go of things—but I hated that he’d taken my side. The memory of his eyes on me in the office made me feel all sorts of things, and that only complicated matters. I wanted to *hate* him.

He’d told me to get rid of Jay! Just like that! He’d told me to *get* *rid* of my mate. To break up with him, like he was just a high school crush. Emmett either had no idea how serious a thing he was suggesting, and that I would never, *ever* consider it, or he knew *exactly* what he was suggesting, and was deliberately trying to provoke me.

But *why*? Why would he do that? Why would he provoke me and then defend me?

I dropped my head into my hands as my thoughts swirled. They were moving too fast for me to follow—chasing each other, spinning and twisting. It was making me dizzy.

At least I’d gotten to see Jay. This whole day had been a mess, but that had been the bright spot. I smiled as my face flushed and my body started to tingle, remembering the time we’d been able to spend together. It had been quality, *quality* time, and I wished he could have stayed longer. I could have gone for an encore performance. I hoped that being with him had cooled off some of the vampire heat.

The heat was driving me insane, and the last thing I needed was more complications.

I looked up as the bell rang, jolting me abruptly from my thoughts. My stomach sank as I rose from my chair and slung my bag over my shoulder. I was dreading my next appointment.

My one-on-one with Emmett.

I tried not to think about it as I wound my way through the crowded hallways, and when I made it to the greenhouse library, I stood outside the door for a moment, psyching myself up. I could *do* this. I was a modern, self-actualized woman. I could handle Emmett. Whatever attraction I had felt for him was long gone. *Should* have been long gone. *Had* to be long gone.

Now, I just needed to focus on controlling my anger. After all, he’d had no right to argue with Jay—and then that fight…

I took a deep breath, steeling myself, then reached for the door and pushed it open. “*Oh!*” I said, surprised, when instead of finding Emmett on the other side, I found Ras. I frowned and looked around, confused. “Did I… Do I have the wrong time? Did I look at the wrong day on my schedule?”

Ras waved me into the room. “No, you’re not in the wrong place. Come on in, Lola. Take a seat.”

This invitation did not alleviate my confusion. “But I had an appointment with… Where’s Emm—I mean, where’s Professor Laurence?”

Ras was sitting on the large teacher’s desk at the front of the room, and she leaned back, giving me a cool, assessing look. “Professor Laurence won’t be your one-on-one advisor for the rest of the semester, Lola.”

I stared at her, totally thrown. “What? Really? Since when? He’s on my sched—”

“Irma agreed that this change was for the best,” Ras said, speaking over me.

“She *did*?” I said. Nothing about this conversation made sense.

Ras nodded. “She did. Especially when I explained that your problems might be better handled by a more… *sympathetic* mentor.” She smiled. “A woman, like myself.”

I thought back to the warning Ras had given me about Emmett. *Don’t trust Professor Laurence*. I wondered how this change played into that warning.

Ras looked at me, her eyebrows raised. “Unless you have an objection to this?”

“No,” I said quickly. “No, not at all. This is fine. It’s probably for the best, actually. Things with Professor Lawrence were getting… um… *complicated*,” I said, my face flushing.

“I can imagine,” Ras said coolly. “Emmett Laurence has that effect on people. He can be a very complicated, confounding person.”

I eyed her. “Is that right? Is that what you were trying to warn me about when you said I shouldn’t trust him?”

Ras slapped her hand down on the desk, making me jump, and stood up. “I didn’t arrange a meeting between the two of us to discuss Professor Laurence, Lola.”

“You didn’t?” I asked.

“Of course not,” Ras said brightly. “We’re here to help you survive Tottenville.”

I could sense the shift in the room—the almost physical move she’d made to shift the subject away from Emmett—and I narrowed my eyes and pushed back against it. “But, if you don’t trust him, and Irma agrees with you, then why is Professor Laurence here at Tottenville at all? If he’s so untrustworthy that you’re telling students to be wary, why do they keep him on?”

Ras looked at me sharply, then her face cracked into a smile. “You’re a strong-minded girl, aren’t you, Lola?”

My eyes narrowed further. “And you keep dodging my questions. Answer me.”

Ras thought for a moment, then she leaned back against the desk and folded her arms across her chest. “Emmett—Professor Laurence—is extremely talented, passionate, deeply knowledgeable. He’s even caring. But he’s also very controversial in his methods.” She raised her eyebrows. “Perhaps you’ve had a chance to see that for yourself?”

“*Maybe*,” I said slowly, hesitant to say more. I wondered what exactly she meant by that, but before I could ask, Ras kept talking.

“He may draw you in with his charm—that’s all part of his gift—but you can’t let those high cheekbones and deep-set eyes fool you.”

Couldn’t I, though? He was so good-looking… And it didn’t always hurt to look, right?

*No, Lola! Snap out of it!*

“I guess not,” I said, but I had a strange feeling Ras and I were suddenly having two different conversations. I sensed that she was no longer just talking about Emmett’s trustworthiness—or lack thereof. There was something about the dangerous flash in her eyes that told me that there was something between the two of them. Maybe something that was still going on.

For a moment Ras seemed to sink into a reverie, her dark gaze turning distant. It was strange, but I didn’t speak, and after just a moment she snapped out of it and stood straight again, her eyes alert and focused on me once again.

“So,” she said, clapping her hands together, “tell me about how you plan on dealing with your vampire heat.”

My face flushed, and I had just opened my mouth to tell her that I didn’t really want to talk about it when, behind me, the door burst open.

Emmett came charging into the room, his normally coiffed hair disheveled and his shirt partially untucked, as though he’d just been sprinting. He looked around wildly at the two of us.

“What the *hell* do you think you’re doing?” he barked at Ras. “Do you think you can get away with stealing my student?” Then he turned his glare on me, his eyes ablaze with fury. “Was this *your* idea?”

**Episode 1423**

AVA

I looked around the small room, then out the window at the grey autumn sky. This was how I spent most of my time—in this room, sitting on the bed, staring out the window, and wishing I was somewhere—*anywhere*—else. I stayed up here because I hated being downstairs, among the pack. I knew no one wanted me here, and no one went out of their way to keep that a secret from me. But what choice did I have?

I couldn’t leave. Iñigo would track me down the minute I stepped out of this place if I didn’t deliver the Fae I’d promised to him. He’d made that clear enough when we’d spoken down by the lake.

My hands curled into tight fists as a wave of anger washed over me. I was still pissed about that whole encounter—that Iñigo had lured me down there, and that Cali had spied on us. If she’d managed to see who I’d been talking to, it would have been over for me. The entire pack would have turned on me then and there.

Thankfully, I was an excellent liar and had been able to cover. But the central problem remained, and I worried it like a hangnail as I stared out the window: Iñigo wanted the Fae I’d promised him, and he was growing tired of waiting. I wouldn’t be able to put him off for much longer. He kept pressing me to invite him into the pack house, but I was scared, not stupid. Inviting him in would be suicidal. If the pack didn’t kill me for it, he would. The pack house was the one place where he couldn’t get me, even if the Redwoods hated me for being here.

Hatred, I could deal with. I had no desire to die again.

I rubbed my forehead, feeling a twinge of pain behind my eyes. I had no idea what Iñigo was going to do when he discovered I was going to be one Fae short, now that Maren was gone. I hadn’t even noticed when she’d left, but after a few days it had occurred to me I hadn’t seen her bratty kid running around anywhere and I’d asked Sage, who told me she’d taken off. So she was gone—who knows where—and I was down one body. At least I still had Cali, Artemis, Astrid, Torin, and Cali’s mom to deliver. Iñigo was just going to have to be content with five Fae. Five was still more than he’d ever be able to come across on his own.

Now I just had to figure out how to get them to Iñigo—or how to bring Iñigo to them. Either way, I was excited about the prospect. The thought of ridding my life of Cali was enough to keep me from running away. Because with Cali gone, my path to a life with Xavier became a lot easier.

My stomach rumbled, and I put my hand over it, trying to remember the last time I’d eaten. That was the hardest part. I usually crept down in the middle of the night to eat, but sometimes I fell asleep and never got around to it. I flinched when my stomach rumbled again then tightened in pain, and I reluctantly swung my legs off the bed. I couldn’t wait, so I was just going to have to grit my teeth and hope I didn’t run into too many Redwoods.

Downstairs, I had just rounded the corner into the kitchen when I ran into the last person I expected to see. “*Xavier*,” I breathed.

His eyes widened in surprise for just a moment. An instant later, he lunged forward and slammed me against the wall so hard the mirror next to me fell to the ground, shattering into a million tiny shards.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he demanded.

My heart was thundering in my chest as a thousand thoughts raced through my mind. “I didn’t know you were back,” I said, taking in everything about him—his tousled hair, the stubble of a beard on his sharp jaw, the smell of the road still lingering on him beneath the fresh smell of soap, the snarl on his lips…

His eyes narrowed. “It’s my house, Ava. I don’t have to inform you of my arrival.” He tightened his grip on my shoulders. “What’s your excuse?”

The drumbeat of my pulse hammered in my ears, but when I spoke I tried to sound as casual as possible. “Ask your brother. He’s the one who brought me.”

Xavier laughed mirthlessly. “Nice try.” His eyes—already dark—grew leaden. “I should kill you right now.”

“It’s true. I did invite her here.”

Xavier whipped his head around to see that Greyson was standing behind him, eyeing him coolly. He gave me a hard shove, and I stumbled back against the wall.

“*This* is what you brought me back here for?” Xavier snarled, turning on Greyson, jerking his head in my direction. “Is this some kind of a sick joke?”

Greyson’s eyes flicked to me, then back to his brother. “Maybe we should go outside, where we can talk.”

Xavier glared at his brother for a moment, seething. Then he turned to me. “I don’t know what you’re up to, but I know it’s something. Don’t bother unpacking your things—you won’t be staying here long.” Without waiting for a response, he followed Greyson through the kitchen and out the back door.

I took a deep breath and ran a hand through my hair. I wanted Xavier back—so much it was like a physical need—but I knew it was going to be difficult. It was going to take time, and very careful planning, but ultimately, he was going to want me back as well. I was *sure* of it.

As long as he didn’t kill me first.

The encounter with Xavier had made me lose my appetite, but I knew I should eat something, so I wrenched open a cupboard door, looking for a granola bar or anything I could take back up to my room, but then a familiar voice made me freeze.

“*Ava?*”

I spun around. “Kira?” I gasped, shocked.

Iñigo’s witch was standing in the doorway, staring at me. The pieces began to fall into place. Kira had helped Xavier escape from Iñigo—they’d been together when I’d met them in the woods. He must have brought her here.

Kira raised her eyebrows, looking as surprised to see me as I was to see her. “You’re about the last person I expected to see.” She looked at me warily and didn’t come any closer. “What are you doing here? Did Iñigo realize that you flip sides the minute it becomes advantageous for you?”

I clenched my jaw, anger seething through me. “You don’t know what you’re talking about, witch,” I bit out. “And you’d just better stay out of my way, you got me?”

Kira eyed me for another moment. “Fine by me,” she said, and walked away.

I leaned both hands on the marble countertop, breathing deeply. This damn pack house. There were too many people here. This was why I hated coming downstairs. You never knew who was going to pop out of the woodwork next.

A thought flashed through my mind, and I looked up quickly, in the direction Kira had disappeared. Was Kira’s appearance here so easily explained? Or was it something more? Kira had been with Iñigo for a long time—much longer than I had. Maybe Iñigo had something to do with her being here now. I wouldn’t have been surprised. Iñigo didn’t like to lose people he found useful.

In any case, I was going to have to keep an eye on that witch.

“I just think something traditional would be nice,” a voice said, from down the hall. “After the month we’ve had, it’d be nice to do something old-fashioned—”

“*That’s* the word!” another voice added. I recognized it as belonging to Orla, Cali’s mom. “*Old fashioned!* We should do something more modern! Sushi!”

“*Sushi* for Thanksgiving! Are you *crazy*?” the first voice answered. It was Cali’s dad, Tom.

They were getting closer, and I saw that Torin was with them.

Torin shrugged. “I don’t care what we do, as long as there’s also stuffing and mashed potatoes. I just love carbs. Like, extra carby carbs.”

I rolled my eyes and continued my search for a granola bar. Thanksgiving was the very least of my concerns, and I was disticintly uninterested in their menu planning discussion.

“I think it’s going to be great,” Torin said as they came into the kitchen and settled themselves at the long kitchen table. They didn’t seem to notice me. “Out in the yard, under the stars, drinks in hand, not a care in the world.”

“That will be nice,” Orla agreed.

“Oh, let’s get some of those outdoor space heaters,” Tom added, “so we don’t have to hurry in when it gets cold.”

“That’s a good idea!” Orla smiled at him.

I gripped the energy bar as my heart thumped. *Outside*. All of them. Including the Fae. That meant that I wouldn’t have to invite Iñigo into the house. He could just come and get them—they’d be his for the taking.

I looked at the three party planners.

This was going to be their lastThanksgiving.

**Episode 1424**

GREYSON

“What the *fuck*, Greyson?” Xavier demanded the moment he stepped out onto the deck. “What the *hell’s* your problem, man? Are you just trying to fuck with me, or what?”

“Xavier, no—” I started, but he kept talking, like he couldn’t hear me.

“Then why the *hell* would you do this? Why the hell is *she* here?”

“It felt like the safer option,” I said, raising my voice.

“Safer than *what*?” Xavier snapped. “You know what she’s capable of!”

“Yeah, I do. And this felt safer than letting her out of our sight.” I shook my head. “Look, I know she’s trouble, but at least we can keep an eye on her if she’s here. If we turn her loose, then she’ll be out there, just roaming around, and who knows what kind of havoc she could cause?”

Xavier strode away from me, down the length of the deck. “This is such a stupid-ass move, Greyson. Not to mention a totally fucked up thing to spring on me. You *called* me. You couldn’t have mentioned this to me before I got back?”

I blew an angry breath out my nose.

“Listen,” I said, fighting to keep my voice steady. “You don’t have to agree with everything I do, but I am the Alpha, and I’m not required to get approval from you for my decisions. You weren’t even here, Xavier. You were off on your own little road trip. It’s done, okay? The decision has been made. Just deal with it.”

Xavier paced away, shaking his head in disgust. “Unbelievable,” he muttered.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. Have you been listening? Ava is the *least* of our problems right now, man. There are much more pressing problems that need attention.” When Xavier still refused to turn to look at me, I lost my temper. “Do you really think I asked you to come all the way back here just to shove Ava in your face?”

Xavier spun around. “I wouldn’t put it past you.”

I gritted my teeth, every muscle in my body tense, but reminded myself that I was trying to keep this conversation on track. “We’re being attacked by revenants, Xavier. Cali almost drowned in a pond filled with ghosts. Pip is in there,” I said, jerking a thumb toward the house, “half-dead, and Big Mac thinks Artemis might be dangerous. But, yeah, if you think it’s more important, let’s sit down and talk about your strained relationship with Ava.”

Xavier glared at me but didn’t respond. His jaw was working as he thought through what I’d just said, and I wondered which way he was going to tip. He was unpredictable at the best of times, and he could go either way—he could realize the urgency of the situation we were facing and stop arguing… or not.

I took a deep breath. “I was really hoping we could work together to protect the pack.”

Xavier eyed me. “And what about Cali?” he asked after a moment.

“What about her?” I asked, a little annoyed at the question. “I told you, she’s fine.”

He narrowed his eyes. “You were kissing her.”

I groaned. Not this again.

“You waited until I was gone and then you swooped right in.”

“I didn’t *swoop*,” I snapped. “I don’t *swoop*. I didn’t force myself on Cali, man. You know I would never do that.”

“You do seem to press your advantage,” Xavier said coldly, pacing toward me.

“What the hell is *that* supposed to mean?” I asked, just as coldly, standing my ground.

“Cali gets into trouble and you’re right there, just when she’s scared and vulnerable. Is that how you like it?” Xavier drew closer and shoved my shoulder.

I stumbled back a step. “Don’t fucking touch me,” I growled.

“Or what?” Xavier asked, pushing me again.

I took a deep breath, trying to control my temper. I didn’t want to engage. I knew he was just blowing off steam, but Xavier was really starting to piss me off. If he wanted to fight, I would give him a fucking fight.

“We’re wasting time,” I snarled. “We should be dealing with the real problems facing the pack, not this stupid shit.”

Xavier clenched his fists, and from the look on his face, I knew he wasn’t listening. He was mad, and from the looks of things, he was looking to take things to the next level.

I was just about to let him when the back door slid open.

“What the hell is wrong with you two?” Big Mac strode out onto the deck and stepped between us, glaring.

“Get out of the way,” Xavier growled.

The witch didn’t move. “You Evers brothers need to grow up and get over yourselves,” she said, clearly disgusted.

I stepped back. I was mad as hell, but I was glad Big Mac had shown up. I was on the brink of losing my temper, and that was never good for an Alpha. Bad things could happen.

Xavier—who looked less pleased with the interruption—shot an angry glare at Big Mac. “What the hell do you want? What are you doing out here?”

She returned his glare with one of her own. “Before I was called upon to referee your pissing contest, I had just come out for some much-needed air. But now that you mention it…” She turned to me. “I wanted to tell you that Pip isn’t better. I just checked on her, and she looks the same. Worse, maybe.”

I ran a hand through my hair with a sigh. “Any ideas about what we can do for her?”

“No,” Big Mac said sharply. “And Mace keeps asking me the same thing. He’s hounding me, actually. Trying to get me to help her. That’s why I came out here. I’ve told him there’s nothing I can do, but apparently, he doesn’t believe me. You need to get him off my back until we can do another ritual tonight.”

“All right, all right,” I said.

“Because if you don’t”—she gave me a beady stare—“I swear, I’m going to turn him into a salamander.”

“Don’t do that.” I shook my head sadly. “I feel for the guy. I know this must be really hard on him. But I’ll talk to him.”

Big Mac glared. “See that you do.”

Leaving Xavier to fume outside, I headed in to find Mace. It wasn’t hard. He was sitting dutifully next to Pip’s bed, where he’d been since they’d arrived. When I walked into the room, I was momentarily shocked: the guy looked terrible. He had dark circles beneath his eyes, a thick growth of beard along his jaw, and his gaze was hollow as he stared at Pip’s closed eyes. He looked worn out and frayed.

“Hey, man,” I said quietly, stepping into the room.

“Hey,” Mace said, looking up.

“Listen, I know you’re worried, but you have to give Big Mac a break. She’s trying to help, but there’s only so much she can do.”

Mace looked at me a moment, then sighed. “I know, I know. I’m sorry. It’s just hard, you know?” he said, his voice cracking. “When you’re just helpless to help the one you love.”

“Hey,” I said, trying to make my voice encouraging, “we’re going to try again tonight, okay?”

Mace nodded and reached for Pip’s hand. He didn’t look back at me, and I left the room, shutting the door behind me.

In the hallway, I took a deep breath. There were a million thoughts chasing each other through my brain, making it all but impossible to concentrate on just one of them. I needed to clear my head if I was going to be able to concentrate. I wanted to go for a run, but I didn’t like the idea of leaving the pack house. Or leaving Xavier alone with Cali.

The weight room downstairs would have to do.

I stopped into my room and changed into my gym clothes, then headed downstairs and racked the weights on the squat press. I added extra weights, which was my trick for clearing my mind, but it just didn’t seem to be working.

Try as I might, I just couldn’t stop thinking about all of it: Mace and Pip, the revenants, the ghost pond, Artemis, Xavier, Ava, and—most of all—the connection I’d felt with Cali when we’d kissed. And I just kept returning to one thought: *If Xavier hadn’t come back, where would it have led?*

With a rumbling growl, I racked weights on the bench press, adding more than was strictly wise. I pushed through the pain searing through my shoulders as I finished my first set. The second set always felt easy, but by the third set my muscles were screaming. As I pushed up the tenth rep, my eyes widened as I faltered and, just as the weight bar started to slip from my hand, I felt my consciousness slipping away.

**Episode 1425**

CHARLIE

The next day was hunter team-building, which everyone was really excited about.

“Ropes courses, trust falls, that thing where we help each other get over a really high wall!” Zachery had enthused as we’d headed down to the woods. “Doesn’t that sound great, Charlie?”

“Great,” I’d said distractedly.

Under different circumstances, it might have sounded like fun to me, too, but I wasn’t in the mood to help anyone here over any walls. I hadn’t had a chance to respond to Violet yet, and I was kicking myself—*why* had I told Sophie that I didn’t have a girlfriend? And I hadn’t even meant it!

I shook my head as I spotted a team member on a tricky section of the rope bridge. There was also a part of me that knew that I hadn’t responded to Violet because I had no idea what exactly I *should* say. The truth was that lying about having a girlfriend seemed like the best way to keep a low profile, which was my goal here. The last thing I wanted was people asking questions about Violet or prying into my life at all.

But… what did that lie look like to Violet? Did it make me look like a coward to her? The only gossip this place seemed to have was about who was and wasn’t single. I couldn’t risk saying anything about Violet again, though—by name or not. I knew Romilly was watching me like a hawk. If I so much as breathed Violet’s name, my mother would probably hear about it.

“*Heads up!*” a voice called.

I looked up just in time to barely catch a perky little redhead just as she did a trust fall into my arms.

“You okay?” I asked, grabbing onto her before she hit the ground.

“Just fine,” she giggled, and hopped out of my arms.

I sighed and shook my hair out of my eyes. I needed to get a grip.

Zachery came bounding over, breathing hard. “Hey, good news.”

“What’s that?” I asked grimly.

He grinned. “I’ve been listening, man, and you’ve become the talk of the town.”

I bristled. “What are you talking about?”

“Rumors are flying. You’re all anyone can talk about. You should take advantage of it while it lasts.”

I shook my head with a groan. Why couldn’t these nosy teenagers just leave me the hell alone?

“Hey.” Zachery gave my shoulder a push. “It’s your turn.”

With a sigh, I headed up the unsteady rope ladder to the narrow wooden platform eight feet above the forest floor. The idea was that we were just supposed to turn around and fall backward, trusting that our team was in place to catch us. But as I turned, I heard a voice that made my blood run cold.

“Hey, newbie.”

I looked over my shoulder and saw Chad just below me, in place to do the catch. I hesitated, unnerved by his satisfied smirk.

He beckoned me to fall, but it was almost a taunt. I could feel everyone’s eyes on me, wondering what I was going to do.

“Screw it,” I muttered to myself, and, turning my back, crossed my arms across my chest and fell backward.

To my immense surprise—and relief—I felt Chad’s arms close around me before I hit the ground. But the relief only last for a second—and so did the catch. Holding on just long enough to slow down my inertia, Chad let me go and I crashed to the ground in an undignified heap.

I groaned and looked up, a bit dazed, into Chad’s face.

He was looking down at me, and the smirk was back on his face. “Oops. My bad.” Then he leaned in close, speaking quietly so only I could hear him. “I don’t trust your kind.”

My heart pounded painfully. What the hell did that mean, *your kind*? Did Chad *know*? I ignored the pounding pain in my arm and hip as panic started to race through my bloodstream. A terrifying thought occurred to me—either Chad had seen what happened at the pond and knew I was a werewolf, or someone told him. And the only person who could have done that was…

*Sophie*.

I looked around, searching for her. She’d sworn to me she wouldn’t tell anyone. Had she been lying?

Before I could locate her in the melee around me, Sergeant Pepperdine came striding over, a grim look on his face.

“Chad!” he barked, “I saw you let a teammate fall. You have to concentrate.”

Chad shrugged. “Sorry. I didn’t realize how heavy Charlie was. I’ll be better prepared for the impact next time.” He shot me a smirk and headed off to the vertical wall.

