**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 15**

**Episodes 1556-1707**

**Episode 1556**

CHARLIE

I froze, the alarm piercing the air with its high-pitched screech.

I’d heard this sound once before, when I’d first arrived at the camp. It spelled bad news. Violet was on one side of the fence and I was on the other, both of us frozen in place. I desperately wanted to hold her again. The feeling was made ten times stronger by the alarm’s blare. It signaled danger and mayhem, and all my wolf wanted was to grab his mate and take her to safety.

I had no idea why the thing was ringing, but I could only assume that it was going off because we were werewolves. It was the only explanation that I could think of right now. Unless there was something else going on, and there was a vampire on the premises.

I wasn’t sure what would be worse.

“What should we do?” Violet said, covering her ears.

What if I just jumped the fence and joined her? What if I just went with her and got this whole thing over with? Would it be so bad to just leave the hunter camp? To leave it all behind?

The alarm stopped.

My mate and I locked eyes, and another second spent without touching her seemed like a waste. She jumped over the fence again, diving into my arms. I kissed the top of her head, then her mouth, stroking her cheek.

“I don’t know what’s going on,” I whispered, “but you are my first priority. Making sure you stay safe is all I care about, I—”

“I need you to stay safe too,” she said. “I’d lose my mind if anything happened to you.”

Violet’s words made me shiver. And when I broke away from her hug, my whole body physically ached. “You need to run. Fast. I know the hunters by now. They won’t stop looking until they’ve uncovered the problem.”

Violet gestured at the charm around her wrist. “But what about you? What if they realize you’re a werewolf?”