Sergeant Pepperdine held out a rough hand to help me up. “You all right, son?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I said quickly, more embarrassed and worried than anything else.

“All right, then,” Sergeant Pepperdine said gruffly. “Get back to it.”

The rest of the drills felt as though they lasted forever, but when they were finally over everyone headed toward the cafeteria for dinner, laughing and talking. I walked with the group as far as campus, then broke off and headed back to the dorms. When I got to my room, I was glad to find it completely empty. I needed to talk to Violet. I had to explain to her why I’d lied about not having a girlfriend.

“*Charlie!*” she said, answering after the first ring.

“Hey, I’m so glad you answered. I’m so sorry, Sunshine. I have to tell you about that whole thing about not having a girlfriend. I only said it because I didn’t want a bunch of questions about you and who you were and where you live and if you know I’m a hunter and all that,” I said quickly. “I was just worried about letting it slip that we were more than girlfriend and boyfriend—that we were mates and that you were a werewolf and everything. And I knew if I said anything about you, it would get right back to my mom. I just… panicked, I guess. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Violet said. “I get it.”

“You do?” I asked. I wasn’t so sure I believed her.

“Yeah, it makes sense,” she said. “But it wasn’t easy to hear.”

My heart lurched. “I know, I’m sorry. I love you.”

“I love you, too,” she said. “But, Charlie, the craziest stuff has been happening here. Lilac came back! Marta was able to get him to come back so I could see him, touch him! It was *amazing*!”

“Wow!” I said, impressed. “That *is* amazing. Is it permanent?”

“No,” she said, her voice getting sad. “I’m hoping we can do it again really soon, and figure out a way to make it permanent.”

“That’s great,” I said. “I know that’s something you’ve been wanting for a really long time.” I sat down on my cot. “Have you had a chance to look at flights yet?”

“Not yet,” Violet admitted. “But I’m going to, really soon.”

I was disappointed, but also kind of relieved.

“It might be for the best, “I said. “I want to see you, but bringing you out here right now might be too risky.”

“Oh.”

Violet and I were both quiet for a moment.

“I guess I should—”

“Yeah,” I said. “Goodnight.”

I looked down at the ended call. I’d hoped talking to Violet would help ease my anxiety, but it hadn’t. In fact, I felt worse because I hadn’t been totally honest with her. I hadn’t told her about what had happened at the lake. But if I had, it only would’ve worried her. And until I knew for sure if Chad knew I was a werewolf, I was just going to keep it to myself.

I stared at the wall ahead of me, thinking hard. It was possible that Chad didn’t know anything—that he was just being a dick. Actually, *that* part was much more than just a possibility.

There were footsteps outside in the hall. Was dinner over already? A few people were headed back to their rooms. My door opened and Reggie, Aisha, and Zachery spilled in.

“—and I’m telling you, the noodle soup is way worse than the barbecue chicken,” Reggie was saying, holding a plate.

“No way,” Aisha said, shaking her head. “At least the soup is *edible*. That chicken is like eating a rubber doorstop.”

Zachery laughed. “I hope the food at the dance will be better.”

“Let’s hope the cafeteria isn’t catering,” Reggie said.

“What dance?” I asked.

They all looked over.

“How do you not know about the biggest social event of camp?” Reggie asked in disbelief. “The dance is practically the whole reason I came up here. Like, where have you been?”

“The dance is the one time we’re allowed to act like regular people, you know?” Aisha said. “Where we don’t have to run around all muddy, trying to stake imaginary vamps. And last year, someone spiked the lemonade.” She grinned. “That was a blast.”

“I can’t believe it,” Zachery said, looking between Reggie and Aisha, wide-eyed. “All this time I thought the dance was just urban legend.”

“Oh, it’s real,” Reggie said, clapping Zachery on the shoulder. “But what you really want to watch out for is the music. Because you want to start out with a bop, but then it has to get slow and sexy by the end of the night, so you can make your move.”

Aisha rolled her eyes. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Hey, I’ll have you know I’ve already asked Natasha Fitch,” Reggie said proudly.

“About time,” Aisha said. “You’ve been horning after her for ages.”

Reggie shook his head. “And which of your many, many hookups are you going to bring?”

Aisha hesitated for just a moment, then shot a glance at me. “I’m not sure yet.”

I swallowed, suddenly nervous. I really hoped she wasn’t thinking of asking me. And what was this anyway? Middle school again?

“Anyway…” Aisha shrugged, grinning. “Who says I have to choose just one? Maybe I’ll invite them all!”

Reggie rolled his eyes and turned to me. “What about you, action hero? Who’s going to be your date?”

“Um, I-I…” I stammered. I was wondering how I could possibly respond to this when I felt a hand land on my arm.

Sophie had come in through the open dorm room door, and she smiled at Reggie. “I’m Charlie’s date.”

**Episode 1426**

GREYSON

I opened my eyes and shoved the weights off my chest. They dropped to the floor with a crash that rattled through me. I sat up, breathing hard and massaging the spot on my chest that would probably turn into a bruise sooner rather than later. I was going to have to be more careful in the future.

Leaving the weights on the floor, I headed upstairs for some water and a breath of air to clear my head. But when I reached the top of the basement steps, I stopped, confused. This wasn’t the pack house, but I still knew where I was. It was a house I knew. I’d been here before.

I stood in the quiet kitchen, looking around. It was unusually quiet—where was everyone?

As if in answer to my question, I heard the honk of a horn from outside.

I opened the front door and stepped outside onto the porch, squinting into the bright morning sunlight. My car was in the circular driveway, and Cali stuck her head out the driver’s side window.

“Hurry up, Greyson! We don’t want to be late for Sabine’s first day!”

“Come on, Daddy!” a tiny voice squeaked from the back seat.

I smiled and hurried over. “Coming.”

When I slid into the car, Cali leaned over and kissed me.

“Hey,” she said quietly, looking up into my eyes. Then she leaned back in her seat again, all business. “Remember, we’re picking up Sabine early today.”

“Why?” I asked, as Cali pulled out of the driveway.

“Oh, you remember. It’s the whole transitional thing for the first week, so everyone can acclimate properly.”

“I want to acclimate properly, Dad,” Sabine said.

I turned to look into the back seat and found a pair of somber grey eyes staring back at me. “You will, I promise,” I assured her.

“Will everyone be nice?” she asked, still looking worried. “All the kids.”

“Of course, sweetheart,” Cali said, looking into the rearview mirror to catch Sabine’s eye and give her a reassuring smile. “You’re going to make lots of friends.”

I looked over at Cali and recognized the slight crease between her brows, so I gave her knee a reassuring squeeze. She smiled back at me, and it occurred to me that saying goodbye this morning might be harder on us than on Sabine.

When we got to school, we joined the flood of parents escorting their kids to the brightly decorated door of the kindergarten classroom.

The sweetly smiling teacher was standing at the door, and she bent to welcome Sabine and press a nametag sticker to her sweater. Then she stood. “Say goodbye to Mom and Dad.”

Sabine waved at us with a smile, and I watched her walk inside, my heart twisting painfully in my chest.

“God, why is this so hard?” Cali whispered, wiping a tear from her cheek as we headed back to the parked car.

“I don’t know,” I said, taking her hand. “Doesn’t feel quite fair that it should be so painful, does it?”

Cali shook her head with a shaky laugh. “No. God, Greyson, she’s just growing up so fast.”

“I know,” I said, opening Cali’s car door.

We were quiet as she started back home, but as she pulled to a stop at a red light, she leaned over and pressed a kiss to my lips.

“Eyes on the road, ma’am,” I murmured, kissing her back.

She smiled against my lips, and when the driver behind her honked for her to move through the green light, she accelerated through the intersection.

“Cali,” I said, leaning back, serious now. “You need to look forward.”

Her only response was to grab the back of my head and pull me closer, kissing me again.

Suddenly, inertia and gravity seemed to reverse course and the air was filled with the wrenching, screeching sound of twisting metal. In an instant Cali was jerked away from me in a horrific, jarring impact, and I watched in slow motion as she sailed through the shattering front windshield before everything went black.

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I opened my eyes and shoved the weights off my chest. They dropped to the floor with a crash that rattled through me. I sat up, breathing hard and massaging the spot on my chest that would probably turn into a bruise sooner rather than later.

Looking around, my heart beating hard, it took me a moment to realize I was still down in the basement gym. The one in the pack house.

I got to my feet. I was unsteady and still dizzy, but relieved that at least no one had been around to see me black out—*again*. I bent to pick up the weights from the floor, and as I re-racked them, I realized I was lucky they hadn’t crushed my windpipe when I’d passed out.

Thinking back to the dream, I felt cold and sweaty, like I’d just been sick. It was the brutal contrast of it that rattled me most. It had started out so happily, giving me everything I wanted—the family I dreamed of—until the car accident had ripped it all away.

Gripping the weights, I took a steadying breath, trying to calm my nerves. What the hell did it mean? Was it just a dream, or was it something more? Was it a sign?

My heartrate ticked up again when I heard frantic steps on the stairs, and some wild part of me wondered if it was the three witch sisters, coming to warn me that my time was running out. But I breathed a sigh of relief when Cali swung around the corner and into the room, looking around in distress.

“What’s going on? Are you okay? I saw you come down here, and then I heard a crash.”

I stared at her for a moment, trying to focus. “You were worried about me?”

She stared back. “Of course I was!” She took a step toward me and reached out, brushing her fingers gently down my cheek. But then, like my skin had burned her, she yanked her hand back. “Are you okay?”

“Of course,” I said automatically, though it wasn’t at all true. I was exhausted, as though the dream had sucked all the energy out of me. “Well,” I amended, “maybe I should go lie down for a minute.”

I needed to get it together. The last thing I needed was for the pack to see me like this.

I took a step toward the door and—in an instant—Cali was next to me, slipping her arm around my waist. I appreciated the support, especially from her, and I smiled and settled my arm across her shoulders.

Cali looked up, alarmed. “Greyson, what’s wrong?”

I shouldn’t have been surprised that she could read me so well, but I always was. “I had another dream.”

Cali sucked in a breath. “From the witches? What happened?”

“It was kind of like the others,” I started, feeling hesitant. “At least at first. We were married, had a little girl. But then there was a car accident…” I stopped, watching the dawning horror on Cali’s face. “You didn’t experience it, too?”

She shook her head. “No,” she whispered. “Nothing.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. “That’s something. It was terrifying.”

She pressed her fingers to the bridge of her nose. “*Why* is this happening? With everything else going on, why you have to be haunted like this, too?”

“I don’t know,” I said gently. “I wish I did. I wish I had an easy answer.”

Cali gripped me more tightly. “Are these witches just playing some kind of game with us? Trying to torture us or something?”

“I don’t know.” I sighed heavily. “I really don’t.”

“I mean, what’s the *point* of all this?” she asked, sounding angry now. “Is it just for fun?”

I pulled her close—it was nice to feel her body against mine. “I wish I could make this better, Cali, I really do. I wish I could do something. I hate to see you suffering like this.”

She looked up at me. “You’re suffering, too, in case you didn’t notice. Don’t you want this to be over?”

I thought of Cali’s body jerking away from mine, sailing through the windshield as glass rained down, the sound of the frame of the car as it twisted and contorted, and I shuddered. “God yes, I want this to end.” I took a deep breath. “But until it does, we just have to hang in there. This sucks, but I have to deal with the pack’s problems first.”

“Greyson,” Cali started, her dark eyes flashing mutinously. “I—”

“I’m the *Alpha*,” I told her, pulling her close. “It’s my responsibility.”

She took a frustrated breath. “I know that. But when will the pack’s problems be over? They seem never-ending.”

I smiled weakly. “Soon, I hope. But we need to be patient. These are unprecedented times, and it’s going to take as long as it takes to get through this.”

When Cali looked at me, there was fear in her eyes. “Greyson, what if it’s never over? Are you really willing to wait forever?”

**Episode 1427**

I held my breath, waiting for Greyson’s response, but he didn’t answer my question. He kept his arm around me and gave my waist a squeeze, his eyes filled with love.

“I don’t know if I could,” I admitted, though saying the words caused me almost physical pain.

“If you could what?” he asked quietly.

“If I could keep waiting like this. I just don’t know if I’m strong enough, Greyson.”

“I don’t know if we have much choice,” he said, his voice rough with emotion.

Frustration flooded through me like a wave. “That’s just it, though, isn’t it? I’ve never had a choice! This whole *due destini* thing has robbed me of any choice I might have had. I don’t have any agency—I’m just stuck in limbo!” I raged, pulling away from him and striding across the small weight room. I was venting, I knew, but I couldn’t stop myself. “And by the way,” I said, rounding on him, “I heard what happened between you and Xavier. Are you two going to keep coming to blows because of me? Have you two ever stopped and thought about how shitty that makes *me* feel?”

Greyson looked grave. “How did you hear about *that*?”

I rolled my eyes. “You were on the back deck, Greyson, and you weren’t exactly quiet about it.”

He sighed and ran a hand through his light hair. “We didn’t come to blows. Not exactly, anyway. Things are tense, Cali, but I don’t want to fight my brother.”

I rubbed my head, the guilty feeling that was always with me nearly overwhelming me. “I know you don’t, but I also know how quickly tempers can spiral out of control with you two.”

Greyson stepped forward, took my face gently in his hands, and pressed a kiss to my forehead. “I promise you, if things do get worse between Xavier and me, I will never throw the first punch.”

I smiled weakly and leaned into him, the tension in my shoulders relaxing just for a moment. “Thank you. I believe you. I’ve always admired your restraint. I know that Xavier is a lot more impulsive—especially when it comes to his feelings for me. He’s always been like that…” I shook my head. “I don’t know what I’m doing. I shouldn’t be talking to you about him.”

There was a sharp knock on the doorframe, and Big Mac stuck her head in. “Hey. Get your asses into gear, both of you. It’s time to do the exorcism.”

I closed my eyes and shook my head in disbelief. “Oh my god, this is my life.” But I opened them again when I felt Greyson take my hands.

His eyes were on me. “Let’s promise each other that as soon as the threat of the revenants is over, we’ll deal with all this dream stuff and the witches and everything else that comes with them. Deal?”

I smiled, and—reaching up on tiptoe—pressed a kiss to his cheek. “Deal.”

As we headed up the basement steps, I could feel myself growing increasingly tense and edgy. I looked around as we walked into the living room, wondering if the force that had knocked me into the lake was going to be as strong with Pip as it had been with Artemis.

I remembered what Kira had said—that the spell conjured by the potion she’d given me would wear off in time. If the cause of this unseen force was the spell, then I was praying it had already worn off. But, not knowing for sure—and not looking for any more unexpected dips in frigid lakes—I lingered by the doorway, near the back of the room, just to be safe. Pip was lying on the couch, pale and still as ever, with Mace by her side. Everyone else had already assembled: Marta was standing nearby, her arms crossed, and Big Mac looked around, her eyes narrowed.

“Now, remember,” Big Mac warned everyone, glaring around, “do exactly as I say.” She eyed me, loitering near the back of the room. “Are you going to be able to hold the candle this time? *Properly?*”

“Um…” I felt my face flush. I didn’t want to explain my reasons, especially not in front of everyone, so I tried to keep it simple. “I’m just kind of nervous about messing it up—maybe you could get someone else to do it this time?”

Big Mac sighed, sounding irritated. “It needs to be a Fae, and there aren’t a lot of you around. Someone go get Orla, and be quick about it.”

“I’ll go,” I said, pushing off the wall and hurrying out.

I found my mom in the kitchen, chatting with my dad at the kitchen table over tea.

“Big Mac needs you,” I said. “She needs a Fae to hold the candle for the exorcism thing for Pip. Can you come?”

“Of course,” my mom said, getting up quickly.

She followed me back to the quietly tense living room, and when we walked in, I was startled to see that Xavier had arrived.

He caught my eye as I entered and smiled, motioned for me to join him.

I hesitated, unsure what to do. How would it make Greyson feel if I did? But Xavier’s eyes were on me, so I stepped toward him.

After a moment, I felt someone step up next to me, and I looked up to see that Greyson had joined me on my other side.

I swallowed hard, my head spinning. It was happening again—I was stuck between the two of them. I sighed as they both leaned incrementally closer to me, heat radiating from them. I supposed there were worse things that could happen to a girl.

Big Mac cleared her throat and stepped up next to Pip. She took a deep breath, ready to begin the exorcism.

I felt a thrill of fear and—instinctively—reached for Xavier’s hand.

He didn’t look over, but he gave it a gentle squeeze. The gesture warmed my heart… for a moment. And then I felt a stab of guilt, and reached for Greyson’s hand on my other side.

Big Mac handed the candle to my mom and solemnly lit it. “Do not let the flame die, under any circumstances,” she warned.

Yeah, I remembered from last time.

I looked around, seeing frosty clouds of breath hovering above everyone as they exhaled, though the room wasn’t remotely cold. A shiver ran down my spine as the candle flickered. A deep, feral rumbling radiated through the floorboards, but its source was deeper than the basement, deeper than the foundations of the house, or the bedrock beneath it. It was something below all of us. I looked down, wondering if the tendrils would reappear on the floor.

A sudden breeze gusted through the room, though there was no window or door ajar, and the candle guttered again.

Then, without warning, my hands were ripped from Greyson’s and Xavier’s and I was thrown backward against the far wall with tremendous, lung-crushing force. It was the same force I’d felt in Artemis’s room and down at the lake, and it was pressing hard on my chest, stealing the breath from my lungs.

Dimly, I saw both Xavier and Greyson react—jumping into action as they lunged for me—but somehow I knew they wouldn’t be able to touch me. I felt a deep, cold dread creeping through me like mold. Something was wrong—terribly, terribly wrong. I had to tell Big Mac. I had to tell someone—everyone.

“Stop,” I whispered, my lips only forming the shapes of the words. “Stop, *please*.”

My mom leaned over, dripping the wax onto Pip’s forehead. It sizzled for just an instant before Pip’s eyes snapped open—and they were bright, flaming orange.

“*No*,” I cried, though the plea only sounded in my head. “No, please!”

Artemis appeared in the doorway of the living room—suddenly, as though she’d been summoned. Her eyes were bright as she looked around hungrily. “Can I help?”

At the sound of her voice, Pip sat bolt upright, her orange eyes aglow, and turned to stare directly at Artemis. They locked eyes for just a moment, and then, without warning, Pip collapsed, rolling off the couch and collapsing to the ground in a heap.

“*No!*” Mace roared, his voice a wild scream.

The force that had restrained me let me go, and I crumpled to the ground. Scrambling back to my feet, I rushed past Greyson and Xavier toward Pip—I had to reach her, I had to *help* her—but my mom grabbed my arms, pulling me close.

“No, Cali! *No!*”

“Let me go! Let me *go*! There’s something wrong! I have to protect Pip—”

“It’s too late, Cali!” my mom cried, grabbing my flailing arms. “It’s too late.”

I stared up at her, breathing hard. I could barely comprehend what she was saying. “*What*?”

“Cali,” she said gravely, looking into my eyes. “Pip is dead.”

**Episode 1428**

My jaw dropped. “Pip is *dead*?”

That couldn’t be possible. She’d *just* sat up. Not seconds earlier, she’d been very much alive. I’d seen her with my own two eyes, and now…

A strangled little whimper slipped out of my throat, and Mom wrapped her arm tightly around me. “It’s okay, sweetie,” she whispered.

I barely heard her over the broken wailing sounds coming from Mace. His face was contorted in absolute agony, and he sounded more like a wounded animal than a person.

*A wounded animal who’s just lost his mate.*

My heart broke for him.

Mace clutched Pip’s limp body to his chest, tears streaming down his face while his chest heaved with sobs. Mace had never been my favorite person in the world, but in this moment all I wanted to do was comfort him, to tell him everything would be all right.

“Pip…” His voice broke on her name, and he nuzzled at her neck. Her eyes were closed, and her head lolled limply on her shoulders. This was his mate. His Luna. His fated other half.

I couldn’t even imagine the depths of his grief.

Still locked in my mother’s arms, I looked helplessly over at Xavier. He looked as solemn as I had ever seen him. A jarring thought struck me then—what if instead of Pip, it had been Xavier who’d died? It was a thought so dark, so disturbing, that even allowing it to take up space in my head brought tears to my eyes.

*Or what if it had been Greyson?*

How would I be able to live the rest of my life without Greyson or Xavier? How could I live in a world that didn’t have both of them in it?

Suddenly the *due destini* struck home in a way it hadn’t in far too long. This could be me. Thanks to the *due destini* curse, it was *supposed* to be me. Devastated beyond measure, a weeping mess, holding my dead mate against me as if I could will him back to life through the sheer power of my heartache.

If I made a mistake, if I let my guard down and chose one of them over the other—even by accident—then this *would* be me. When I looked at Mace, I might as well have been looking into a crystal ball.

It wasn’t like I hadn’t screwed up and almost lost them before. I’d almost lost Greyson at Torin’s stupid Flower Ceremony when I’d “chosen” Xavier for the round. When Greyson had collapsed, his face ashen, his body limp and those horrifying veins darker than ever, I’d thought for sure that I’d lost him. The memory still made my muscles seize and tremble.

I shouldn’t have risked kissing either of them yesterday. It was selfish and reckless and instead of a moment of weakness, it could have brought the life of one of the men I loved to a stuttering halt. Either one of those kisses could have been the opposite of true love’s kiss—instead of breathing new life into a future with one of them, it would have killed the other.

Mace let out a low sob, and I was pulled back to the present.

*Read the room, Cali. This isn’t about you right now. Worry about yourself later. Right now, you should do all you can to help Mace.*

I looked around the room for some sign of what I could do to help the grieving Alpha, and then I realized Torin wasn’t in here. A desperate kind of hope fluttered in my chest. Torin was a healer—he had magic inside him that even Big Mac could only dream of. Could he heal Pip? Or… heal her body at least? And then maybe her spirit would have a home to come back to?

I gently eased myself out of my mother’s arms and whispered, “I’m going to get Torin.”

A crease appeared between her eyes as she frowned. She shook her head slowly. “Sweetheart, I think it’s too late for that…”

“If Dad or Artemis or I were the one lying there, wouldn’t you want to try anything and everything?”

A pained look crossed over her face, and she stepped back. “Hurry, then.”

I practically tripped over myself in my rush to get out of the room.

“Torin?” I called when I hit the hallway. “Torin!”

I ran into the kitchen, and then outside, but he was nowhere to be found. So I headed upstairs, knocking on random doors and calling his name.

A pack member stuck his head out with a grimace. “Do you mind? Some of us are trying to take a nap.”

“Then go back to sleep!” I snapped and moved on. “Torin? Where are you? I need you!”

Finally, I found him coming out of the bathroom. Steam was wafting out of the room, and Torin sighed happily as he secured the fluffy towel wrapped around his waist.

“Ah, the wonders of hot water on demand! What luxury—ah!” He cried out when I grabbed his arm and started pulling him down the stairs. “Cali, what’s the matter? Where are you taking me? Can’t I put some pants on first?”

He held onto his towel for dear life as I all but hauled him down the stairs and toward the living room.

This had to work. Torin had to bring her back—and save Mace the agony her death was causing him. I still couldn’t believe she was dead. Pip was the one who had first explained Lunas to me, back what felt like a hundred years ago. When things had been so much simpler. Pip and I didn’t always get along perfectly, but she was someone who had helped me understand more of this world that I’d been dropped into. Pip was a staple, a solid presence.

And now she was gone. So suddenly. So senselessly.

I couldn’t accept it.

As we got closer to the living room, voices began to carry into the hallway. People were yelling, and it was drawing the attention of the rest of the pack. I pushed my way through, dragging the towel-wrapped Torin behind me.

Mace was on his feet now, snarling into Big Mac’s face. Xavier and Greyson struggled to hold him back. “You fucking witch! You killed my mate!”

Big Mac stepped back, blinking rapidly. It was so out of character for her to be flustered by anyone or anything that her clear shock set my already frayed nerves further on edge. “I—”

Mace cut her off. “This is all your fault! You killed her!”

She shook her head. “I removed the dark magic from her body, but the damage seems to have already been done. I’m sorry. I really am, but nothing could have saved her. That dark magic may have been the only thing that was keeping her alive.”

“Do you seriously expect me to believe that? She was *alive*, and then you did your occult bullshit and now she’s dead. Either you screwed up and Pip paid the price, or you killed her outright. Which is it?” he spat.

I couldn’t hold back any longer. I stepped forward. “Listen, I know Big Mac can be rough, but she would never hurt anyone. She was only trying to help.”

Mace turned his focus on me, and I almost peed my pants a little. I’d never seen anyone so completely lost to their fury. His nostrils flared, and I could have sworn I could see the wild animal just beneath his human side, raging to get out. “You stay out of this!”

“Take it easy,” Xavier warned him, still pulling him back with Greyson.

Mace shook them off and pointed at Big Mac. “Just keep her the *hell* away from me.”

I stepped toward Pip, still pulling Torin along with me. Almost immediately, Greyson and Xavier stepped into my path. “What are you doing?”

“I want Torin to try to heal her.”

If Mace had looked furious before, now there was murder written in every line of his body. “Why the fuck didn’t we use the Fae *before*?”

Torin knelt down at Pip’s bedside, his eyes wide as he looked her over. He grimaced. “But… she’s dead.”

“Just try,” I said. “Please.”

Mace lunged toward us. “Don’t touch her!”

Once again, my mates had to hold him back as Torin reached out and held his hands over Pip’s body. His fingers emitted a soft blue light.

“What’s he doing?” Mace roared. “Stop!”

I crossed my fingers. *Come on, Torin. Come on, come on, come on…*

It was then that I noticed movement out of the corner of my eyes. Artemis was moving toward Pip, her eyes fixed on the wolf’s limp body. I’d seen that look in my sister’s eyes before, when York had risen from the ashes of his own funeral pyre.

Suddenly, Pip’s eyes snapped open and she pulled in a sharp breath.

Torin fell back on his heels. “Oh my gods!”

The room went deathly still, everyone staring in shock at Pip, who had seemingly come back from the dead.

I glanced over at Artemis. She was still staring at the Luna, like she was in a trance.

*Did Artemis somehow bring Pip back?*

**Episode 1429**

XAVIER

*Did Torin just bring Pip back from the dead?*

I was in such a state of shock that I eased my grip on Mace’s arm, staring at the now very-alive Luna, coughing and blinking in front of us. Once I was no longer holding him back, Mace threw me and Greyson off and barreled over to his mate. He wrapped his arms around Pip with a sob and buried his face in her neck.

“You’re here,” he mumbled, almost like he was trying to convince himself. “You’re here. You’re here with me. I didn’t lose you.”

Pip blinked a few times and slowly put her arms around Mace. She looked completely disoriented. It made sense. She’d spent her entire time here at the pack house in a coma—she wouldn’t have any idea what she was doing here, or what had happened while she was out.

“Mace?” she gasped. “What’s… What’s happened? Are you all right?”

The Blue Blood Alpha let out a humming noise and held her even closer. “I am now.”

I turned to Greyson. “What the hell is going on?” I asked quietly, not wanting to interrupt Mace’s moment with Pip and give him another reason to try to disembowel someone.

My brother shook his head. His eyes kept darting back to Pip, as if he couldn’t believe what he was seeing. “Honestly? No fucking clue.”

Big Mac took a step forward, her eyes wide and riveted on Pip.

In a blur of movement, Mace tucked Pip behind him and growled at Big Mac. “Stay the fuck away from my mate. You already killed her once. I won’t let you touch a goddamn hair on her head!”

I could practically see his hackles lifting and his body thrumming with repressed primal energy. His instincts, right or wrong, were telling him the woman in front of him was a threat to his mate. And with that in mind, Mace was beyond reason. As long as his inner wolf sensed danger, and that perceived source of danger was standing mere feet away from his mate, Mace would be one wrong move away from shifting and tearing Big Mac apart.

Which would be far from ideal—for obvious reasons. I definitely wasn’t in Big Mac’s booster club myself, but with all the other bullshit going on around us, the pack didn’t need an all-out Alpha-witch battle in the middle of the pack house.

Big Mac froze. She never took her eyes off Mace’s. She had the look of someone staring down a bear. “I’m glad it all worked out,” she said, and then slowly backed up until she reached the cluster of bodies scattered around the doorway and pushed her way out of the room.

Greyson turned to the spectators with a frown. “Don’t any of you have anything better to do? Get out of here. Mace and Pip could use some space—not a bunch of rubberneckers.”

For once, I actually agreed with my brother. I watched the pack members filter out of the room and disperse down the hallway. Mace was a loaded cannon right now, with the world’s shortest fuse. He was pacified for the moment, more out of relief than anything else. But that raw, desperate relief was still too far from level-headed for him to be capable of thinking rationally. The guy had been traumatized and at his wits’ end *before* he’d watched his mate drop dead in front of him. Who knew what he was capable of at this point?

I looked over to where Mace was holding Pip against his chest again, stroking her hair. It was the same pose he’d held her in right after she’d suddenly passed away, only this time she was holding onto him too. The anger had disappeared, but there was a hollowness to his gaze that I didn’t like.

When Mace recovered from the shock, he would be on the warpath. He’d be looking for someone to blame. Big Mac would be the logical choice, but there was a chance that he’d spread the rage around.

I glanced around the room, and my gaze landed on Cali. She’d pissed Mace off plenty of times in the past, and even though her idea to get Torin had brought Pip back, there was always the chance that Mace would hold not bringing the Fae man in sooner against her for. Mace could easily justify lashing out at her.

And I wouldn’t fucking allow it.

Now that I was back, now that my debt to Kira was paid—with interest—I planned to focus on two things: protecting Cali, and my pack.

*No time like the present.*

With Greyson occupied by the witch, I took Cali by the hand and led her out of the room. Her hand was warm and soft, and the simple, innocent touch reminded me of the kiss we’d shared. After watching another Alpha almost lose his mate, I wouldn’t have minded doing a little more kissing now.

“I want to stay.” She tugged at my loose grip on her arm. “I should check on Pip. Do you really think she’s okay?”

I sighed. My tiger and her bleeding heart. “I know you’re worried, but can you please leave them alone?”

“But—”

I pressed a finger to her full lips. “I want you to be safe.”

She pushed my hand down. “I know that, but—”

I cut her off again. “Argue all you want, but I agree with Greyson. Stay away from Mace right now.” My hand rose up again to tilt her chin up. “If not for yourself, then do it for me. Okay?”

After a beat in which I was certain she’d dig her heels in for the long haul, she finally smiled. “I’ll try.”

Her smile knocked the air out of my lungs, and I had to look away from her eyes, from her lips that were just begging to be kissed again. But now probably wasn’t the best time—assuming she would even let me kiss her at all. But all of that didn’t mean there wouldn’t be an even better time later.

Cali pulled back and looked away. She also seemed to be having second thoughts, and I hated that she felt that way around me. That even now, even after our kiss, she was still looking for ways to put distance between us. All I wanted was for us to be together. Was that truly so much to ask?

“I’m only thinking of you,” I said. “I know there’s a lot going on, and a lot of people you want to help, but you need to take care of yourself too.”

“I know.”

Did she, though? The moment dragged between us, neither of us saying anything more, but neither of us walking away, either. Did she feel that same pull I did? Was she finding it just as impossible to walk away from me?

“Hey.”

Jay bounded up, interrupting what was left of my moment with Cali. I could have punched him.

“I heard what happened to Pip,” Jay continued. “What the hell is going on around here?”

Cali turned that bright smile on Jay before looking back at me. “I’m going to go talk to my mom.”

Her hand slipped out of mine, and I was left with a gnawing emptiness where before there had been warmth.

I watched her disappear down the hallway, and it was then that I noticed Jay was carrying a bag. “Where have you been?”

He sighed. “I went to check on Lola. It’s…” He blew out a breath. “It’s a long story, but we’re good now.” He looked up and down the hallway before turning back to me, his voice lowered. “Have you spoken to Ava yet?”

*Seriously? He knows about Ava too? Did everyone know she was here except me?*

My face must have said it all, because he immediately added, “I didn’t want her here. We all know she can’t be trusted, and I know she’s the last person you would want to see.”

“You’re not wrong. I almost killed Greyson when I found out.”

A smile tugged at Jay’s lips. “That would have been interesting.”

“Hello, boys.” Kira stalked up. “I heard you were talking about Ava. Thought I’d join in, since it’s so rare for me to know what the hell anyone is talking about around here.”

Jay gave her a dubious glance. “How’d your adventure go?”

I shrugged. “We accomplished what we set out to do.” Best to keep it vague. “Kira’s going to hang with us for a while.”

Jay eyed the witch. “I take it you’re familiar with Ava?”

She nodded. “We met while I was working for Iñigo, but when we escaped it was the most we’d interacted.”

“Ah. Well, I’m not her biggest fan,” Jay said. “What do you think of her?”

Kira glanced at me and then shrugged.

“You can be honest,” I pressed. “What did you learn about her when I was being held by Iñigo? Anything I should know about?”

She glanced around and then motioned for us to follow her. “Outside. I don’t want to talk about it here.”

We walked out onto the lawn, a fair distance away from the house.

“It’s good that you’re cautious,” I said. “You can’t be too careful when it comes to my ex-mate.”

“I wasn’t sure how to bring this up,” Kira began. “But when I spoke to Ava earlier, I noticed something. One of the reasons Iñigo has been able to attack and capture werewolves is because I used a special herb to mask his scent. It’s undetectable to werewolves, but not to witches.”

I nodded. “Huh. That explains a lot, but what does it have to do with Ava?”

She gave me a meaningful look. “I smelled it on her.”

**Episode 1430**

VIOLET

I missed Charlie. Like, *really* missed him.

After everything that had happened this morning, I felt like I’d been punched in the heart. All of the joy I’d felt over being able to hold Lilac, to talk to him and feel those long-lost Lilac-shaped pieces of my heart snap back into place, was gone. Pip’s death had wiped it all out—and her mysterious resurrection hadn’t done a whole lot to comfort me.

For as long as I lived, I would never forget the anguish I’d seen on Mace’s face. I’d known him for a long time now, and he’d always had this… *indomitable* quality. He was an Alpha, sure, but he wasn’t like Xavier, or even Greyson. He wasn’t warm. He was effective, and smart, and even larger than life sometimes, but it never crossed my mind that inside that barrel of a chest was a heart capable of breaking.

And seeing it break firsthand was its own kind of devastating. I’d rushed out of the room and was halfway up the stairs before I’d heard Greyson bellowing at the rest of the onlookers to scatter. With Mace’s face fresh in my mind, and his keens of anguish still echoing in my ears, I’d curled up on my bed and thought of my mate.

How would Charlie react if I died? Or what if it was the other way around? How could I live in a world that didn’t have Charlie in it?

*I couldn’t.*

Having a mate was both a blessing and a curse. It was something I’d never really thought of before. All my life, everything I’d been told about fated mates had been like something out of a fairy tale. Once you found them, you lived happily ever after. Up until recently, I’d never considered just how much work it would be to try to live alongside your mate—especially if you wanted different things from life or, say, your mate’s parents were a couple of supernatural hunting psychopaths hellbent on breaking you up. Lola and Jay; Cali, Greyson, and Xavier—they were all mated, and in so many ways their mate bonds had made things so much more difficult for them than if they were going it alone.

But now, thanks to what had happened to Pip, I was acutely aware of everything I stood to lose even if Charlie and I got through his hunting training and his evil parents. What was the point of fighting to keep that perfect match in your life if they could just up and die?

I knew the truth: having a mate was both a blessing and a curse. For every wonderful part of our bond that we shared, there was an equally scary part where I worried about Charlie *all the time.*

I looked down at my phone, willing a message to pop up on the display. Or for Charlie’s face to fill the screen for an incoming call.

Since I’d seen Pip and Mace like that, I’d sent Charlie a million texts. I needed to hear his voice, to feel, even just for a moment, like everything would be okay. That I had nothing to be afraid of.

Even though I saw Pip’s body go slack every time I closed my eyes.

My phone began to ring, and I nearly jumped out of my skin. It was Charlie!

*Did he read my mind? Did some mate sense start tingling? Or did he just read my texts?*

It didn’t matter. I fumbled with my phone in my haste to answer. “Charlie? Oh my god. I’ve missed you so much,” I blurted out. Tears burned my eyes, and I felt a sob snagging in my chest. All those emotions I’d been trying like hell to push down were rising to the surface, and already I was treading water.

“I-I miss you too, Violet.” He sounded taken aback, and I could just picture the adorable little crease between his eyebrows. “What’s wrong? Did something happen? You seem upset.”

I licked my lips. For all my desperate desire to talk to him and unpack some of the crazy and awful things I’d just seen, my mind now came up short. I didn’t know where to begin. Everything was wrong because I’d just watched someone die—someone I’d known for a long time. And then I’d watched her mate shatter into a million pieces. Everything was wrong because we still didn’t know what was wrong with Pip, and what it had to do with the revenants and the spirit world and the dark magic we just couldn’t seem to escape.

But mostly, everything was wrong because Charlie and I weren’t together.

“Hold on, Charlie.” I grabbed my coat, threaded my arms through it, and headed down the stairs and outside, brushing past Xavier, Jay, and that witch Kira on my way out.

When I reached a space far away enough that I knew I wouldn’t have to fear being overheard, I let out a low, shuddering breath. And that breath turned into a sniffle. Which, of course, Charlie didn’t miss.

“Violet, talk to me,” he said. “Did something happen?”

I swallowed. “Pip—”

“Sorry, hold on.” In the background, I heard a muffled conversation before he came back. “Ugh, I’m sorry, I only have a couple minutes. I have to get to my drills.”

My heart sank. A few minutes wasn’t even enough time to cover the basics.

“I can fill you in later. I just…” I swallowed, trying to keep my voice from breaking. “I really needed to hear your voice. I miss you so much.”

“I miss you too. When are you coming?”

I hesitated. “Um, I haven’t booked a flight yet,” I admitted with a wince.

He groaned. “Why not? I thought you were looking into it.”

I was, but so much had been happening here. With Lilac. With the spirit world, and bloodthirsty zombies. And now the Blue Bloods were here too.

Plus… there was still that not-so-small part of me that had never truly gotten over Charlie leaving me to go to hunter training in the first place, and that raw, aching piece of me was still waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“You… You do still want me to come, right?” I asked.

“Of course I do. Why wouldn’t I?”

*Maybe because Mommy Dearest is brainwashing you?*

Or maybe because all this time away from me was making him want to become a hunter and leave his werewolf life—and mate—behind.

“Violet? Are you still there?”

Screw it. If today had taught me anything, it was that I couldn’t just sit around in fear of asking for what I wanted. I could die tomorrow and never get it anyway.

“I don’t like being your dirty little secret,” I blurted out. “This would be so much easier if we could tell your parents.”

“Tell them what?”

“I don’t know! Since your mom is so opposed to us as mates, maybe we could pretend we’re just friends?”

There was a long beat of silence on the other end before he finally responded. “I don’t think that would be such a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“I have to be super careful around here. Some of the other trainees are already suspicious.”

I bit my lip again. At this rate, I was going to chew it raw. I didn’t like imagining Charlie at the mercy of a bunch of hunter wannabes.

“Maybe you’re right,” he said suddenly. “Maybe you should hold off getting a flight.”

My jaw dropped. “Wait, so now you *don’t* want me to come?”

“Well, no. I mean, yeah.”

What the hell did that even mean?

“Violet, hold on a second.” There was another muffled conversation on the other end of the line. And was that a female voice? “Sorry, Violet. I really do have to go.”

Tears burned my eyes again, and I blew out a breath. “When you figure out what you want, call me back.”

“Vi—”

I hung up before he could get another word in.

I replayed the conversation in my head. It truly felt like we’d just gone five steps backward. I headed back inside, feeling numb from the bitter cold—and maybe from my failed conversation with my mate. I went into the kitchen, grabbed a white chocolate mocha, and leaned against the counter.

Just like that, I was missing Charlie all over again. Why had he changed his mind about me coming? And who, exactly, had he been talking to right before he’d said he had to go?

I groaned. Was it so much to ask for us to just *be together* without all the twists and turns?

I pulled out my phone and started flipping through my photos, which, of course, led to photos of Charlie. But I didn’t have as many as I would have liked. I ran out far too quickly. So I opened up his Instagram account and scrolled through his photos.

There was a funny comment on one of Charlie’s photos from someone named Zachery. Was he a friend Charlie had made at camp? My lips twitching at Zachery’s joke, I detoured to his account and started scrolling through his photos too. When I ran out of those, I looked through Charlie’s “tagged” section.

Even if I wouldn’t admit it to myself, I was looking for photos of Charlie at camp.

It didn’t take long to find one.

I froze, my stomach clenching. The picture was of Charlie and a pretty girl on top of what looked like a frozen lake, standing so close together they were pretty much hugging. The caption read: *Thanks for everyone’s concern and well wishes. But I’m safe in the arms of this cutie—my hero!*

A wave of jealousy nearly knocked me clear off my feet.

*Who the hell is* she*?*

**Episode 1431**

Xavier was *not* going to be happy if he found out that I’d decided to ignore his advice pretty much directly after telling him I’d try to follow it.

To be fair, I had *tried* to follow it… for about two minutes. Just long enough for Xavier and Jay to follow Kira outside. Hopefully whatever they were talking about would last long enough for me to double back to Pip and get a better sense of what was going on. I could just picture Xavier’s glare, if he caught me in the act.

*But that’s future Cali’s problem.*

Present Cali was free to do what she wanted, and right now what I wanted was to make sure Pip really was okay. Now that the hallway was clear following Greyson’s lecture, it was a *lot* easier to make my way back up and poke my head into the room.

Big Mac was still MIA, which was probably for the best considering it seemed like Mace had devised at least ten different ways to kill her. She would probably need to keep a low profile for as long as the Blue Bloods were here. Torin was gone too—probably to put on those pants I’d detoured him away from.

Mrs. Smith and my mom were still in the room, standing by in case Pip or Mace needed help. Judging by the way Mace’s body was curled protectively around his mate, I kind of doubted that he’d accept anyone’s help right now.

But Pip… She really did look fine. Her skin was a healthy color. Her eyes weren’t orange. She seemed completely normal.

Was it possible she wasn’t really dead? Like, maybe she was just in a really, really bad coma? The kind where her heart slowed so much that she looked dead? Was that even a thing?

I forced myself to step into the room, putting one foot in front of the other and trying not to wilt under the force of Mace’s death glare. I stopped only about halfway over to the couple, standing next to Mrs. Smith and my mom.

“Can I do anything for you two?” I asked. “Maybe you’d like some water, or—”

Mace’s glare deepened, and I was sure I would have caught fire if he’d had the power to make it happen. “Yeah, you can keep your two-bit witch away from me.”

I glanced over at Mrs. Smith, who visibly winced. I knew how upsetting it must have been for her to hear her partner badmouthed like that, especially after how hard Big Mac had tried to save Pip. She didn’t deserve to be dragged like that—just like Mrs. Smith didn’t deserve any of the residual anger that was being directed at her.

I put a hand on Mrs. Smith’s arm and gave it a gentle squeeze.

She offered me a weak smile. Her eyes were warm, telling me without words that she appreciated the gesture.

I glanced over at my mom, suddenly hesitant. Now that I knew for sure that Pip wasn’t in danger of dropping dead any second—or at least she didn’t seem to be—I wanted to talk to my mom. I hadn’t been lying to Xavier about that part, at least.

Because the thing was, I kind of already knew that saving Pip after she’d suddenly keeled over should have been borderline impossible. I’d run to get Torin’s help because I’d needed to do *something*, because I hadn’t been able to just stand there and watch one of the strongest, toughest Alphas I’d ever known just fall to pieces.

And when Torin had put his hand out over Pip’s body, I’d had hope that somehow he would manage to pull her back. That maybe all this spirit world nonsense would work in our favor for once and Pip would be able to come back if her body was healed.

But that didn’t mean I’d truly expected Torin to heal her. Somewhere in the back of my mind, where panic and desperation weren’t running the show, I’d known that Torin simply didn’t have that kind of power. That pulling him downstairs and telling him to heal Pip’s dead body had been more than a one in a million shot—it had been a child’s prayer.

Pip was obviously alive now, so *something* had brought her back. I just wasn’t convinced that that something had anything to do with Torin. In fact, the more I thought about it, the more I wondered exactly how much a certain Fae sister touched by dark magic had been involved with Pip’s resurrection.

The idea seemed as ridiculous as pulling a half-naked Torin downstairs to heal a dead body, but Torin’s magic hadn’t really seemed to be working on Pip. And it wasn’t until Artemis had come downstairs that Pip had come back to life.

And then there was the look in my sister’s eyes. The empty, intense look she’d had as she stared at Pip. I’d seen it before, when another body had been raised from the dead.

Was it possible that Artemis was behind the raising of this one too? Maybe. I just had no clue why or how. Just like I had no idea how to even approach my mother with this. But what did I have to lose?

I reached for my mom’s arm. “Can I talk to you? Privately?”

She nodded, and we stepped into the hallway. I looked around to make sure we weren’t in danger of being overhead before I asked, “Have you noticed anything unusual about Artemis?”

My mom pulled back a bit. “What do you mean?”

“I feel like maybe Artemis was somehow… involved in what happened to Pip,” I confessed.

“Cali, do you think it’s possible you’re looking everywhere and anywhere for an explanation, and Artemis is just an easy target? She was sick before, but she seems better now. And she’s been inside, under Rishika’s watchful eye, the whole time.” She gave me a meaningful look. “We’ve been through this. You dragged everybody out into the snow the last time you were suspicious of your sister. And thankfully there was nothing.”

*Maybe Mom’s right.* Was I just trying to push all of this onto Artemis? Had Artemis even really resurrected York—or was the *due destini* curse starting to mess with my mind?

“I want her to be okay,” I said. “Really, I do. I’m just worried about her.”

Mom wrapped me in her arms. “I know, sweetheart. You just want the best for everyone.”

Even though I wasn’t a kid anymore, my mom’s hugs were still hugely comforting. Like warm chocolate chip cookies.

She kissed my forehead. “I’m going to check on Pip,” she said, and headed back into the room.

Torin approached me. At least he was wearing pants now. “I’ve been wanting to talk to you.”

“Oh, hey, thanks for helping Pip. You’re amazing.”

“That’s the thing…” He looked up and down the hallway and then back at me. “I don’t think I did anything?”

*Say* what*?*

“But—but Pip came back,” I sputtered. “She came back when you started to do your healing magic.”

“It felt like it wasn’t actually doing anything. I can tell when it works, Cali. I can feel the magic moving and healing. But with Pip…” He shrugged. “I didn’t feel anything until she actually woke up. I was just as surprised as everyone else.

This couldn’t be good. But there was no need to bring Torin into this mess. I forced a smile. “Whether or not it was your magic doesn’t matter. We should just be happy that Pip is okay. The important thing is you cared enough to try. You should be proud.”

But in the back of my mind, I kept thinking back to Artemis and what I’d seen yesterday.

*Or what I think I saw…*

Artemis brushed passed us then, not acknowledging either of us beyond a blank glance, and stepped outside. I watched her go before turning back to Torin. “Have you noticed anything off about her?”

He shrugged. “Like what?”

“I don’t know. I’m going to talk to her.”

“Great! I’m going to finish getting dressed and work on the Thanksgiving plans. What’s a baster?”

I was heading outside when Jay, Xavier, and Kira came in. I’d have to ask Kira to tell me more about dark magic’s capabilities. Whatever the hell was going on, it had to be connected to dark magic.

Xavier grabbed my hand. “Where are you going?”

I wanted nothing more than to sink into his touch, but I needed to talk to my sister. “I’m just going out to get some fresh air.”

I brushed past him without waiting for a response. I hurried to catch up to Artemis, but I slowed as I approached her. She was heading toward the woods, and I didn’t want to get too close to her in case the spell pushed me back into the lake again.

*It’s way too damn cold for that!*

“Artemis!”

She jumped and spun around.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“Are you checking up on me? You’re worse than Mom.”

“We both care about you.”

She held her hands up. “As you can see, I’m fine. Now if you don’t mind…” She turned and started toward the woods.

I groaned. “Artemis, wait!”

She stopped and spun around again. “What?”

And then her eyes went wide, and she pulled a knife from her thigh sheath and lunged at me.

**Episode 1432**

LOLA

Emmett’s displeasure bore down on me. “This was *your* idea?” he demanded.

My mouth opened, then closed. Then opened and closed again, and I shook my head helplessly. I honestly had no fricking clue what he was even talking about. Or what was going on. Or what had transpired between these two back in the day.

The only thing I truly knew at this point was that there were definitely some bad vibes between Emmett and Ras. And now, I’d somehow gotten in the middle of that mess.

I looked from one vampire to the other. I knew they’d been together before, but this definitely felt like a bit of a fresh lovers’ quarrel. How recently had these two been together, anyway? The way Emmett was staring me down made my face heat, and I was pretty sure he knew that. Maybe that was why he didn’t look away—not even for a split second.

“It was my idea,” Ras said suddenly, her voice smooth as silk. She was clearly nowhere near as ruffled by Emmett’s anger as I was.

Emmett rounded on her so fast I never would have been able to follow it without my vampire vision. “Really? You just couldn’t mind your own business, could you?”

She shrugged. “I’m a teacher here, and I have a responsibility to protect the students under my care. Your behavior toward Lola was inappropriate.”

He turned to look at me again, his eyes flashing with fury and blame. “Oh, I see. You’ve been telling stories about me. Did you explain how I was attacked? How your so-called mate turned on *me*, an esteemed professor of this institution?”

*Cool your jets, Professor Asshat.*

I frowned. “Jay was just visiting me because he was worried about me—clearly with good reason!”

I stopped myself before I could go on. But now that I thought about it, and with Ras standing right there if I needed support, it was clearer than it had ever been that what had been bubbling between Emmett and me *was* inappropriate—especially since he *knew* I was fighting off my vampire heat and he’d stuck around anyway. Kissing Emmett, or doing *anything* else with him, would have been one of the biggest mistakes I’d ever made. I’d already almost lost my mate over this, and all Emmett seemed to care about was that Jay had put him in his place.

“I’m sorry.” Emmett’s eyes narrowed. “But do you really think that gives him the right to punch me? Not to mention his reckless behavior.” He looked over at Ras. “If you truly care about your students, then you should see the danger posed by a rogue werewolf attacking professors in the halls. There were students there, and any one of them could have been hurt.”

“Jay’s not reckless!” I snapped, just short of stamping my foot in frustration.

“Yes, the werewolf who stormed into a school filled to the gills with vampires, then shifted and picked a fight with one, certainly doesn’t have impulse issues,” he deadpanned. And then he blew out a breath. “I don’t know why I’m even having this conversation with you. What happened is clear, and the fact that you can’t see what’s right in front of you just shows how your mate bond has compromised you.”

My jaw dropped. “*Compromised* me? I don’t agree with your version of events—which, remember, I was *also* there for—so I must be compromised? *You’re* the authority figure here, Emmett,” I snapped, getting right in his face. “Why don’t you try acting like one for a change?”

Ras stepped forward. “How about we all take a breath?” She gave Emmett a disappointed look. “Emmett, perhaps you should leave.”

Emmett’s body was practically thrumming with rage, and he looked from me to Ras. Then he turned to the door and took a few steps before freezing and turning back to face me. “I’m disappointed in you, Lola.” There was a hint of sadness in his gaze, so much that I almost *believed* he was truly disappointed and not just angry that his ego had gotten bruised. “Since you arrived here, all I’ve done is try to help you, and this is how you show your gratitude?”

He turned back around and slammed the door on his way out.

Ras crossed her arms and leaned on the edge of the desk. Her lips curved up into a smirk. “Well, that was illuminating.”

I stared at the door Emmett had disappeared through and then turned back to her, shaking my head. “How did this turn so ugly so quickly? I’ve never seen him so angry. He’s always so composed.”

*He was up until Jay decked him, at least.*

Ras chuckled. “You’ve only seen what he wanted you to see. You know someone a long time, you get to see everything—the good and the bad.”

My ears perked up at that. So Ras *had* known Emmett for a long time then. Since they’d been in a relationship, she probably knew him in ways I never would. Maybe this was my chance to finally learn a little bit more about the bad blood between those two. “You seem to know a lot about Emmett. What happened between you two?”

She paused. “Well, we used to be a couple, but I imagine you knew that already. Once upon a time, we were spending a weekend together. For me, it was a test to see if I was ready to move in with him. He had a beautiful apartment, overlooking the river.” A fond, faraway look washed over her face before she added, “I thought he loved me.” She laughed, but it wasn’t a happy sound, and that faraway look was replaced with something like resignation. “I should have known better than to date a younger man.”

Oh… I didn’t know what exactly I’d been expecting, asking Ras about her history with Emmett, but this was getting very personal. And I wasn’t sure I wanted to hear all the nitty gritty details about two of my professors’ personal lives.

But… who was I kidding? I was also dying of curiosity. My less civilized side was practically screaming, *Spill the tea, sis!*

“The first night I stayed with him,” Ras continued, “I woke up and went to his fridge for a snack. And while I was searching, I found a box filled with vials of blood—*my* blood, labeled with my name, and dates. He’d been stealing my blood.”

*What the* what*?*

I blinked, torn between shock and disgust. “Why… Why would he do that?”

“When I confronted him, he tried to play it down. He didn’t think I’d mind—can you imagine that?”

Honestly, I couldn’t imagine a scenario—even for vampires—where stealing someone’s blood wouldn’t be a huge freaking deal. *Jay would never do something like that.* “Did you ever find out why he stole your blood?” I asked.

She shook her head. “To this day, it’s a mystery. I left that night, and I hadn’t seen him again since—until I accepted a teaching position this semester.” Ras gave me a meaningful look. “And now you know why I warned you about him.”

Wow… Never in my wildest imaginings had I considered that *this* was the reason for the tension between those two. God, it was so creepy. Emmett seemed so nice, recent events aside. He definitely didn’t seem like the kind of guy who would steal your blood while you slept…

Ras cleared her throat. “Enough of my sad history—let’s get down to brass tacks. How are you going to deal with your vampire heat?”

Heat rushed to my face. There was literally nothing I wanted to talk about less. “Um, yeah. Maybe I should get to my next class… Don’t want to be late!”

Ras smiled. “I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable, but this isn’t just going to go away if you ignore it, Lola. You have to deal with this. If not handled properly, the uncontrolled desire can lead any vampire astray.”

I grimaced. “Actually I *have* been trying to deal with it…”

“Oh? Is that why your mate came to visit?”

My cheeks felt like the approximate temperature of the surface of the sun. But… she wasn’t wrong. Jay hadn’t come to see me for a hookup, but having my mate around to help me take the edge off… I definitely wasn’t complaining about it.

“It’s okay,” Ras said. “You shouldn’t ignore your feelings. It must be hard to be away from him.”

“You have no idea,” I grumbled.

She cocked her head. “I’ve experienced a lot more than you, you know.”

“*You’ve* had a vampire heat?”

“I don’t think that’s what it would be called, but I’ve had my share of desires.”

Oh god… Did I want to hear this? I was pretty sure the answer was no.

“What am I supposed to do about it?” I asked. “Unless I can control it, I’m worried it’s going to cause serious problems with Jay.”

“Let me stop you right there. Your mate.”

I blinked. “What about my mate?”

Ras leaned back to reach into a desk drawer. She removed an amulet on a necklace and held it up. “There’s only one way to fix this. You need to forget him.”

**Episode 1433**

ARTEMIS

I lunged toward Cali, my knife flashing as she went stock still and let out a horrified scream. At least she wouldn’t be afraid for long.

My hand pressed into her shoulder and I shoved her aside and plunged my blade into the heaving chest of York, who had suddenly appeared behind her. She hadn’t even realized he was there, hadn’t had even the slightest inkling that she was in grave danger, the formerly dead man reaching out for her, determined to do god knew what to my sister.

York let out a guttural croak, his orange eyes rolling around before fixing on me with shock and horror. Like *I* was the monster. “Mistress…” he groaned, and fell to his knees.

Cali spun around to stare at York, her eyes wide with shock. “What the *hell*? Where did he come from? Oh my god! I thought he was—” Her words turned into a scream when York groped for the blade still sticking out of his chest and wrapped his fingers around the hilt. “No, no, no, no!” Cali whimpered, backing up as fast as she could.

Wheezing and grunting, York tugged at the knife lodged in his chest and then—*poof*. He disappeared in a puff of smoke. The knife fell to the grass with a *thwump*. The blade was as bright and clean as ever.

My sister’s jaw dropped, and for a moment I thought she might actually pass out. “What was that? Where did he come from? How—”

I pulled her to her feet and threw my arms around her. “Are you okay?” I asked. I stepped back, scanning her for any sign of injury or even the slightest indication that York had touched her.

She didn’t seem to hear me. “You… You saw that, right?”

I nodded. “He came out of nowhere. Did he hurt you?”

Cali stared at the knife on the grass. “It was York. What was he doing here, Artemis?”

I’d seen him too, but I didn’t know if I could trust it. Because what I’d seen—what I now knew we’d *both* seen—was impossible.

“It can’t have been York.” I shook my head slowly, forcing my mind through the gymnastics of it all. I’d seen some crazy shit in my life, things that defied the laws of nature, but this wasn’t just crazy—it was flat out impossible. “We burned him on the pyre. I saw it—we all did.”

A crease appeared between my sister’s eyebrows, and she huffed. Was she *angry* at me? Her earlier words came back to me suddenly. Wait, why was she asking *me* what York was doing here?

“Yeah!” she snapped. “I know we burned him, but didn’t you bring him back? During the snowstorm?”

“What are you talking about? During the snowstorm, I was sleeping off that poison you gave me, remember? Why on earth would I bring York back? And even if I wanted to, how could I pull *that* trick off? The guy was dead even before he was burnt to a crisp. There was no body left. He’s gone, Cali.”

She sighed. “I know it sounds crazy, but—”

“But what?” I snapped.

“I’m sorry!” She held her hands up. “I’m just confused.”

“That makes two of us,” I muttered as I bent down to scoop up my knife. I examined the blade—it was just as pristine as it had been before I’d plunged into that thing. *Odd. And terrifying.*

“Wait!” Cali said, her eyes going wide again. “We hugged!”

I blinked. “I didn’t realize it was such a big deal.”

“No, I mean, you and I aren’t being forced apart like before!”

Had it been the potion? Then, before I could fully process what she was saying, she pulled me into another hug to prove her point. I patted her back a few times before she finally let me go.

“I wonder if whoever that was who just tried to attack you had something to do with it.”

“Maybe.” Cali shrugged. “Or maybe the potion has just worn off.” Her face lit up. “Either way, we can be proper sisters again!” And then she pulled me into a third hug, and despite myself, I felt a smile curving my lips. She tightened her arms around me, resting her head in the crook of my neck. “This is all I’ve wanted to do for the past few days,” she breathed. “Hug my sister.”

I had to hand it to her—my sister could sweet-talk her way out of anything. No wonder those two Alphas had it so bad for her, even after all the drama.

“Save some of that for me!”

I stepped back and turned to see Rishika jogging up to us. “What are you guys doing out here?” she asked. “It’s freezing!

“You won’t believe what just happened,” Cali began. “Artemis just saved me—”

I cut her off with a loud laugh. “I just saved her from freezing to death out here. Look, she’s not even wearing a jacket!”

Cali’s head snapped around, and she gave me a confused look. I shook my head subtly.

“That I do believe,” Rishika said easily. If she’d picked up on my subterfuge, she wasn’t saying anything. “We’re all going to freeze if we don’t get inside soon.” She motioned for us to come back to the house. “Don’t hang around out here for too long. I’ll get some tea brewing.” Then she headed inside.

I took a step to follow her, but then Cali caught my arm.

“Why did you stop me from telling her about what happened?” she asked. “A dead guy just tried to attack me, and you… Well, you didn’t *kill* him, but you did protect me!”

I shook my head again. “I don’t want to worry Rishika yet, or anyone else. Besides, we don’t really know what happened. The second we sound the alarm bells, we’ll be put on the spot. There’s no un-ringing that bell.” I pointed to the ground behind us, where the creature—because I couldn’t believe it had truly been York—had disappeared. “Whatever that was, it’s gone now. And if we go blabbing to everyone about it but can’t come up with any concrete answers, it’s going to be… What’s the term? A shitshow.”

Cali grimaced. “And I get that. Believe me, I do. But Rishika really likes you—doesn't she deserve the truth?”

“When we know what the truth is, sure.” I slung an arm around her shoulders. “Let’s just keep this between us for now. How about that tea?”

Once we made it into the house, I hung back by the staircase while Cali went on ahead to the kitchen. She stopped, puzzled, and turned back to me. “I thought you wanted tea?”

“I do.” I nodded and forced a smile. “I’m just gonna run upstairs and grab a sweater first. Rishika wasn’t kidding about the cold.”

She seemed to buy my reasoning and smiled back. “Okay, I’ll get your tea ready, then.”

Guilt twisted in my stomach as I climbed the stairs to my room. As much as I hated lying to my sister—and how desperately she wanted to believe me, given that things had been tense between us for so long—I just couldn’t take any more questions about what had happened.

*I just hope Cali can keep it to herself.* The second she so much as mentioned what had happened to either of her mates, the whole pack house would be up in arms again.

I closed the door behind me, then spun around—and gasped.

York was sitting at the foot of my bed, a scowl twisting his face. “What the hell?” he demanded. “How could you stab me like that, Mistress?”

“*Quiet*.” My voice slipped out of the cadence I was so careful to use around my family and the rest of the pack and into something dark and domineering. I didn’t have any control over it. “We’re in a house full of werewolves—they hear everything.”

His lip curled up into a sneer. “And? Getting stabbed hurts, you know. I might be dead, but that doesn’t mean I can’t feel.”

I rolled my eyes. “Enough with the melodrama. I had no choice. You forced my hand when you came after my sister.” I narrowed my eyes at the revenant, my voice dropping low. “What could you possibly have been thinking?”

He had the audacity to shrug. “I was trying to get rid of an obstacle for you.”

The nerve of this one, to think he was allowed to act independently. “You come when *I* call you—”

“And if you don’t call me?”

“Then you stay the hell away!” I snapped, my voice barely above a whisper. I moved closer so that I was looming over him. “If you ever forget that again, I’ll stab you as many times as it takes for the lesson to stick. I made you, York, and I can unmake you. Do you understand?”

His gaze slipped down to the floor, and he nodded.

“Good.” I stepped back, and he let out a breath.

“But, Mistress… why did you do it?”

“I had to earn their trust. Everyone’s always suspicious. They don’t trust me. So I used you to show Cali that I’m looking out for her.” My lips twitched. “Even though you and I both know that’s not true.”

He nodded slowly. “And… why did you bring me back again?”

I walked to the window and stared out at the woods. “I brought you back for the same reason I’m bringing back the others.”

“The others?” He blinked. “What others?”

**Episode 1434**

GREYSON

I stood in the hallway outside Cali’s room, where I’d had Pip moved. Despite literally having dropped dead in front of us all, she seemed to be resting comfortably. And other than being confused about why she was here at the Redwood pack house—and what had happened to put her mate into such deep distress—she actually seemed… fine.

*Definitely a step up from being a corpse.*

I blew out a breath. What a complete shitshow of a day. A week. A month? I rubbed my face, trying to remember the last time my life hadn’t seemed on the verge of crumbling to dust.

I came up empty.

*That can’t be a good sign.*

Mace had been glued to Pip’s side since this morning, and I didn’t blame him one bit. If Cali had suddenly died and then, just a quickly, been brought back to life, I would’ve been a little unhinged too. Still, it was a little strange to see the Blue Blood Alpha doting on his mate so unabashedly. He and Pip made a good team, and they obviously cared about each other, but I’d never considered Mace to be particularly warm—even to his mate.

Mace froze suddenly and whipped his head toward the doorway. He must have scented me nearby. He turned back to Pip and kissed her forehead. She mumbled something sleepily, and Mace rose from his seat and stepped into the hallway, closing the bedroom door behind him.

“How’s she doing?” I asked.

“She’s sleeping it off.” He let out a long, shuddering breath. “She seems fine, though. Even though…” He grimaced. “I’m sorry about earlier. I know I went off the rails there for a while. I didn’t mean what I said.”

“I get it, believe me. There’s no need to apologize.” A self-effacing smirk twisted my lips. “I probably would have been even worse if I were in your shoes.”

I *knew* I would have been worse. If something ever happened to Cali… Simply acknowledging the possibility of something happening to my mate had my inner wolf snarling for blood.

I didn’t want to think about what I’d do. Or how much sheer destruction I’d rain down on those around me.

Mace licked his lips. “Fair enough. But I still don’t trust that witch of yours. If I’m being honest, I’m not convinced she’s innocent in all this. I…” He shook his head. “I’m not ready to apologize to her yet. I might not ever be.”

“Don’t you worry about Big Mac,” I said firmly, a subtle reminder that she was a member of my pack, and Mace didn’t get to make the call on how to handle her.

His eyes narrowed the slightest bit before he nodded. Message received.

“What are we going to do about these… what did you call them? Revenants?” Mace’s voice shifted into that confident, commanding tone that told me he was done talking about personal matters. “As Alphas, we need to figure out a plan. We need to do something to protect our packs. I don’t want anyone else to suffer what Pip has suffered.”

I nodded. “I agree, but I think right now your first priority should be taking care of your mate. We can discuss the revenants later, when she’s back on her feet.”

I kept all my concerns and the nagging sense of dread that maybe Pip would never be the same to myself. But who was I kidding? Pip had been injured by a revenant, which had catapulted her into a coma, made her eyes flash that terrifying shade of bright orange that I only ever saw on revenants themselves, and ultimately ended her life—no matter how brief her death had been.

*How the hell does somebody come back from that?*

A soft, pained moan sounded from behind the closed bedroom door. “Mace?”

He tensed, and then nodded. “Later, then.”

He returned to Pip, moving back to her bedside so fast that even with my heightened vision I struggled to keep up.

Pip was pale, reaching out for Mace with a limp, trembling hand. She didn’t even look fully conscious, but her face was twisted with what looked like pain, and sweat slipped down her face. Mace made soothing noises in his throat, wiping her face with a damp washcloth my mother had brought them.

As I watched them for a moment, that inescapable sense of dread deepened. I knew then that I would willingly die a thousand times over before I’d let the same fate befall Cali.

I headed back to my bedroom but stopped short in the doorway. Perhaps I should have seen it coming, but I was still surprised to see Sabine standing in the middle of my bedroom, her arms crossed over her chest. Waiting for me.

She looked up when she saw me standing there. Worry was etched into her face, and that, combined with the pursing of her lips and her defensive body language, told me in an instant everything I needed to know.

She was upset.

My muscles twitched, and I nearly stepped forward to reach for her, to hug her, to instinctively offer some small measure of comfort, but instead of doing any of that, I stood where I was. I wasn’t there yet, much as she probably wished otherwise. The whole having-a-mother thing, much less living with one, was still beyond foreign to me.

“What can I do for you?” I asked instead, putting down a clear boundary. Right now, I was her Alpha, not her son.

Something flashed in her eyes, but it was gone too quickly for me to parse it. “I’m tired of the way people are treating MacKenzie.”

Ah, I should have guessed.

“Mace had just lost his mate,” I began. “He didn’t know what he was saying—”

“It’s not just Mace! It’s everyone—they question her every motive, watch her every move, and treat her like she’s this hostile outsider, yet the *minute* something goes wrong, who does everyone turn to to fix the problem?”

I sighed. “Okay, what do you want me to do?”

“You’re the Alpha. You should stand up for MacKenzie. She may project a rough exterior, but she’s just as soft on the inside as everyone else. Like… Like an avocado.”

Suddenly I envisioned Big Mac with an avocado body, using her powers to whip up a bowl of magical guac. My lips twitched, but I forced the snicker down. Sabine was beside herself with worry for the woman she loved.

“You should want to support MacKenzie,” she added. “She’ll be your step-mother one day. Sort of.”

*Yeah, that doesn’t exactly help the argument.*

I groaned. “Let’s not even go there. But… I will do a better job of defending her.”

She gave me a weak smile. “Thank you, son.”

I forced a smile to my lips. “Sure. I, uh. I think I’m gonna go get something to drink. You want anything?”

She waved me off, and I escaped downstairs. It didn’t miss me for one moment that I was avoiding my own bedroom in my search for some peace and quiet, but I didn’t have it in me to play mother-and-son with Sabine right now.

I went down to the kitchen, where I found Cali sitting at the table with Artemis and Rishika. They all had large, steaming mugs in front of them, and were talking and laughing together.

I lingered in the doorway to better watch Cali unobserved. God, she was so beautiful. A ray of light in the never-ending dark tunnel of my life.

Suddenly, I imagined anew what it would be like if Cali, not Pip, had been the one to drop dead this morning. And then my mind flashed to that horrifying car crash dream, and a shudder racked through my body.

Cali’s head snapped up, and she set down her mug and came over to me. “Are you okay?”

I nodded. “Just a little shaken by that dream,” I admitted.

She put a hand on my chest, and I savored the warmth of her palm. “It was just a dream. We’re okay.”

I caught her hand and pressed a kiss against her palm. “Even with Xavier here?”

Heat rushed into her cheeks. “Well, um, yeah. But it’s… we’re…”

I put a hand on her cheek. “Don’t worry about it. Him being here changes nothing for me.”

She didn’t look as comforted by that as I’d hoped, so I decided to change the subject.

“Where did you sleep last night, love?” Before Xavier had returned, I’d been hoping Cali would stay with me.

But of course Xavier had ridden in and screwed everything up.

*Fuck him. He’s an ungrateful bastard. Everything I’ve done for him and he’s barely even said “Thank you.” He probably doesn’t even know the words.*

But there was a reason I had, not so subtly, given Cali’s room to Pip and Mace. It had been a cocky move on my part, but I wanted to fall asleep with her body pressed against mine. To go to bed with her scent wrapped around me and to wake with her still in my arms, soft and sleepy and so fucking perfect.

“I stayed in Lola and Jay’s room,” she admitted. “But he’s back now, right? I don’t know what I’ll do tonight.”

“Well, my bed is always open.”

Her already pink cheeks darkened, and satisfaction purred in my chest.

“In fact, not only is it open, but I want you there tonight, if you’re willing. What do you say, love?”

**Episode 1435**

This was torture—plain and simple. There could be no other possible explanation for why Greyson would stand here in the middle of the hallway, where literally anyone could happen upon us, and invite me into his bed for the night.

*It is possible to physically die from embarrassment? Because that is 10/10 where I’m at right now!*

Every nerve ending in my body felt like it was lighting up with arousal and humiliation. And that was the worst part—that even though some part of me was so scandalized by Greyson’s offer that it was practically screaming, *Oh my stars, what a scoundrel!*, another, much, much bigger part of me was nearly purring.

*Cali! Seriously? How can you be turned on right now? Your mate, with whom you have tried very hard to lay down some firm boundaries, is straight up propositioning you in the middle of the pack house!*

Was that horrible for me to admit? Probably. Was I ashamed enough to stop?

That remained to be seen.

Greyson took a step closer, and I felt my whole body flush with heat—again. He was quickly blocking out my senses, engulfing me with him and only him. I could smell him, feel the warmth of him, see the mischief and desire in his darkening eyes.

My mind might have been full of reservations, but my body certainly seemed to know what it wanted. It wanted to envelop itself in him, use him like a soft blanket on a cold night. It wanted me to trace every line of his body with first my fingertips, and then perhaps my tongue.

*God dammit, Greyson.*

I came back to myself just long enough to realize I was staring straight at his lips. Those amazing, irresistible lips that knew exactly how to make me come absolutely undone.

*Emphasis on* come*...*

*Ugh! Focus, Caliana! You know* exactly *why you can’t do any of that right now!*

I jolted when Greyson placed a finger on my lips, and the touch sent a ripple of pleasure down my spine.

“I can see your mind moving a million miles a minute, love,” he murmured. “You don’t have to say yes. You don’t even have to answer me. It’s just food for thought.”

“Um, right.” My voice came out rough, sultry, and I cleared my throat. “Of course.”

I pulled back, stumbling a little as I did so, and Greyson reached out to steady me. I kind of wanted to smack that smug look right off his gorgeous face.

A throat cleared behind us, and I peered around Greyson—and gasped.

Xavier was standing just down the hallway, glaring at us. His arms were crossed over his chest, and his nostrils flared. “Oh, please don’t let me stop you,” he sneered.

Well that was a lie if ever I’d heard one. Xavier was clearly pissed off, but I knew he would absolutely delight in breaking up any moment between Greyson and me. And honestly, I couldn’t blame him. No matter who I was with, I was always upsetting the other one. And by now, the arrangement had to be getting pretty old to both my mates.

Greyson turned around with a long-suffering sigh. “What do you want, little brother?”

The dig—*little*—couldn’t have been more obvious, even if it didn’t exactly fit beyond birth order. There was nothing littleabout either of my mates. In any way.

Still, I wished Greyson wouldn’t antagonize Xavier like that. This situation was impossible enough without them constantly at each other’s throats.

To my surprise, Xavier ignored the dig. “I just spoke to Kira. I want to talk to you about Ava.”

My eyebrows rose. I’d honestly been expecting them to throw down over me, not discuss Ava. But I’d take it. I’d rather talk about Xavier’s psychotic ex-mate than my own screwed up mating situation. And I definitely didn’t want things to escalate to blows, like they had earlier.

Xavier nodded back toward the front door. “Can we go somewhere we won’t be overheard?”

“According to my sources, Ava’s out running right now, but if it makes you feel better, we can talk in the den.”

Greyson led the way, with Xavier close behind. I brought up the rear, trying not to do a double-take at the sudden burst of civility between my two mates. I knew I should have felt relieved, but in reality I felt the exact opposite. Seeing them standing so close to each other, close enough that either one of them could reach out and try to do some serious harm to the other, set my teeth on edge.

Xavier was dynamite and Greyson was a lit match. At any moment, all three of us could be blown sky high.

When we got settled in the den, Greyson immediately turned to Xavier. “What’s going on with Ava?”

“I won’t bring up the stupidity of inviting her back into the pack house,” Xavier said, giving him a pointed look.

Greyson rolled his eyes. “That again? Really?”

My muscles locked up. This didn’t bode well. I casually placed myself between them. “Both of you, stop it. Right now. Before things get out of hand. If you two throw down right now, it will hurt the pack. And the pack needs to come first. You’re here to talk, remember?”

“Fine,” Xavier said through clenched teeth. “Ava is working with Iñigo.”

Iñigo? Wasn’t that—

“The same Iñigo who rented me out as a blood bag to a bunch of bloodsuckers,” Xavier clarified. “I’m going to make that bastard pay.”

I grimaced. I hated the thought of Xavier being held captive and used that way. I couldn’t even imagine what it must be like to have lived through what Xavier had endured. My own brief stint at Sabyr’s mercy couldn’t compare to what Xavier had been put through.

“What makes you so sure?” Greyson asked. “The way Ava tells it, she was held captive, at Iñigo’s mercy. Not all that different from you.”

“And we all know Ava’s never told a lie,” Xavier deadpanned. “I have no doubt that Ava must have spun a pretty tale to get you to bring her back here, but this information is coming from Kira. She used to be Iñigo’s witch, and she developed the method he uses to cover his scent. It’s an herb mixture that makes him undetectable to werewolves.”

Greyson’s eyebrows rose. “Okay? And how does Ava fit in with that?”

“Kira smells the same herbs on her.”

“Hmm.” Greyson seemed to process this. “I can’t say I’m surprised.”

“And you still invited her here?” Xavier pressed, his eyes flashing.

Greyson didn’t so much as flinch. “You were saying?”

It was obvious Greyson was impatient to be done with this conversation, and I could feel Xavier tense beneath the palm I had against his chest, where I was still holding him back.

“You let her in here,” Xavier growled. “Let me get her out of here.”

“You want to throw her out?” Greyson asked.

Xavier’s voice was cold, calm. “Actually, I want to kill her. Again.”

I winced. “I’m the last person on earth to stand up for Ava, but I’m not a fan of all this talk about murder.”

Greyson made a thoughtful expression. “Here’s an idea: maybe don’t kill Ava just yet.”

Xavier’s eyes narrowed, and he shook his head. “I don’t need your fucking permission.”

“Actually, you do. Like it or not, I’m still the Alpha here.”

Xavier lunged for Greyson, but I twisted to push him back with both hands.

“Stop it!” I turned back to Greyson. “Was that really necessary?”

He raised his hands. “I’d love it if my dear brother would think this through for a little longer. Look past the immediate bloodlust and consider the real options and potential consequences here,” he said. “I know you want to take Ava out. That’s old news. But you want to make Iñigo pay for what he did to you too, right?”

Xavier looked ready to foam at the mouth. “Why do you care?”

“It’s a simple yes or no,” Greyson said. “And I ask because if you really want to take out Iñigo, why not use Ava to help you?”

He scoffed. “And how am I supposed to do that?”

Greyson shrugged. “Beats me. Maybe you can try to get close to her. I bet she could lead you straight to Iñigo.” Big Mac walked past, and Greyson followed her with his gaze for a moment before turning back to us. “I need to go have a few words with a witch. Excuse me.”

He gave me a long, lingering look before following Big Mac down the hall.

“Son of a bitch,” Xavier growled. “He’s such a pain in the ass.”

I bit my tongue. Even though I privately agreed with Greyson’s approach, I didn’t want Xavier to think I was taking sides. “What are you going to do? I hope the whole murder idea’s off the table.”

Xavier rubbed his face and then blew out a breath. “As much as it makes my stomach turn, my brother is right. All I have to do is regain Ava’s trust and get close to her. It shouldn’t be hard—she’s still obsessed with me.”

Warning bells went off in my head. “But how close are you going to get to Ava, exactly?”

**Episode 1436**

AVA

The great thing about being a self-imposed captive was that I’d more or less given myself up to Greyson’s mercy, so in theory I had the freedom to leave the pack house on those rare occasions I chose to do so. The not-so-great thing was that I *was* clearly still a captive, because I was never allowed to leave the house without an escort.

Mmm… no. An escort implied that they cared what happened to me, and that I was something to be protected. In reality, it was more like I never left the house without a *warden*. Someone to watch my every move and make sure I didn’t do anything they wouldn’t like.

Case in point: I’d been out on a long run around the pack house—making loops to stay outdoors longer and compensate for the fact that straying too far from the pack house would not end happily for me—for well over an hour, and from the moment I’d shifted on the forest edge and burst into motion, Sage had followed close behind me.

My warden.

I didn’t blame Greyson for making the poor girl do it. Honestly, I wouldn’t have trusted me either, if I’d been in his shoes. In fact, if I were in his shoes, I probably would have killed me a long, long time ago. So maybe I should’ve been a bit more grateful that he was letting me stick around—not only at the Redwood pack house, but on earth in general.

Maybe.

Still, all the understandable intentions in the world didn’t change the fact that having a keeper was annoying. Nobody had ever explicitly told me I was being constantly supervised, but Sage was so freaking terrible at keeping herself hidden from me that it wasn’t exactly a secret. Even if I hadn’t been able to hear her crashing through the forest behind me, I could still smell her without a problem.

*But maybe that’s the goal. Maybe Greyson wants to make sure I know I’m not alone on these jaunts outside. That I’m being watched.*

He could forget about that gratitude, then. I wasn’t interested in playing any power games with Greyson. I’d already had more than enough of that with Iñigo.

It felt good to stretch out my wolf, though, and feel the snow beneath my paws, the cold air sawing in and out of my lungs, and the snowflakes bursting into the air as I sped by. Winter had always been one of my favorite seasons, and now that I was no longer six feet under, I had this gorgeous opportunity to experience its simple pleasure once more.

That was the thing about this twisted second life I’d been given—all my pleasures were simple, small. Anything else was out of reach for someone like me, passed around to use as a tool, distrusted by the few people who knew me from my first life. Alone, without a scrap of help—save for the fair-weather allies I’d managed to scrounge up since Silas had been killed. But even those had turned against me.

My brother was gone. My pack was all but decimated. My mate had abandoned me. His pack distrusted me. And even Iñigo, the closest thing I’d had to a constant in the past few weeks, was probably out for my head by now.

I had to keep things simple for now. Simple pleasures, small joys, moments of peace scraped together one at a time while I fought like hell to make it to the next sunrise.

Maybe one day I’d figure out how to stop trading one set of shackles for another.

I rounded the bend and came to a skidding stop. There was someone behind the tree!

My hackles rose, and I tensed, ready to defend myself—

But the dark shadow lurking around the bend turned out to be a fallen tree. Nothing scary about that. My racing heart began to slow.

*Okay, maybe now’s a good time to go back to the house.*

I wasn’t that far from the house, nowhere near far enough into the forest to come near Iñigo’s territory. But the joy had been stolen from my run. Now, I saw Iñigo lurking around every corner and lunging for me with every blur of movement I caught in the corner of my eye. I didn’t want to talk to him right now. Hell, if I thought I could actually get away with it, I’d try to avoid him forever.

But such was my luck. One way or another, I would find myself at his mercy—and soon—and it would be better for me if I didn’t piss him off too much along the way.

I still hadn’t told him about the Thanksgiving plan. It was still a ways off, and he would undoubtedly be pissed off that I wasn’t delivering soon.

And now, there was a whole other complication.

Xavier was back.

My heart ached to think of how close he was now, living in the same house. I couldn’t cut and run so soon. Not with my mate just a few doors down.

I decided to round back and caught Sage following me on my way.

“Hey, have a good run?” I asked.

She skidded to a stop and shifted back, staring at me open mouthed as I headed back into the warm house.

The shower did a wonderful job thawing the chill in my bones, but it didn’t help the nagging panic that had set in during my run. No amount of rationalizing did a damn thing to ease it, nor did the knowledge that I was safe inside the walls of the pack house.

The longer I ruminated on it, the clearer my choice became. I had to bite the bullet and just call Iñigo. I stepped out of the shower, wrapped myself in a towel, and picked up my phone.

Iñigo answered on the third ring, at which point my nerves were so shot the phone was shaking in my hand.

Iñigo, on the other hand, was cool as a cucumber. “Do you have any news for me?” he asked, in lieu of an actual greeting.

Which was probably for the best, honestly. Business first—and last. There was no room for emotions in this transaction. Even if my mouth was so dry from fear that it took a few attempts for me to speak.

“I’m working on it.”

“‘Working on it’?” His voice took on a sharp edge. “I seem to remember hearing that before. And still, I have yet to see even one fucking Fae delivering to my doorstep. I’d come and collect them myself if *someone* wasn’t dragging her feet about inviting me in.”

This, at least, didn’t have anything to do with my plans for the Fae. The pack house was my last refuge from Iñigo. Once I invited him in, that safety would be gone. And probably my life along with it.

I took a deep breath. “I’m sorry, but I’m still earning their trust back. It’s just going to take some time. Once everything is sorted out, I’ll invite you in and you can have them.”

There was a long beat of silence on the other end of the line before Iñigo asked, “Ava, what aren’t you telling me?”

I grimaced, curling my free hand into a tight fist and slamming it soundlessly against my mattress. I hated that it was so easy for him to read me. “Xavier’s back.”

“Your mate, who broke your connection?”

I bristled. “Yes.”

I wasn’t stupid. Iñigo knew exactly who Xavier was to me. It wasn’t like there were a lot of werewolves running around here with that name.

“Now that the man who abandoned you is bunking nearby again, what? You suddenly don’t have time to focus on this job? Is pathetically stalking him around that big-ass house really so time consuming?”

“He knows how to read me,” I said through gritted teeth. “I have to be extra careful with him around.”

“You’d think you’d want to be *extra careful* not to give me yet another reason to break your fucking neck,” he hissed.

I swallowed roughly. “I’m—”

“I don’t care that you’re sorry, Ava. I don’t care that you’re trying. I don’t care about the particulars of your pathetic little love life.”

“Iñigo—”

“*Shut. Up.* I’m talking now. And I’m telling you right now that I’m sick of waiting for you to prove yourself useful to me. I’m sick of your false promises. You had better produce something useful soon, or you’ll have much bigger problems to deal with than getting caught. Do you understand me?”

“Yes,” I squeaked. “You want something useful.”

“And what a lovely parrot you make.”

Anger grew inside me. “Did you know that your witch is here?”

The line went silent.

*Holy shit? Did I just surprise him?*

“I beg your pardon?” he asked, his voice low and silky. As dangerous as it could get. “You’re telling me that *Kira* is there, at the pack house?”

“Yes,” I said smugly. “She arrived last night.”

“Hold on.”

I paced around the room, listening to muffled voices on the other end of the line. Would this help my case? I needed all the help I could get. There were only five Fae at the house right now. Would he even accept only five of them?

His voice came back on the line. “Thank you for the information. Keep an eye on that witch, and don’t let her out of your sight.”

The line went dead.

My knees buckled, and I collapsed onto my bed. How had I gotten myself into this mess?

I wished I could separate myself from Iñigo, but he had such a charming pull about him. If he were here in person, I wasn’t so sure that he wouldn’t charm me back into everything again.

I jumped when I heard a knock at my door.

“Wh-Who is it?” I called.

“It’s Xavier.”

A tangled knot of emotions slammed into my chest. I slowly got up and headed to the door, opening it just a crack.

On the other side, Xavier smiled at me. How long had it been since I’d seen his gorgeous smile?

“I know what you’re up to,” he said.

**Episode 1437**

MARTA

“Wait,” I said to a nearly hysterical Violet. “Charlie is hanging out with another girl at training camp, and he didn’t say anything about it?”

Violet nodded, and then shook her head. “I’m not sure if they’re like, *hanging out*, hanging out. I just saw him tagged in this Instagram post with another girl, and they were standing really close together and—Oh, I’ll just show you.”

She fished around in her pocket and pulled out her phone, then flipped it around to show me the picture.

Next to me, Lilac leaned in to view the screen. He scowled. “What the hell?”

Honestly, I was still getting used to telephones being the size of candy bars, so sending real-time, high definition, color photos through them—along with whatever the hell “social media” was—and videos and everything else… It all went over my head. I didn’t know the difference between Picgram and Twitbook. Face Tok was kind of fun, but Violet always drove the electronics, and I would’ve had no idea how to find any of those videos on my own.

In my day, it had taken at least a week to see pictures, and the only place we’d had to post them had been a bulletin board.

But technology aside, I did still have two working eyes, so it wasn’t difficult to take in the picture she was shoving in my face. Charlie and that girl really *were* close. I could see why Violet was worried.

“‘I’m safe in the arms of this cutie—my hero’?” I read, then met my friend’s eyes. “What happened there? Did he save her life, or something?”

“I have no idea!” Violet cried. “He hasn’t mentioned *any* of this to me. What should I do?”

I hesitated. What did I know about relationships? I had never been in one, and after being trapped in that house for so long, I was pretty sure I had some baggage to unpack that would make it hard to be in a relationship. Plus, my flirting skills were a solid fifty years out of date.

“I know what I would do,” Lilac piped up, giving me a meaningful glance. “I mean, first of all, we need to face facts—that girl is hot. If I were in Violet’s shoes, I’d shift and rip her to pieces.”

I rolled my eyes. “Like I’m going to tell her that.”

“Tell me what?” Violet asked.

He shrugged. “I don’t see why not—it’s funny.”

“Uh, no. It’s not.” I gently pushed on his shoulder. “Just shut up.”

“*Excuse me?*” Violet snapped.

I shot Lilac a dirty look and then turned my attention to Violet. “Sorry, your brother is being an annoying pest.”

“I am not.”

I sighed. “Yes, you are. You always are. I’m pretty sure ‘Lilac’ is actually a synonym for ‘pest,’ now that I think about it.”

“Hey!” Violet snapped her finger in front of my face. “Will you both stop bickering for, like, ten seconds? This isn’t about you—it’s about *me* and my *mate*, who, by the way, is posing in pictures with some other girl. This is serious.”

Was it, though?

I tried to be supportive, but this was one of those situations for which I just wasn’t a good fit. Violet and Charlie had literally saved my life, and I would be forever grateful to them for that. And after getting me away from Bert, they’d gone so far as to bring me along, include me in their journeys, and even offer me a home at the pack house. Violet was the best friend I’d ever had, and I loved her.

But I didn’t get this mate stuff. And I genuinely didn’t understand why Violet agonized over half of the things she did when it came to her mate. She didn’t want him to go learn to be a hunter in Minnesota, but as far as I knew, she’d never told him that. She hated his parents and genuinely feared for his life, but that was being kept mum, too.

Now she was spinning about this picture she’d found by accident, jumping to worst-case scenarios when there was a very simple and logical course of action: actually talking to her mate.

“What do you think would happen if you just asked Charlie about the picture?” I asked.

Lilac burst out laughing. “That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

I glared at him. “Are you calling me stupid?”

Violet stamped her foot. “ENOUGH! You two are useless. I’ll figure it out myself.”

She stormed out of the room without another word.

We’d really screwed that one up. I turned to Lilac. “We shouldn’t have argued like that. That isn’t what she needs right now.”

He held up his hands. “I was only trying to help.”

“Were you, though?” I raised an eyebrow. “You, the guy who suggested ripping that other girl to pieces?”

Lilac shrugged. “I don’t see a problem.”

I groaned. “You know, it’s hard enough to talk to Violet about relationships, but it’s nearly impossible with you commenting on every little thing I say. Besides the fact that you’re wrong and annoying, I can barely keep track of who’s saying what.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” he said, sarcasm dripping from his tone. “It’s not my fault I *have* to be here and that she can’t hear. It’s not easy existing like this, but good feedback. I’ll try not to get murdered at a young age next time so you don’t have to be burdened by my presence.”

Guilt tugged at my stomach. I wished I were strong enough to bring Lilac back for longer. It would have made them both so happy… Plus, then I wouldn’t have to channel his annoying comments all the time. I thought of the disappointment on Violet’s face, and my stomach twisted tighter.

I owed her so much. I wished I could do better by her.

“You still haven’t told her that I want her to stop trying to bring me back,” Lilac said suddenly.

I glared at him. “I’m sorry I failed you both, I guess. What am I supposed to tell her?”

“It’s fine. You should cut yourself some slack. Violet’s way too worked up about Charlie. It’s silly.”

Privately, I thought that as well, but coming from Lilac, it didn’t sit well with me. “That’s not fair. Violet is going through a lot.”

He gave me a dubious look. “Why are you getting mad at me? I’m saying this to defend *you*!”

“Your sister is my friend too, and I don’t want her feelings being dismissed on my behalf.”

Lilac sighed. “I’m sorry. Maybe everyone’s emotions are just heightened because of the whole resurrection thing. We should probably take a beat on that, anyway. This necromancy stuff… it doesn’t sit well with me. I don’t want either of you to go down a dark path for me. Especially since things are so weird with the spirit realm right now.”

“Wait.” I froze. “Are you saying that I’m purposefully putting Violet in danger? I would never do that! I like her! She’s probably my only friend!”

“Wow. You’re putting words in my mouth. I’m worried about *both* of you!”

I scoffed. “I can take care of myself.”

“Oh really? Did you take care of yourself when you got trapped in a haunted house for decades?”

My jaw dropped. That was a low blow. Even for him. I was starting to turn away when I felt a light pressure on my arm. It was Lilac’s hand.

“I’m sorry.” He looked it too. “I shouldn’t have said that. I let myself get too emotional because… Well, I care about you, Marta.”

For reasons I didn’t fully understand, my heart began to race. The sweet sincerity on Lilac’s face made my stomach flip-flop. I didn’t know what to do with that. I turned back to him. “I know. But you need to trust me, too. If you can’t trust me, then this being tethered thing is going to get really tense and awkward.”

His hand, which was still on my arm, squeezed gently. “I do trust you. In fact, besides Violet, you’re the person I trust most in the world. There is no one else I’d rather be tethered to.”

My mouth went dry. No one had ever said anything so nice to me before. Lilac and Violet—and even Charlie, to an extent—were kinder than anyone I’d known in my previous life, family included.

Even if Lilac was really, really annoying sometimes.

But I wasn’t annoyed right now. If anything, I was… happy? Extra-warm?

I swallowed.

*It’s just a side effect of being tethered.*

But I knew that wasn’t it. It was because Lilac was such a great guy, not to mention he was kind of cute. I couldn’t deny that he made my heart flutter.

Then Lilac leaned forward, and I was suddenly hit with a thought that I’d never considered before.

*Is he going to kiss me?*

Wow. Where did that come from?

I started to lean forward too… and then Lilac gently wrapped his ghost arms around me and gave me a hug.

Something tugged at my chest. Something like disappointment. I’d really thought he was going to kiss me.

I gasped. *Oh my god. Do I have a crush on a ghost?*

**Episode 1438**

CHARLIE

I rushed forward and pushed the tackling dummy back with all my strength. I was still pissed off about my call with Violet, but trying my best not to wallow in it. She’d hung up on me, and yet all I wanted was to call and apologize to her.

Instead, I was out here in the freezing cold, pushing these stupid tackling dummies around. I never would’ve thought that football exercises would be a part of hunter training. I’d gone up against my fair share of supernatural beings and held my own just fine without practicing any of this stuff. Every day this place seemed more and more like a joke, and I was becoming more and more over it.

I’d much rather have been driving a stake into a vampire’s chest, or racing through the woods as a wolf—feeling the wind in my fur—tuned in to every sight, smell, and sound around me. There was no doubt in my mind that I could teach all of these “hunters” a thing or two about how to properly prepare to go up against a murderous bloodsucker. For one thing, they rarely sat still in front of you waiting for you to push them over like these dummies. Unrealistic to the max.

Sergeant Pepperdine’s whistle cut through the air. “Roll it back, folks! Go again! Kim, improve your form!”

*Really? He’s singling me out?* I nearly laughed out loud. I wished I could show Pepperdine all the sports trophies lining my shelves. I remembered how I’d had to help my mom build extra shelves, just to hold all my lacrosse trophies. I wasn’t one to brag, but come on—what form was one supposed to have when going up against inanimate objects?

“Way to go, loser,” Chad sneered.

I fumed and dropped back down into an attack stance, ready to tear into the stupid dummies and show Pepperdine and Chad The Asshole what I was capable of. I shot Chad a sidelong glance. He was still looking at me with a smug look on his stupid face. It was clear that my very existence got under his skin, and he was trying his best to make me pay the price for his discomfort.

Why did there always have to be a guy like Chad? There’d been one in kindergarten called Danny—he’d liked to steal my crayons and melt them on the radiator. Then elementary school—that one had been called Evan—he would put his boogers on the chairs of the boys he didn’t like, and the girls he liked. Not too bright, that one. Not to mention a bunch in junior high and in high school who’d rained various brands of terror down on anyone they’d turned their sights on.

Hell, I used to face a rival team whose entire roster had been made up of douchebags like Chad—severely untalented and massively overconfident. I’d dusted the floor with more than a few of them, and it had felt damn good. Yet they’d always had the best girlfriends on their arms. Go figure.

I pictured Chad’s face on the tackling dummy in front of me, which wasn’t hard since they both shared the same dull expression. At Pepperdine’s signal, I slammed into it, knocking it clear off the stand and driving it into the dirt until it bent like a pretzel. I stood up and recovered while everyone stared at me. I rolled my shoulders and flexed my biceps under my jersey. *Take that, Chad.*

“Way to go, bro!” Zachery called out. I could always count on Zachery.

I realized then that I’d gone a little too far—again. *Damn.*

Pepperdine blew his whistle again. “Time for some line scrimmages!”

Line scrimmages? Maybe I’d accidentally walked into the wrong camp and we were all actually “hunting” for a chance at the football championship.

I laughed to myself a bit as I lined up against Chad. This time I wouldn’t have to just picture his face—he was right there in front of me, already scowling like the dumb beast that he was.

The play was called, and Chad and I collided. Before long, our pushing turned into an intense shoving match that continued even after the whistle blew. I had a fist full of Chad’s jersey as he came at me like the ogre he was, trying to tear my jersey clear off me.

“I’m taking you down, golden boy,” Chad hissed, spit flying in my face.

Why did this guy have it in for me so bad? I was trying to keep it together, doing my best not to snap, but it was getting to be too much.

Without thinking, I shifted.

Chad’s eyes went wild, and he stumbled backward as I pounced on him, tearing his helmet off and ripping out his throat.

Then the whistle blew again. I shook my head and realized that I was still human, still locked into a savage tangle with Chad, one second from driving him into the ground.

I could already hear the satisfying sound of him hitting the dirt and me dropping my cleats down onto his neck and pinning him to the ground while I made him apologize for being a raging asshole.

Then I remembered. *Keep a low profile; don’t let them know that you’re more than a hunter.* I ripped away from Chad, purposefully easing up. Chad took that opportunity to punch me in the stomach. I sucked in air and stumbled backward. I should have known he’d take a cheap shot.

“Enough!” Sergeant Pepperdine yelled, leaping between us. “Both of you, five laps!”

Zachery reached down and helped me to my feet. “You could’ve taken Chad, easy,” he said. I nearly mentioned how not only could I have “taken” him, I could have snapped his neck without breaking a sweat, but I knew that admitting such a thing might not go over well, to say the least.

“You win some, you lose some,” I said, and spat on the ground, still reeling from the gut punch and trying hard not to show it. Inside, though, I was beyond annoyed. Was this what it took to seem normal? Allowing a jerk like Chad to think he was better than me? If so, being normal sucked.

I threw off my helmet and launched into my laps, trying to slow down so that Chad stayed more than a few paces ahead of me. I had no desire to fight with him again—not because I was scared, but because I knew I wouldn’t be able to pull back a second time.

There was no doubt that blood would be spilled if I got my hands on him again, and then I would have no choice but to shift and get the hell out of dodge. No matter how attractive that option seemed, I knew it was a no-go. I couldn’t shame my parents that way—my mother would never forgive me.

I watched as the others finished practice and headed into the locker room. All I wanted was to shower, go back to my room, forget this day had ever happened, and pretend that Chad was an annoying figment of my imagination.

Chad slowed down and started taunting me. “You think you can come here, a newbie, and take my place? Get real, Kim. We all know what you did.”

I tried my best to ignore him, but I couldn’t help wondering what it was he thought I’d done.

“Like you don’t know.” Chad snorted, running in place now. “It’s so fucking obvious.”

I slowed to a stop but stayed a safe distance from Chad. I didn’t trust myself to get any closer. “What are you talking about?”

“You thought you could take Sophie from me by rescuing her. You set the whole thing up.”

*What? Was this guy unhinged?* I stood there, dumbfounded, trying to make sense of everything as Chad continued.

“You happened to be the only one next to Sophie when she fell through the hole in the ice. The hole you put there.”

My eyes practically bulged out of my head as I stifled the urge to laugh at the ridiculousness of this. Yeah, this guy was Grade-A delusional.

“Are you crazy?” I asked.

“No, *you’re* crazy if you think you’re going to get away with it,” Chad replied.

“You’re full of shit,” I said, trying to sound as nonchalant as I could. I picked up my pace. I couldn’t wait until this hunter crap was over. All I wanted was to be with Violet.

Chad was the worst type of bully: the kind that was as deluded as he was dumb. It scared me to think that this guy would soon be out in the world, hunting supernaturals like me. He was a complete idiot, and I’d learned that violent idiots were the type to fear the most. At least a violent person with a brain could be reasoned with, and practiced discernment when choosing their victims.

I finished my laps and returned to the locker room. Sergeant Pepperdine was there with two other faculty members, standing by my open locker.

“What’s going on?” I asked them.

Sergeant Pepperdine held out a pickaxe. “Mr. Kim, can you explain this?”

**Episode 1439**

XAVIER

I kept my eyes fixed on Ava, watching as a flicker of fear sparked in hers before she regained her composure. She’d never been quite as good as she thought she was at covering up her emotions, though I figured when it came to her, I was a little bit more perceptive than others might have been.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said. She flipped her hair over her shoulder and cocked her head to the side. Now that she’d recovered, she returned my stare head on.

I laughed. “You should know better than to underestimate me,” I said. “So, are you going to let me in? Or are you afraid to?”

She stepped aside. “Why would I be afraid of you?”

“Is that supposed to make you sound tough?” I almost laughed, stepping past her and into the room. It smelled like her, and my eyes dragged from the neatly made bed to her weekender bag shoved in the corner, the few belongings she possessed tucked inside.

“You still haven’t told me. What is it that I’m up to?” she asked. She even flashed a small smile, as if she were teasing me. She wanted to appear light and unaffected, and to the untrained eye, she definitely seemed as such.

I took a moment to draw in her scent as I turned to face her, trying to pick up the smell that Kira had talked about. All I noticed was her familiar smell mixed in with the scent of her shampoo and perfume. But that didn’t mean Kira was wrong. Already, I trusted Kira more than I would ever trust Ava.

“You aren’t here to hide from Iñigo,” I said. I couldn’t care less if she was scared of the vampire. As far as I was concerned, she had made her own bed and she could die in it, but I did need to know what it was she truly wanted. I needed her to say it.

“Oh? I’m not?” she asked innocently.

“No. You’re here because of me. You haven’t given up on us, but we’re unmated, Ava. You need to come to terms with that and back the fuck off.”

I saw her reaction—a flash of hurt. Once again, she’d failed to cover up her true feelings.

I would have thought that seeing the hurt in her eyes would make me feel good, but I was surprised to realize that it didn’t.

“I’ll admit it. When we were eighteen and in love, I never thought I’d unmate from you. I thought we’d be together forever,” I said with easy sincerity.

For a moment, the gravity of it all hit me like it never had before now. The unmating was still pretty fresh. Everything had happened so fast, and there had been so much craziness lately that I hadn’t really taken the time to process my feelings about it all.

*Did I actually feel anything about the unmating?* I felt relief, that much was for sure, but I wondered if there was something else there, underneath that. Being blindly angry at her for everything she’d done had served to make me apathetic about it. Not to mention, being captured by hungry vampires not long after I’d actually performed the unmating. Talk about a perfect distraction. But now that I was here with her and actually speaking with her face to face, I realized that some dregs of sentimentality about what we used to share remained.

A clear memory of the two of us discussing a future so full of promise drifted through my mind. We’d discussed our lives together more times than I could count, and we’d never even fathomed that we wouldn’t be together, or that things would have ever ended up so irreparably broken between us.

I’d really believed in our bond, once upon a time. But now, that forever bond was with Cali, and I wouldn’t have it any other way. It was strange how things worked out, how chance events could change the entire course of your life in an instant.

“You’re wrong about me,” Ava said, her mouth set with determination. I’d seen that look many times before—had even appreciated it, once upon a time.

“Am I?”

Ava stepped closer to me. “Unmating me was the worst thing you could have done—worse than death.” A small, sob-like sound escaped her lips, but she sailed right over it and kept speaking. “But I didn’t come here because of you. I came here because I needed help. If you can believe that, if you can trust that’s why I’m here, maybe we can stop hating each other.”

Her eyes shone as if she was on the verge of tears, but I remained unmoved. Years ago, seeing her enduring any sort of emotional suffering would’ve felt like a punch in the gut, but those days were long gone.

I wished I could believe her, but experience had taught me well.

“Maybe Greyson’s right. Maybe I should try to be more… forgiving,” I said.

She placed a hand on my arm, and I stopped myself from slapping it away. I wouldn’t go so far as to say that her touch made my skin crawl, but the sensation I felt was very close to it.

“Can you do that? Can we work to become friends some day?” she asked.

I looked into her eyes—the same eyes I’d fallen in love with so long ago—but then I was hit by a flash of memory of my mother, bloodied and bruised, falling dead at Ava’s feet.

I maintained my composure and nodded. “Friends? Maybe. Maybe someday.”

I felt stiff and a little awkward. I could hear the iciness in my own voice, and if Ava knew me as well as I knew her, she’d heard it, too.

Us becoming friends was a stretch—there’d been too much bad blood between us for that to ever be a real possibility. The most we could hope for was respectful tolerance, I was sure. I removed her hand from my arm and turned to leave.

“I told your mother that I would do everything I could to keep you alive,” she said. I could hear the desperation in her voice, and I didn’t like it. It was like she was trying anything, everything, to get me to stay.

I paused, considering her carefully. “Was that before or after you killed her?”

An awkward silence passed between us before she mustered up the nerve to continue.

“When I was escaping from Silas’s cabin, I spoke with Marlene. I mean, it was her ghost, and the conversation wasn’t as long or as in depth as I would’ve liked, but I made a vow to her that I would protect you, and I meant it,” she said.

There was an earnestness to her voice that surprised me, and this newest revelation rocked me to my core, but I managed to keep my composure intact.

“I kept my word. I’ve done nothing but help you ever since,” Ava added.

Now, that part was a stretch. I could name a few things that she’d done since she’d come back into my life that fell short of helping me, that was for sure.

Besides that, with Ava, one could never be sure what was the truth and what was a lie. The honesty in her voice as she spoke about the promise she’d made to my mother now served to cast a shadow on everything else she’d said today—those words hadn’t had the same veracity. It was too much to contemplate, and I had no interest in doing it here.

I said nothing, just left, still reeling from her admission. My mother had spoken to Ava? *My mother spoke to me, too, but in riddles, and left too soon*,I thought, with no small amount of bitterness.

I was frustrated. Talking to Ava always set me on edge. I could never quite manage to get the upper hand. I’d much rather fight a problem that talk to it, and maybe that was half the reason why. I was done fighting Ava, so what was left? It felt like we were going in circles with these talks of ours. There was always something unsettling about our conversations. I still didn’t know what Ava was up to, but I knew that it was something. It would come out sooner or later.

It occurred to me that there was someone who *would* know. If my mother’s ghost had spoken to Ava, there had to be a reason. If her ghost was still around, had she been watching Ava? Had she been hanging around to make sure she kept her vow to protect me?

I quickened my pace and found Marta in her room. The door was open, and she was sitting at her vanity, trying on different lipstick colors in the mirror. Upon seeing me, she tossed the lipstick, looking a little flustered.

“You’re Xavier, right? One of Cali’s mates?” she asked.

I frowned, and she apologized.

“What, was I not supposed to say that?” she asked with an innocent look. “I’m still learning about all this werewolf stuff, sorry.” She seemed genuinely sorry—that was refreshing. She even looked a little embarrassed to have put her foot in her mouth. After coming from my talk with Ava, this made me smile despite myself.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said, waving my hand in dismissal, wanting to get right to the point. “What I want to know is… Can you contact a ghost for me?”

**Episode 1440**

I was sitting on the couch in the den, my nose in a book that I wasn’t reading, worried about Xavier’s chat with Ava. I wasn’t sure how it was going, but I didn’t like it—the idea of it, the thought of it, the reality of it. He’d assured me that it was all to expose her for the creepy little snake that she was, and I was all for that. Still, I knew deep down—well, maybe not all that deep down—that Ava wanted Xavier back.

That was all there was to it, really. It wasn’t that I didn’t trust Xavier—I did, no question. It was Ava I didn’t trust. In fact, I actively distrusted her, and every move that she made. Every flip of her amazing hair, every purse of her too-perfect lips. Who could trust someone that beautiful, anyway? When it came to Ava, trust was a four-letter word, but with five letters.

I snapped the book closed and went into the kitchen. Torin, clearly excited, was waving a baster in Astrid’s face while he explained how it worked.

“So,” he sang, gearing up, “you remove the big squishy ball thing and put the liquid in here,” he said, demonstrating. “Then you twist this back on…”

“I get it,” Astrid said, exasperated. “Stop. It makes things juicy, yum, got it.”

I couldn’t believe that Thanksgiving was so soon. We didn’t have all that much to be thankful for at the moment, but maybe the holiday would change that. Growing up, holidays had always had a way of pressing a reset button. I hoped it would be the same this year.

Dad was rummaging through the fridge. “Do we have corned beef? Does anyone know? I’m really in the mood for a Reuben. I’ve been having the craziest craving for meat lately.”

He stood up and rubbed his stomach. I couldn’t help but remember how he’d looked chasing after that ball.

I sighed. It would be nice to celebrate with Mom and Dad and the pack, even if my dad was still acting weird.

“So, stuffing—should I use chestnuts? Cali, what do you think?” Torin asked, his eyebrows arched so high that they were *this* close to getting trapped in his hair.

I wondered how Torin could get so caught up in simple things like ruining a perfectly good serving of dressing, but I didn’t begrudge him his ability to look on the bright side to distract himself from everything else. He hadn’t exactly signed up to be part of our ongoing drama, after all, so I was sure he was just making the best of things.

“Torin is becoming obsessed with Thanksgiving, if you haven’t noticed. He’s starting to drive me mad,” Astrid said, crossing her eyes for emphasis.

Mom was off to the side, buttering a few pieces of toast. “Cali, would you mind taking this up to Pip?”

“Sure,” I said, thankful to be of use for a moment. Maybe it would get my mind off Xavier and Ava.

I took the plate and went upstairs to my room, which was now Pip’s room while she recovered. I was pleased to see that Pip was sitting up in bed, which was a vast improvement over how she’d looked when the Blue Blood pack had first brought her to the pack house.

Mace looked better too, a lot less stressed, though I could still see the concern in his every move as he hovered over Pip, fluffing her pillows and smoothing the covers around her, offering her water two times before I even made it to the bed.

“How are you feeling?” I asked her, setting the plate of toast on the bedside table.

“I’m fine,” she said. Her words didn’t quite ring true. She seemed distracted, distant, not the Pip I remembered—but who could blame her? She *had* just come back from the dead. That had to affect you in strange ways.

I remembered when I’d first met Pip at the barbecue—which seemed a lifetime ago, now. She’d been so outspoken and lively. Now, she was like a shadow of her former self. Maybe she just needed some time to recover, remember what it was like to be alive.

“Well, I just wanted to see how you were, bring you some toast,” I said cheerily. “Don’t hesitate to ask me for anything you need.”

Pip gave a stiff nod, and I turned to head out. Mace followed right behind me.

“Hey, can I talk to you?” he asked. I could see the worry all over his face. I followed him down the hall, noticing that he was putting a lot of distance between us and Pip’s room, as if he didn’t want to risk her hearing us.

“Listen, I feel like you’ve always been honest, like I can trust you,” he said. “I just want to know—did you notice anything… *off* about Pip just now?”

His eyes had a heartbreaking pleading look, and I knew that he would’ve given anything just to have her back the way she was. I would be frantic too if Greyson or Xavier had—no, nope, didn’t want to think about it.

Pip had definitely not seemed like herself, that was for sure, but again, that was to be expected. She’d just gone through a horrific experience—she’d died! I told Mace as much, but I could tell that he wasn’t ready to just accept that her current behavior was a normal reaction to the trauma she’d gone through.

“I know that. I understand that she just went through hell—I was there, it was awful. But I just can’t shake this feeling that… Pip just isn’t really Pip.” He jabbed his fingers into his temples and closed his eyes. His internal struggle was palpable.

I felt thrown by his assessment, but I couldn’t discount what he was saying—not with all the craziness that had been happening lately.

“I feel guilty even thinking this,” Mace continued, “but something’s just not right. With all the talk about dark magic, all my instincts are going off like crazy trying to tell me that Pip might be… might be a part of it, somehow. I don’t know which mate you’re with, Cali, but you have the ear of an Alpha. Maybe you know more about what’s going on than the others?”

I paused. I knew exactly how Mace was feeling. After all, I was feeling the exact same way about my sister. I tried to think of what I could tell Mace without alarming him. I really didn’t know much more than he did, which was admittedly not much. I didn’t think Xavier or Greyson knew much more, either. We were all learning as we went and trying our best to stay one step ahead of the dangers cropping up around us.

“Whatever’s affecting Pip, this is the safest place for her,” I offered, feeling bad that I couldn’t do or say more to alleviate his worries.

“I hope so,” Mace said. “I can’t stop worrying about her. But hey, thanks for talking to me. I know I’m a mess.”

“Don’t apologize, Mace, I totally get it,” I said. “Just make sure to holler if you or Pip need anything.”

He turned and headed back to join Pip. I still felt bad, wishing that I could actually do something to make him feel better. It was crazy how much I could relate to what he was going through. I wondered if he was right—if there *was* dark magic involved. If that was the case, shouldn’t we be able to do something about it?

Then it hit me—Kira’s potion. I still had some left. Maybe I could take some more and see if I was repelled from Pip—or anyone else who might be hiding dark magic. *Even Artemis*, I thought regretfully. I wouldn’t mind using the potion to protect myself. It was supposed to ward off dark magic, after all, and it seemed to do the trick last time with no harm done.

I returned to the kitchen, which was still buzzing with festive activity. Dad and Torin were engaged in a heated argument about how best to make a Reuben. My dad looked like he was about to drool all over himself as he got into the meaty details.

I opened the fridge, looking for the potion. I looked around for a few moments before I realized that it wasn’t where I remembered leaving it. Torin must have moved it to accommodate something that he was marinating.

I moved a couple of other things to the side before I spotted it sitting at the back of the fridge. I took it, slipped it beneath my jacket, and went outside. I held it up to the light, remembering how amazing I’d felt the last time I drank it.

I unscrewed the cap and took a large sip… and nearly spat it right back out. It was way more bitter than I remembered it being. I plugged my nose and gulped it down. Maybe it was spoiled? Did potions go bad? I stood there, trying to swallow a bunch of my spit to get the taste out of my mouth, waiting for something to happen. Nothing super obvious had happened last time, so I wasn’t sure what it was I was waiting for.

Then a sharp pain ripped through my body, and I collapsed to the ground.

**Episode 1441**

GREYSON

I was with Big Mac in the room she shared with my mother, trying not to make this situation any more awkward than it already was. I couldn’t remember ever having been in this room since my mother and Big Mac had made it theirs. Or if I had, I’d blocked it out like I did anything that made me even mildly uncomfortable.

In addition to a bunch of strange bottles, charms, and dried things hanging all over the walls and neatly lining the shelves, there were snapshots of Big Mac and my mother in various loving poses everywhere. Half-burned candles stood like relics on the bedside tables, and I even spotted a few dried rose petals on the floor beside the bed. I didn’t want to think about what any of that meant—maybe it was all for Big Mac’s spell work. Yeah, that had to be it.

I turned my attention back to Big Mac. I’d gone from having no mom to essentially having two—and I’d promised my mother that I would try to be more sensitive toward Big Mac, which wasn’t easy. It was like trying to hug a cactus.

“Hey, I just wanted to apologize,” I started.

Big Mac looked taken aback. “Did Sabine put you up to this?” she asked, her eyes narrowed into slits. I couldn’t recall how many times I’d seen her with that look, but it was probably in the millions.

“Well, she asked me to, but the truth is, I should have stood up for you with the whole Mace thing. Not just because we’re going to be a family, but because you deserve to be treated better.”

Big Mac waved me off and looked away, but I could see that she was getting emotional.

I decided to try to lighten the mood.

“Please don’t expect me to call you Step-Mom,” I said with a nervous laugh.

“Don’t you dare!” Big Mac said, her nostrils flaring and her eyes going wide with horror.

“I promise, I won’t.” I held up my hands in surrender.

I remembered what my mother had said—that Big Mac wasn’t as tough as she appeared, and for once, I could really see it—a sensitive side. But even Big Mac’s sensitive side seemed rather prickly, yet not… unlikable.

“I’ve never been good with family relationships—after all, Silas wasn’t the ideal dad. But I do value family above everything else. You’re part of my family now, so I’ll be there for you just like I would be for my mom,” I said.

“Alright, kid, sounds like a deal.”

Having Big Mac on my side would be an asset. She was one of the best witches I’d ever come into contact with. She was always quick on her feet and was more than capable of holding her own in any situation. I was proud that my mother was with such a strong witch, even if Big Mac tended to get under people’s skin from time to time.

I studied her face closely, then pulled back in shock. Was that a smile? Hard to tell. An awkward silence passed between us. Well, Rome wasn’t built in a day. I stood up.

“Okay then—glad we could have this talk.”

Whatever had passed for an intimate moment between the two of us ended when I heard Astrid calling my name in the hallway. I stuck my head out of the doorway to see her running toward me.

“Hey, what’s going on?” I asked, a sick feeling dropping into the pit of my stomach as I took in the panicked look on Astrid’s face.

“It’s Cali!” Astrid shrieked. “You have to come now!”

I’d already leapt into action the moment she’d said Cali’s name. I ran downstairs with Big Mac close behind. Astrid led us to the kitchen, where Torin had Cali’s limp body cradled in his right arm, his free hand shining with his healing magic. Xavier came running into the kitchen a few seconds after we arrived. We exchanged a look as we both rushed to Cali’s side.

Torin passed Cali into our arms as he began to use both hands to try to heal her. I took Cali’s lifeless hand in my own.

“What happened?” I asked, unable to mask the rage in my voice. The second I found out what, or who, had done this to her, I was gonna tear them to pieces.

Torin’s voice shook as he tried to explain, his brow set as he worked his magic. “We were just here in the kitchen talking when we saw Cali collapse outside. We stopped what we were doing immediately, and Tom and I went out and brought her in.”

Tom nodded grimly where he stood beside Orla. His hands were clasped tightly together in front of him as he watched Torin’s attempts. Orla had a desperate look in her eyes that I knew mirrored my own.

“We didn’t waste a minute, Greyson—this is my daughter we’re talking about,” Tom said.

I nodded at him. It was clear that I needed to reserve my anger for whoever was actually behind this newest catastrophe.

I couldn’t help but think about Pip recovering upstairs, and how sick she’d been when she’d come to us—how she’d nearly died. Barely a day later and now, I was dealing with my own mate falling mysteriously comatose. It wasn’t fair, and I was trying my best to keep calm and not let my mind drift to the worst-case scenario.

Astrid held up an empty Mason jar with a strange-colored liquid coating the sides. “We found this with her,” she said.

I remembered that jar—it was that potion she’d made the other night.

“She must have drunk it,” I said. *Damnit, Cali, stop taking so many stupid risks.*

“What is that?” Xavier asked, taking the jar and turning it over in his hands, his brow knitting in confusion.

“It’s the potion *your* new witch gave Cali the recipe for. The one that almost killed Artemis,” I barked.

I could tell Xavier was pissed at my tone, but I couldn’t help it. It was the truth; the witch had given Cali the recipe, she’d taken the potion, and now she was in this state. Whatever this state was. Was she passed out? Asleep? In some sort of weird coma like Pip had been? I couldn’t tell, and that scared me more than anything.

“Don’t you dare try to blame me, as if I—or Kira for that matter—would do this on purpose,” Xavier spat.

“Well you know as well as I do that accidents kill people just as quickly,” I said.

“I’ll remember that, brother,” Xavier said with an icy look—and if looks could kill, I would’ve died where I stood.

I was about to reply, but I knew that now wasn’t the time for us to get into a shouting match, or worse. I turned my attention back to Cali and decided to try to mind link to wake her up.

*Cali, love, can you hear me? It’s me. Come back to us. We need you. Whatever happened, we’ll get through this and you’ll be okay. Cali! Please wake up!*

Big Mac stepped forward. “Move aside, everyone, and lay her on the table,” she said.

Tom and Astrid wasted no time knocking everything on the table onto the floor with a loud crash that none of us reacted to, too concerned with Cali’s fate. Torin stepped back and sagged against the wall, clearly spent from all his spellcasting.

Xavier and I laid Cali down carefully on the table and stepped away to give Big Mac plenty of room. Without a moment of hesitation, Big Mac thrust her fingers into one of the sacks hanging at her waist and shook a mixture of herbs into her palm. She cupped the back of Cali’s head, covered her mouth and nose, and held her hand there for a few beats, her eyes closed as she recited something under her breath.

Cali jerked awake, gasping for air. Her eyes were hazy as she sat up and looked around, not fully with it as she and I connected gazes.

Her soft voice filled my head as she mind linked, *What happened?*

I was too overwhelmed with the knowledge that she was okay to answer. Instead I stepped forward and pulled her into a hug, not caring that my brother was right there.

I held her tightly, rocking her back and forth. “You’re okay, love,” I said, choking back sobs. I couldn’t believe that with everything that happened with Mace and Pip, I’d have a scare with my own mate. But I wouldn’t dare cry in front of Xavier—I didn’t want him to have that over me, no matter how much I wanted to bawl my eyes out with relief.

“Give her some air, dude,” Xavier said gruffly, rolling his eyes. I ignored him and helped Cali to her feet, then carried her to the door to get her some fresh air.

Then I saw it—a figure standing in the woods with their back to the house. A chill raced down my spine. The figure turned around slowly, and I froze.

It was Silas.

**Episode 1442**

CHARLIE

I dragged my gaze from Sergeant Pepperdine, to the pickaxe, to my open locker as I tried to make sense of the scene. Had someone opened my locker with that thing? Why would anyone want to break into a smelly gym locker?

“How do you explain this, Mr. Kim?” Sergeant Pepperdine asked again, holding the pickaxe up as if he thought I needed to get a closer look.

I was completely confused. “Yeah, I get it, it’s a pickaxe. Why do you have that? If you wanted to open my locker, why didn’t you just ask me? Or like, use bolt cutters or something. A pickaxe is overkill if you ask me.”

Sergeant Pepperdine glared. “Are you denying that this is yours?”

I suddenly got it.

“You think that’s *mine*? Why would I have a pickaxe?” I asked.

By now, a crowd of boys had gathered to watch everything unfold. As usual, I was the most entertaining thing going on for miles.

One of the faculty, his bulging arms crossed over his barrel chest, chimed in. “You used this to tamper with the ice, didn’t you?”

“What? Why would I do that?”

“So you could play the hero. Do you fantasize about being a hero, Mr. Kim?” he asked.

He shifted his stance, and his raging biceps seemed to flex with the movement. I wondered if I was supposed to be intimidated. Judging from the expression on his face, this dude looked like he just caught me red-handed.

“Just like you tried to play the hero the other day when you tried staking one of your classmates,” another faculty member added. He turned to Sergeant Pepperdine. “The boy’s got a hero complex.”

“This is so stupid,” I said. Was I in *The* *Twilight Zone*? What kind of person would break thin ice just to “play the hero”? Something like that could go wrong so easily—I could’ve died. No one with half a brain would risk taking a pickaxe to thin ice just to *maybe* have the opportunity to save a girl.

“First of all, do you think I secretly planned to make Sophie fall through the ice?” I demanded. “How would I even do that? And isn’t the point of this whole camp to learn how to act on instinct? To help people who are in danger?”

I had no idea if my argument was making any impact. All three men regarded me with stony expressions. I didn’t think they believed me for a second, but I couldn’t afford to get angry. If I started shouting they’d just see that as excuse to… well, I didn’t know what they could do to me, but I didn’t want to find out. I turned to the other students that had gathered around.

“Did anyone see me do this? Did anyone see me take a pickaxe out to a lake I’d never even been to before? Then use it to crack the ice, hide the pickaxe, then make sure that Sophie fell right through that exact spot?” I asked, repeating the entire theory so that everyone could see how stupid it sounded.

The guys who’d come to watch shrugged, and a few of them said no.

“I rest my case,” I said.

The barrel-chested faculty member slammed my locker door shut, and he and the other guy headed out.

Sergeant Pepperdine leaned in close. “I’m keeping an eye on you, Mr. Kim. Nothing gets past the Pep,” he said, before throwing the pickaxe over his shoulder and marching out.

*Nothing gets past* the Pep*?* Evidently yes, I *was* in *The Twilight Zone*. I couldn’t believe that had just happened. What kind of idiot did they think I was? Better yet—what kind of idiot would accuse someone of something like that? They’d pretty much implied I wanted to try and murder Sophie.

Was everyone here out to get me? Clearly, they were. It was obvious that I was public enemy number one just for existing. If this was how hunters behaved, I really didn’t want to be one.

I thought for a second about Rogue wolves, and I wondered if there were Rogue hunters—those who preferred to live by their own rules and hunt on their lonesome. I was sure there were plenty of Rogue hunters if this was how hunters behaved in groups. Yikes.

Zachery came over to me as the rest of the crowd dispersed, whispering amongst themselves. “What the hell was that all about?” he asked.

I looked aroundand saw Chad watching from afar with a couple of his equally stupid-looking buddies, a smirk on his face.

“Looks like Chad happened,” I said, returning Chad’s stare. If nothing else, I wanted him to know that I wasn’t afraid of him, and that I knew exactly what he was up to.

“You think he set you up?” Zachery asked.

“I don’t think, I know,” I said. “Chad accused me of the same thing earlier. And it’s no coincidence that they found a pickaxe in my locker,” I said. “A *pickaxe*, really?” I shook my head, still in disbelief. “I don’t think I’ve ever even seen one of those things in real life.”

“Yeah, you’re right. That dude is out to get you,” Zachery said, shaking his head.

“It’s so stupid. He’s jealous because he’s got a crush on Sophie, but she likes me,” I said.

When I was with Sandi, I’d made a few of the guys jealous, but nobody had been desperate enough to try something like this.

“So, what are you going to do about it?” Zachery asked.

Honestly, I wished that I could just shift and tear the guy to shreds, but I knew that wouldn’t be a wise move. Instead, I shrugged it off, yet again. If nothing else, this place was forcing me to learn how to control my knee-jerk urges to shift and mess up anyone who wronged me.

“It’s not a fight worth getting into. I’ve been on so many sports teams where rivalries led to defeat. I won’t take the bait,” I said.

I quickly grabbed my things out of my locker, eager to get the hell out of there. As I walked past Chad, I paused. It would’ve felt so good to punch the guy. Instead, I turned to him and said, “If you’re so desperate to be with Sophie, here’s a little advice: stop being a dick.”

Zachery burst out laughing, and we headed out, Chad’s glare burning into our backs.

I returned to my room to find Sophie waiting by my door.

“Hey, are you okay?” she asked. She was dressed in a warm-looking black sweater and jeans. Her cheeks were red, like she’d been waiting for me for a while.

“Yeah, I’m okay. I assume you heard about the Pep and the pickaxe?” I asked, nearly laughing upon hearing it out loud again.

Sophie shot me a confused look. “The Pep?”

“Yeah, just an inside joke… between me and Sergeant Pepperdine,” I said quickly.

“Oh, well yeah, everyone’s talking about it, but no one believes that you would actually do that. It’s about the stupidest plan ever,” Sophie said, rolling her eyes.

I laughed, happy to hear I wasn’t the only one who thought the whole thing was completely crazy.

“That’s what I thought,” I said. “Even Pepperdine had to back off when he realized how stupid he sounded. But I don’t want to keep hashing their idiocy out. Actually, I was hoping I could talk to you.”

Sophie nodded and followed me into the room.

Aisha looked up at us from her bed. “Oh, I just remembered, I have to meet Kelly. Laters,” she said, casting us both a glance as she hurried out.

“You swear you didn’t tell anyone what I am?” I asked Sophie, throwing my gym bag under my bed. I still couldn’t believe how stupid I’d been to shift. I looked down at the bracelet Romilly had given me. Too bad it couldn’t prevent me from shifting—clearly I was too stupid to stop on my own.

“No way! I told you I wouldn’t, and I meant it,” Sophie said, her tone sincere. She sat beside me on the bed. Her nearness was strange, and I thought about Violet. I wished she were here with me more than anything. She would’ve gotten a kick out of all this craziness.

“Thanks, Sophie,” I said. “I have to admit, when everything went down, I was worried that Chad had found out. Though I’m sure that he wouldn’t waste any time telling anyone who would listen if he knew what I was.”

“Yeah, you can say that again. He really seems to have it out for you,” Sophie said.

“Well, I’m not the only one Chad is gunning for,” I said. “The guy has a serious crush on you—so serious that he would do anything to ruin me and get me out of the way, including trying to pull off that half-baked frame job.”

Sophie’s face scrunched in disgust. “Chad? *Me?* Ugh!”

“Yeah, sorry,” I said. “But it’s true. I don’t think he’ll get off my back as long as he thinks I’m standing between you and him.”

“Well then he’s not going to like it when I take you to the dance,” Sophie said, fluttering her eyelashes at me so hard I swore I felt a breeze on my face.

I paused for a second, trying to pick my words carefully. “Yeah, about that. That was the other thing I wanted to talk to you about—why did you say that I was your date?”

**Episode 1443**

LOLA

I’d had it. Why was everyone trying to get me to forget about Jay? Didn’t anyone understand how strong the mate bond was? It was the type of bond that couldn’t be broken under normal circumstances—let alone over some silly vampire heat, which was honestly becoming even more of a drag as the days went on.

It was clear that vampires didn’t understand the level of loyalty and commitment I had with Jay, and I didn’t care if they didn’t get it. I understood it, Jay understood it, and that was all that mattered.

I turned on my heel and stormed toward the door. Ras was already there, blocking my way. Damn, she was fast.

“Take it easy, Lola,” she said. “I would be the last person to tell you to forget your soulmate.”

I was struck by the term she’d used. *Soulmate*. Maybe Ras *did* understand. Jay *was* my soulmate. He was everything to me. I allowed Ras to lead me back to the desk. She swung the sparkling amulet in her hand.

“I didn’t mean that you should forget Jay in a literal sense,” she began. “I suspect that the mate bond is partly to blame for your uncontrollable vampire heat.”

I squinted at her. “You think my bond with Jay is what’s making me want to jump the bones of someone who *isn’t* Jay? That makes no sense.”

She shook her head. “I believe the mate bond, as a very intense and profound supernatural force, could be amplifying the effects of the heat, causing it to flare up to this degree and stay strong. What I’m suggesting would temporarily numb the mate bond so that hopefully the heat can curb back to a normal level.”

“What, you mean like a witch spell?” I asked. “I’m not crazy about witches.”

I thought back to all the less than stellar experiences that I’d had with witches recently, and a shudder raced through my body.

Ras laughed. “I’m not a witch, and I’m not crazy about them, either. No, I’m talking about this.” She held up the amulet. “Hypnotherapy. Maybe you’ve heard of it?”

I raised a brow. “You want to hypnotize me?”

Had I heard of it? Sure, in nearly every horror movie and psychological thriller I’d ever seen. The results were never good, and someone always seemed to get hurt, or ended up worse than before they’d gotten hypnotized. *But that’s just in the movies, right?*

Ras pointed to a framed certificate on the wall. “I know, I know, I see the look on your face—it’s a mix of skepticism and fear. But I’ve got a PhD in it. I’m literally a hypnotherapy expert,” Ras proclaimed. “Well, truth be told, I have several PhDs, but I’m most proud of that one.”

I still wasn’t sure. It sounded sketchy, and I’d had enough sketchy experiences here to last me a lifetime. I thought back to the orgy house, and a bit of heat gathered in the pit of my stomach. Yes, I’d had a colorful stay so far, and I didn’t want to try my luck any further.

“Before you write it off, why don’t you think it over? Even discuss it with your mate?” Ras suggested.

“Oh, because that will go over *so* well with him,” I snorted.

“The vampire heat *will* come back. You’ll need to decide soon,” Ras added before I left.

As soon as I was a safe distance away from Ras’s door, I pulled out my phone and called Jay. I wanted to see how he was doing and run Ras’s idea by him. He would undoubtedly be straight with me and tell me if letting Ras hypnotize me was as crazy as it sounded.

Jay answered on the first ring.

“I’m so happy to hear your voice,” he said. “I hope I didn’t get you in too much trouble—I kind of lost my cool.”

I smiled. God, I missed the hell out of him. Just the sound of his voice made me feel better—and reminded me of one of the reasons I wasn’t so keen on doing Ras’s hypnotherapy and numbing our bond, even if it was for a short time to get the vampire heat under control.

“So, I have something to talk to you about,” I said.

“Of course, what is it?” Jay replied.

“Promise you won’t freak out.”

“This doesn’t exactly fill me with confidence, Lola.”

So far I was not setting up my case for success. I wanted and *needed* these stupid urges to stop—especially about other people!—so I could get my new vampire life in order and reunite with Jay and the pack. But was this really the only option? It was so hard to get myself to say the words to Jay. How would I feel if he were the one asking me if it was okay to effectively axe our mate bond, even for a short time?

“So, the thing is… uh… I might not be able to come home for a while!” What I’d meant to say flew away in the wind as the words rushed out of my mouth.

“I just… feel like I’m finding my footing, and I really need to stay here for the time being. Are you okay with that?”

There was silence on the line before Jay let out a big sigh. “Of course, I understand, Lola. It’s just so frustrating that I can’t do anything to help you and that the best thing to do is to stay away from the school. I hate the sound of it, and of not knowing when I’ll see you again.”

I was getting teary as I processed the hurt in his voice. I didn’t want him to feel abandoned, or like I didn’t care about him. That was the furthest thing from the truth, in fact. I was actually hoping that Ras’s hypnosis might make me more loyal, so that my vampire heat didn’t cause me to betray him. That would be the worst thing ever. If numbing our bond for a few weeks could keep me from making that mistake, it would be more than worth it. But I still couldn’t admit it to him.

“It’ll only be for a short time. I’m crushing this vampire thing more and more every day,” I said, trying to convince him as much as I was trying to convince myself. “Remember, we’ve been apart for much longer and survived. Though I admit that I’m a little nervous that something else might go wrong and I’ll want to run away again.”

“Hey, don’t sell yourself short. I believe in you, and you should too. You *can* do this. But as for Emmett, definitely don’t trust that guy,” Jay said.

I laughed, ever in awe of his ability to say what I needed to hear to make me feel better. My sweet Jay. My *soulmate*.

Just then I caught Emmett’s eye as he stared at me from his office. Clearly, there was some unfinished business between us.

“Remember, babe—I love you. Nothing can change that,” I said. “I’ll call you soon.”

Then I hung up and slipped my phone back into my bag, shooting another glance at Emmett. He’d come out of his office and was now waiting off to the side a few paces ahead of me, still watching me as he leaned against the wall outside his office.

All of this would be so much easier if Emmett weren’t so damn hot—he looked like a high fashion model with an edge. He was dressed impeccably in a crisp white button up and creased black slacks—the perfect mix of style and professionalism. His hair was meticulously styled in a way that showed he knew that his cheekbones were one of his best features, and the tiniest hint of a smile played on his soft pink lips as I got closer.

I reminded myself that any attraction I felt toward him was due to the vampire heat, and nothing else.

Emmett knew about the vampire heat, so didn’t he know how difficult this was for me? To look at him and feel like I wanted to rip his clothes off while simultaneously fighting against that feeling with every thread of self-control I possessed because I didn’t want to betray my mate. I took a moment to collect myself and then headed straight toward him, ready to confront him and leave whatever it was that lingered between us behind.

“What do you want?” I asked as I got closer to him.

“I want to apologize—I shouldn’t have lost my composure like that before. Even though Jay was the one who struck first,” he added bitterly, “I could’ve handled things better. I know how difficult all of this is for you, Lola, and it pains me to know that I was a big part of that. I’m sorry I made things worse between the two of you—that was not my intention.” He pushed away from the wall and stood up straight. As he did so, the scent of his cologne wafted over to me. He smelled amazing. I ignored that and schooled my expression to a calm, stoic, disinterested air. “From day one, I’ve only wanted to help you.”

“Yeah, you’re only sorry that Jay sucker-punched you.” I scoffed. “And that you got caught fighting him. And forgive me if dropping me off at an orgy and trying to beat up my mate isn’t the type of help I’m receptive to.”

“I just wanted you to know,” he said. He gave me a wistful smile, then walked away.

I took a deep breath. That hadn’t been as hard as I’d thought. My mind wandered back to Ras, and I wondered if she could numb my attraction to Emmett while we were at it.

I was about to walk away and head to my next class when I noticed that Emmett had left his office door ajar. I paused, remembering everything that Ras had said about Emmett, especially the part about how he’d stolen her blood like a total creep.

I started to close his door, but then I hesitated. What other secrets was that vampire hiding in here?

**Episode 1444**

XAVIER

I was worried about Cali, and alongside that worry pulsed a wave of annoyance at Greyson calling Cali “love.” He was so melodramatic, and he knew exactly what he was doing. But that anger was quickly replaced by a deep chill that raced through my blood at the shadow I saw flit across the window.

I peered through the glass of the storm door and could just make out a dark figure in the woods. Whoever it was had their back to the pack house. I blinked, trying to make sense of what I was seeing—or rather what I shouldn’t have been seeing—but when I looked again, the figure was gone.

For a moment, my mind went back to Greyson and Cali, and I wondered if Greyson thought that he loved Cali more than I did. He’d pulled her to him, and away from me. I’d had to use every ounce of control I possessed to resist pulling her back. I didn’t want Cali in a literal tug of war between me and Greyson. But now, all that jealousy had gone out of the window in light of something more important.

I turned to look at Greyson. From the look in his eyes I knew that I’d seen what I thought I’d seen. We both had.

Greyson and I held Cali so that she could find her footing, only letting her go once we were sure that she was strong enough to stand on her own.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

She nodded, though her eyes still had a bit of a glazed look.

“Cali, why did you drink this?” Big Mac said, holding up the nearly empty jar of potion. “Dare I even ask what that the hell you were thinking?”

“The last time I drank it, I was fine. In fact, I felt great.” Cali replied.

“But *why* did you take it?” Big Mac fired back.

Orla pulled Cali into a hug. “Honey, what were you thinking?”

I was curious, too. I didn’t like the idea of Cali using potions on herself. I caught Greyson’s eye. *We need to talk*,I mind linked to him.

We excused ourselves and stepped outside, facing the woods.

“You saw it, too. I know you did,” Greyson said.

“I wasn’t quite sure at first. It was a figure, right out there,” I said, pointing into the darkness of the woods. “I couldn’t tell who or what it was; they had their back to the house. I wasn’t even sure if my eyes weren’t just playing tricks on me until I realized that you’d seen something, too.”

“It was Silas,” Greyson said.

“Are you joking?”

“No. I saw the same thing as you. I thought maybe it was light or shadows playing tricks, but I’d know those cold, dead eyes anywhere,” Greyson said.

I pulled Greyson further from the house, way out of earshot. There was no need to worry the others until we’d figured out exactly what we’d seen.

“How could Silas be back?” I asked. My mind was reeling. It was like we just couldn’t get rid of him, no matter what we did.

“I don’t think it was the physical Silas,” Greyson said. “More like a spirit.”

“An evil spirit,” I said. Greyson nodded in agreement. “Why the hell would Silas’s ghost—or whatever that was—come back?” I asked.

“So we can kill him again?”

When I was obviously not going to give him the satisfaction of entertaining his little joke, Greyson waved me off and sighed.

“My first thought was that it’s somehow connected to whatever Cali did with the potion. But there’s so much going on that we can’t explain,” Greyson said. I could see the frustration, and the weariness, on my brother’s face. “I don’t know, I just think it’s all connected.”

“Or are we both losing our minds?” I said.

Greyson grimaced as he considered that possibility.

Two brothers going crazy at the same time probably wasn’t unheard of, especially with all the stress we were under. Maybe we were just cracking under the pressure.

“So, what should we do?” I asked. “You’re the one who claims he’s the Alpha—so what’s the plan, Alpha?”

Greyson didn’t react how he normally would have to my thinly veiled challenge, so I knew that he was as worried as I was, and I decided to ease up a bit.

“I wish there was a definitive way to know if Silas, ghost or otherwise, is back,” Greyson said.

I thought back to the question I’d posed to Marta, about whether she could connect me to Marlene. “My mom might know,” I said.

“Your *dead* mother?” Greyson asked.

“Yes, my dead mother,” I said. “Thanks for that.”

“Sorry man, I didn’t mean it like that. Go on.”

“Ava claimed that she spoke to Marlene’s spirit,” I said.

“You believe her?”

“Yeah, fair question. I believe her. I mean, I spoke to my mother’s ghost once before, too. I’d dropped by to talk to Marta about possibly communicating with her when we were interrupted by the scare with Cali. Let’s go see if it’s possible—my mom might have the answers we need about a few things.”

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We found Marta in her bedroom, seemingly talking to thin air. She was pursing her lips. “This is too bright, not my style,” she was saying. “I like a darker, subtler look. Back then there was a color called Cutie Cat, and it was all the rage in the disco scene.” She turned to look at us as we came in. “Oh, hey. Is Cali okay?”

“She gave us a bit of a scare, but she seems fine,” I answered, still a bit confused about what we’d walked in on. “I came by to finish our conversation. We got cut off before. So—can you or can’t you contact my mother?”

Marta shrugged. “Honestly, I have no idea.”

In my annoyance at her blasé answer, I suddenly wanted to agree with her doubts about the lipstick—the shade of red that she was wearing was way too bright. I wouldn’t tell her that, though. Annoying the only medium I’d ever met felt like the wrong approach.

“Can you at least try?” Greyson asked. “It’s really important.”

Marta glanced to one side. “Be patient,” she said to the air again. I suddenly remembered that she was tethered to Lilac, so she must have been chatting with him.

“Hey Lilac, have you seen our father?” I asked the same patch of air Marta had been conversing with.

“Who?” Marta said. She paused, as if listening, then turned to me. “Your father sounds like a horrible man.”

“He was,” Greyson said dryly.

“Lilac has been, shall we say, a little out of touch with the spirit world as of late—he’s been stuck with me,” Marta said apologetically. “So, no, he hasn’t run into your father.”

“Can you at least try to speak with my mother?” I asked, getting a little impatient.

She sighed, “I can try. No promises, though; talking to the spirits can be a fickle task. They don’t always want to chat.”

Marta directed us to spread apart as she opened a drawer and removed a handful of burgundy votive candles. She got down on her knees and arranged them into a large circle. Then she pulled a Zippo lighter from her pocket and lit each of the candles with care, moving them just so, making sure that each candle was placed an equal distance from the one next to it.

She took my hand in hers. “Xavier, since you’re Marlene’s son, I can use you as the common object,” she explained.

Her hand was warm, and something about it comforted me. While I was excited to connect with my mother to try to get to the bottom of the Silas and Ava problems, it was still a bit nerve wracking to think that I was possibly going to talk with my mother again.

Marta closed her eyes and started murmuring under her breath. I listened hard but couldn’t make out what she was saying. I shot a glance at Greyson, but he simply shrugged in response. We both watched in awe as a light breeze built in the room, causing the candles to flicker. At that same moment, my mother’s ghostly figure began to coalesce in the middle of the circle.

My breath caught in my throat as my mother smiled wistfully at me. A flood of memories hit me: the way her hair used to smell when she kissed me goodnight when I was young—just like flowers and fresh rain; the way her voice would drop a bunch of octaves when she was angry; how much it used to bother me when she was sad, and how her laughter had tinkled out of her mouth like a crescendo of bells when she was happy. There were so many things that I wished I could ask her now that she was right here in front of me—more or less—but I knew I had to put those sentimental desires aside.

“Hi, Mom,” I said. My voice sounded shaky and soft, even to my own ears. “I asked Marta to call you here because I wanted to see if you can help me. Mom, is Silas still alive?”

**Episode 1445**

The more I tried to justify myself for taking the potion, the more frustrated I became. The hazy feeling had finally cleared from my head, and I was using every bit of my newly regained consciousness to plead my case, trying to convince everyone that I wasn’t a reckless maniac.

“Honey, I believe your intentions were good, if not a little rash,” my mother said.

“I get it, Mom, but I was caught by surprise. What I don’t get is why I had the same kind of reaction as Artemis this time. That wasn’t how it happened before; something’s different,” I said. A scary thought hit me. *Do I have dark magic in me?*

“I repeat,” Big Mac said, “You should *not* be messing with potions. Stick to sandwiches, or whatever. I hear that mixing nail polish colors can be exciting.”

“That’s not fair! I followed the recipe *exactly*, I swear,” I said. “I’m not stupid—I wouldn’t have purposefully taken the potion if I thought it was going to harm me.”

Tough crowd. Everyone was giving me skeptical looks. I could tell no one here believed me, and that only made me more frustrated.

“I get it, I know I take risks sometimes, but I only do it because I want to help,” I said. “Why won’t anyone believe me?”

I was getting upset now, and I was on the verge of bursting into tears. I choked them back—the last thing I wanted to do was cry in a room full of people. They’d really think I was weak and childish, then.

“Oh, we know you meant well, Caliana,” my mother said, gathering me into a hug.

“You just need to be smarter about it,” Big Mac said. “No more random potions. Leave that to the experts.”

I was a bit surprised to see that Kira had managed to sneak in midway through the argument. She ignored us all and went straight for the potion. She took the potion, smelled it, and frowned. She handed it to Big Mac, who sniffed it. Her eyes went wide.

“Cali, why would you put dragon’s blood in this?” Big Mac asked. “Bad move.”

My mother gasped, and I shook my head briskly.

“I didn’t,” I said. “Like I said, I followed Kira’s recipe.”

“Well, it seems like someone must have tampered with it,” Kira said.

“Who would do that?”

“I don’t know, Cali, but someone definitely would if they were trying to target you,” Big Mac said.

“Nobody knew I was going to take it—I didn’t even know I was going to do it until a few minutes ago,” I said.

Who could have done this? Torin was always in the kitchen, but I had a hard time believing that he would poison me. It had to have been someone who knew just how to tamper with a potion to make it have the right negative effects. The only other person I could think of with the knowledge to tamper with something like that was Big Mac, and if Big Mac was out to get me I’d have been dead already.

However, if the Orb was messing with people again… Just then, I remembered York. He’d tried to attack me before, so maybe he’d also tampered with the potion. Except no one believed me about seeing York rise from the ashes. No one had seen him come back to life but me… and Artemis.

I pushed my way out of the room despite the protests from both Big Mac and my mom. I had to find Artemis. If anyone was going to believe me, it would be my sister.

I found Artemis outside with Rishika, practicing archery.

“Hey Rishika, you mind if I steal a few moments with my sister?”

“No problem, I’m going to go hit the weights,” Rishika said before heading off. Artemis looked a bit disappointed to be interrupted, but her attention soon went back to me. She had one eyebrow raised quizzically.

“So, guess what just happened?” I began as soon as Rishika was gone. “The potion—the one that made you sick? I drank it, and it made *me* really sick—like what happened with you,” I said. “One minute I was on my feet, drinking it—and it tasted awful—and the next I was waking up on the kitchen table with everyone standing over me.”

“That’s crazy,” Artemis said evenly.

“Yeah, I know! Maybe we should tell someone what happened with York. Kira and Big Mac think someone probably tampered with the potion. What if he was the one who tampered with it? What if something bigger is going on?”

Artemis gave me a look that I couldn’t read. I would have thought she’d be leaping to confirm some of my wild theories, or at least look even just a bit more interested than she did now.

“I doubt that York had anything to do with it,” she said. “But I’m sure we can figure this out together. We’re sisters, and we can do anything as long as we put our minds to it. Not to mention we have Fae powers,” she added, arching her eyebrows playfully. That was a much better sign. My momentary worry about her sloughed off. I cracked half a smile despite my fears at her words, but I shook my head.

“No, I think we need to find York. If we can capture him, we can show everyone that he’s still alive and question him.” My mind was already racing with ideas about where to find him, or how to lure him out. He couldn’t be far—especially if he’d managed to break into the kitchen and get to the potion.

“Are you sure about this?” Artemis asked. I took note of the concern in her voice and wondered what she was so afraid of. If York was on the loose and had access to the house, we had to find him anyway, before he attacked someone else.

“Yes, I’m sure,” I said. “Why?”

“Remember the pond where you almost drowned?” Artemis said.

“Yes, how could I forget?” I shuddered, remembering how cold the water had been, and how strong the hands had been that had pulled me down into the depths. I couldn’t imagine anything worse, and I was sure that I would remember the absolute horror that had gripped my body for the rest of my life.

“I think the pond is a hot spot of dark magic. If York is involved, that’s as good a place to look for him as any,” Artemis said.

I was hesitant to return there. Not only had I almost died the last time I’d gone near the pond, but the area around the place felt dark and heavy, and teeming with a power I didn’t quite understand. It was the epitome of the phrase “bad vibes.”

I wasn’t sure that I was strong enough to resist whatever forces were at play there. I certainly hadn’t been able to before. Overall, the place just really creeped me out. I thought back to what Big Mac and my mother had just accused me of—taking foolish risks. Right now, returning to such a dangerous place seemed like another foolish risk, and I figured I’d had my fill for the day. I imagined everyone had a finite amount of luck, and I had no doubt that mine would run out sooner or later.

But Artemis was right. The pond was definitely a hot spot, and if York was around, there was no doubt that he would be drawn there. I was scared to return, but maybe it would be different this time. Artemis would be with me. And while that might not have comforted me in the recent past, we were able to get close now, even hug, without being blasted back—I’d thought that meant the potion had worn off, but maybe it indicated that the dark magic’s pull on Artemis was gone?

I wanted to believe my sister was back. And if there *was* dark magic at the pond, and Artemis was still susceptible to it, I could protect her. If she really was rid of the dark power, I wasn’t going to risk it infecting her again. I’d just make sure to be really careful—that way I could cut the risks and we could find York, bring him back, and figure out who’d tried to take me out.

“Okay, you’re with me, so maybe it’ll be fine this time,” I said, trying to make myself fully believe that.

We wasted no time heading down toward the pond. I kept looking at Artemis, glad that she seemed more like herself. Even though I had Artemis right there by my side, the closer we got to the pond, the more anxious I became.

Though the night was already cool, it seemed like it got even colder as we approached the pond, and it was more than just the fact that we were nearing a body of water. The cold was sharp, and it cut through my jacket and clothes straight to the bone.

Artemis took my hand. “Don’t worry, we can do this,” she said, obviously sensing my fear.

“Thanks.”

I took comfort in her touch, and soon I could see the dark water before us. Again, I was aware of the strange feeling of heaviness that surrounded the place. Despite Artemis’s nearness, I was afraid. I didn’t want to chicken out now, though, so I didn’t resist as Artemis led me down to the water’s edge.

As soon as we got close, a vision of the ghosts raced through my sights. It was like I could see and feel them right there with me, their strong, ice-cold fingers grasping at me and pulling me under the water. I remembered how thick and frigid the water had been, holding me under, waiting for me to drown.

One of the creepiest things about the whole experience was how quiet it had been under the water. It hadn’t had that familiar sound that usually bubbled in your ears when you went underwater. It had sounded like I was in a vacuum, a place where sound simply didn’t exist.

Artemis squeezed my hand. “It’s okay,” she assured me.

We were getting closer to the edge now, so close that I could feel the cold radiating off the water. We didn’t speak, we just stood there and stared down into the icy-cold blackness of the pond. I leaned over and—*bam!* Someone shoved me with shocking force, and I splashed headfirst into the pond.

**Episode 1446**

GREYSON

I stood there, waiting for Marlene to answer Xavier, thinking about how the world had turned completely upside down. Up until a few minutes ago, I never would have even considered the possibility of Silas returning from the dead. But I knew what I’d seen out there in the woods. There was no question that it had been Silas. I would never forget that face, or those eyes.

I thought about how odd it had to be for Xavier, to speak to his mother this way. She flickered in and out from moment to moment, kind of like an old movie reel. Her voice sounded clear, but distant. If I hadn’t been absolutely certain that she was a benevolent spirit, it might have been a little unsettling.

“Silas is neither alive nor dead,” Marlene said.

“I don’t understand,” I replied. “Is he like the rest of the revenants?”

“He’s not a revenant.” Marlene shook her head. “He is both life and death itself.”

I wondered what she meant by that. Had Silas somehow fused with the Orb?

“What the hell does that mean?” Xavier asked. I could hear the exasperation in his voice, and it was a feeling I shared. What I wouldn’t give for some straight answers about how to be rid of Silas and that fucking Orb, once and for all.

“The fact that he’s back as a spirit without being tethered to a medium or living anchor is concerning. It means he has enough power on his own to stay in this world, without any conduit to summon him,” Marlene said.

I thought back to a conversation I’d had with Big Mac. Was this the Orb at work, just like Big Mac had thought? Had Silas achieved what he’d set out to do—become one with the Orb? Was this all my fault? Had killing Silas only served to fulfill his goal of gaining immortality? I hated to admit it to myself, but it was looking that way.

It was just our luck that one of the worst people to have ever walked this Earth had potentially figured out how to wield such unbelievable power. Silas was the last person who should ever possess dominion over the living and the dead. He would only use it for his own devices, and he was never out to improve anyone’s condition but his own. Time and time again, he’d proven that he was as selfish as he was vicious.

“Mom—do you know how we can find him? Can you tell us how to track him down so we can stop him?” Xavier asked, his voice a pleading rasp.

“I wish I could, but I can’t predict Silas’s moves any more than I can predict the future,” Marlene said.

That wasn’t the answer we were hoping for, and I could feel my frustration building.

Marlene’s flickering worsened, and Marta grimaced. “I’m losing my grip on her,” she said. “Whatever else you have to say, you’d better do it now.”

“Wait! I have to know… I have to know about Ava,” Xavier said quickly.

Ava? I was thrown by this—it seemed a bit insensitive for Xavier to bring up Ava, seeing as she’d killed Marlene. And why was he asking about her right now when there was so much else on the line? I didn’t say anything, though. I was sure that Xavier had his reasons, and it wasn’t like Ava *wasn’t* another mystery in our orbit that needed solving.

“I’m glad that you’re free of her.” Marlene’s ghostly image smiled at Xavier. “And I’m glad that you unmated from her. I am proud of you, son.”

He’d unmated from Ava? I was surprised, but I hoped my face didn’t show it. I didn’t want to encroach on Xavier’s moment in any way. We didn’t always get along—well, we never got along—but I had enough of a heart to respect a moment between a man and his dearly departed mother.

Still, it was jarring to learn that Xavier had actually taken the plunge and unmated from Ava. I knew that unmating rituals were complicated, painful affairs. Honestly, they made me shudder just thinking about them. But after everything that Ava had put Xavier through, I more than understood why he would do it—Cali notwithstanding.

Marlene flickered once again, and her image started to fade. “The spirit world can be treacherous, and if someone died in a traumatic way, it might affect how their time in the spirit world feels to them,” she said.

“Are you saying that I should cut Ava a break?” Xavier asked.

“No, I’m warning you that her type of trauma isn’t something that you’ve come up against before. You need to be careful around her.”

“Great,” Xavier said. He had a look on his face that said “tell me something I don’t know.”

I was just trying to wrap my head around all of this, and I could imagine that Xavier was, too. At least we could all agree on one thing: do not trust Ava.

“Tell us about the Orb,” I said, trying to get us back on track while we still had the best source to answer our questions. “How do we defeat it?”

Nothing we had done so far had come close, but there had to be a way.

Marlene was little more than a shadow now. “In order to stop the beasts, you must cut off the living head,” she said.

“Not another riddle,” I groaned. I was tired of the circle talk. Was it too much to ask for her answer to be something like “drop the Orb into a vat of acid, seal the vat, and throw it into the river”? Those were the kinds of solutions that I could get behind.

Marlene turned to Xavier. “I love you,” she said, before she faded away completely.

The candles extinguished in a rush of air.

Xavier was quiet. I knew him well enough to let the silence stretch and not say anything. I could only imagine what he was going through, the emotions that were twisting around inside him. Not only had he seen his dead mother, but he’d also had to talk about the most awful subject that any of us could imagine: Silas.

I thought about how nice it would have been for the two of them to catch up under better circumstances, for them to reminisce and simply spend quality time together rather than us having to bombard Marlene with questions, pressing her for answers that could possibly save our lives. That had to have put a lot of pressure on her, even in the spirit world.

When I’d been faced with the truth of who Sabine was, after thinking for so long that my mother was dead, I practically had a full-on breakdown. I could only imagine the turmoil Xavier was feeling after seeing his mother’s spirit after—god knew how long it had been since he’d last seen her.

We had such complicated family lives, and because it was all I knew, I didn’t often stop to think about how hard it had to be to not have even one parent to lean on. It made me more grateful for Big Mac and Sabine, for sure.

“Are you okay?” I asked Xavier after a few more seconds of silence.

Marta was probably used to tense familial moments like these, the type that took place between the living and dead and involved loads of unfinished business. She was quiet as she picked up her candles and tucked them away, obviously taking care to give Xavier a quiet moment to process everything that Marlene had said, and all the things she hadn’t.

Xavier shrugged in response. “I’m fine,” he said with a gruffness that I would’ve usually taken at face value, but not this time. I knew he was trying to cover up whatever was really going on inside him. Sure, we had the whole Cali thing between us, and our communication was shit, but he was still my brother, and I could tell when he was in pain. Besides, I knew that tone well. I, too, used it to hide my real emotions. I guessed we were more alike than we cared to admit.

“I’m sorry that I wasn’t able to hold on to Marlene longer,” Marta said. “Sounds like you guys are dealing with some serious stuff. Should I be packing my bags? This Silas sounds like bad news.”

“He’s the worst,” Xavier said, his voice still gruff and closed off. “Just be glad you don’t know more.” He pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration, letting out a tired sigh. “Thanks again for your help, Marta. I really appreciate it.”

Without another word, Xavier left the room.

Marta waited a moment after he left before speaking. “He’s a lot more upset than he’s letting on.”

I thanked her and went looking for Cali. I was surprised to find Xavier waiting in the hall.

“So, we need to stop Silas. Again,” he said.

This was another one of those moments that would’ve been comical if it weren’t a matter of life and death.

I sighed, my frustration at an all-time high. “Yeah, I know, but how do you defeat a man you’ve already killed?”

**Episode 1447**

I plunged into the water. It felt like something was weighing me down, holding me under so that I couldn’t swim back to the surface. This was different than the last time I had fallen into the pond. This time I was inhaling water, and my lungs felt like they were seconds from exploding. I could feel myself slipping in and out of consciousness, and the darkness of the water seemed to be everywhere—it was like I was lost in a vortex.

Fear closed around me like a vice. It was just like I’d figured before we came out here—my luck had to run out sometime. This felt like the final time. Who survived almost drowning three times in a row? Who survived so many near-death experiences and lived to talk about it? So much for not taking foolish risk after foolish risk.

I thought of Xavier and Greyson. I wasn’t going to get to say goodbye to them. Would they even find my body? I wondered if I tried hard, if my mind link would reach them. I loved them. They had to know that. I needed them to hear that if it was the last thing I ever thought.

*I’m so sorry.*

Would they think I’d abandoned them? That I’d just run off somewhere without telling them? I couldn’t bear to think about how much my disappearance would hurt them.

Even as I thought all this, even as the idea of just giving up crossed my mind, I was still fighting, still trying to orient myself in the water. I thrashed with all my strength as I tried to shut off the flow of water spilling into my lungs, trying with all my might to make sense of the thick darkness around me and fight my way back to the surface. Then, an arm stretched around me and started to pull me down.

Fear almost made what little air I had in my lungs escape as I saw who was trying to drown me.

Silas!

I fought against him, trying with all my remaining and fast-draining strength to push away. The hands grabbed at me, shaking me and clawing at my clothes, and then I realized that it wasn’t Silas after all. It was… Artemis?

She kicked her legs with impressive power and swam toward the surface, pulling me up with her. We splashed out of the pond and crashed to land, coughing like crazy and spitting up water.

“Are you okay?” Artemis asked after her breathing had calmed enough so that she could talk.

I nodded. I ran a hand through my hair, squeezing it in my fists, trying to wring the icy water out of it. I felt like my brain was freezing.

“You just fell into the water!” Artemis said.

“Fell?” I choked out, lungs burning. “I didn’t fall in. Someone pushed me.” I sat up, head spinning as I tried to remember how to breathe.

“Wait you felt that, too? I thought someone was trying to push *me* in,” Artemis said, shocked.

I was afraid. Something weird had happened to the both of us. I looked back at the water, only a few feet away, and slid further away from it, scared to be that close. I’d learned my lesson. The water looked still and calm, like nothing had even happened in that deep darkness. I knew better, though.

The crack of a branch startled us both. We were too weak to defend ourselves if it was an enemy, but Artemis had her hunter instincts up. She scrambled to her feet, pulling me up alongside of her no matter how much I wanted to continue lying there. I knew I couldn’t do that. Xavier and Greyson wouldn’t find me that way, and I couldn’t wait to return to their arms.

Still, I knew this was yet another instance where I’d put myself in harm’s way and nearly died—they wouldn’t be happy. I wasn’t looking forward to the talking to I was going to receive about this latest debacle.

“What was that?” I asked Artemis. “Is someone out there?”

I stared hard into the trees, trying to catch another glimpse of something, anything, in the thin sliver of moonlight that cut through the clouds overhead. I could barely see a few feet into the trees.

Artemis put a finger to her lips to quiet me. She was in total bounty hunter mode. I could see the change in her eyes and demeanor. All I could think was that seeing her like this didn’t bring particularly positive memories to mind, considering I’d once been one of her victims. I was glad that she was on my side these days.

Artemis stalked forward like a cat, not making a sound. I wanted to shout after her, but I knew better. Why the hell would she be walking *toward* the mysterious sound right after something had just tried to kill us? We could just lie down here in the soft grass and take a nap instead—except it was freezing cold out here, and we’d turn into popsicles in seconds flat if we stopped moving.

“What are we doing?” I asked.

Artemis shushed me. She put her arm out to stop me as she paused to scan the horizon. Then she took off sprinting. It was then that I saw the figure in the woods again. It was strange how I couldn’t make out any identifiable details—what they were wearing, how tall they were. I only knew that there was definitely someone out there. Was that who’d pushed me?

“Stop!” I yelled. “Who are you?”

The figure disappeared into the cover of the trees, and before I knew it, Artemis had sprinted way ahead of me. I was drenched, and I couldn’t stop my teeth from chattering. My clothes felt like heavy sheets of ice against my skin, and I longed for one of Mrs. Smith’s white chocolate mochas to warm me up inside and out.

I ran after Artemis, hoping that the physical activity might warm me up. At least it couldn’t hurt. My lungs still burned and ached, and I couldn’t really feel my fingers. As I ran, the cold wind whipped against me, practically blowing straight through me. My ears hurt like hell, and my toes felt like ice cubes in my shoes. I ran until I couldn’t go one step further, and then collapsed to the ground in a shivering heap.

“Shit!” Artemis yelled, jogging back to me. “They got away.” She knelt beside me and took my hand. “You’re freezing, Cali. You’re going to get hypothermia—we have to get you back to the house.”

Artemis helped me to my feet. I felt like someone had taken my batteries out. I was so spent I could barely move. I wished I were more like Artemis. She was so strong. She wasn’t even breathing hard, and she’d just taken off into the night like a speeding bullet.

“Aren’t you just as cold?” I asked. I reached out and ran and hand down her cheek, but I was too cold to be able to tell.

“I am, but I’ve trained my body to withstand all kinds of environments,” she explained. “A necessary precaution for a bounty hunter.”

I did my best to walk with her and keep up, but my teeth were shattering so hard that I felt like my entire body was shaking to the core. My jaw was starting to ache, and my lungs were still on fire. My chest was tender—it felt like there was a cramp going right down the center, between my breasts.

I didn’t feel right, and I was only getting weaker as we walked. It hadn’t seemed like we’d gotten that far, but right now every step felt like a mile. I wished we hadn’t decided to come here, to go this deep into the woods. I should have trusted my instincts and avoided this place like the plague.

Artemis paused. “Someone’s coming,” she said. Her hand crept down to the knife at her waist.

It took us a second to realize that it was only Rishika coming toward us.

“What happened to you two?” she asked, breaking into a sprint. She situated herself under one of my arms. “Cali, you’re cold as ice. We need to get you back to the house *now*!”

Together, she and Artemis walked me back to the house. We were able to move quicker with Rishika’s help, and I was glad for it. All I could think about was how nice it would be to have Xavier or Greyson hold me and keep me warm.

“What are you doing out here?” Artemis asked Rishika.

“I came looking for you,” Rishika said. “I followed your scent. Vander’s at the house, looking for you.”

Vander? When had they arrived? And were there going to be even more unexpected guests at the house, at the rate they all kept popping in?

Artemis and Rishika picked up the pace, and I did my best to lessen their burden by keeping up as best I could. We saw Vander waiting on the porch with Big Mac as we approached. Vander got to their feet when they saw us coming.

“I’m glad you’re all here,” they said. “I don’t quite know what it means, but one of the portals has opened.”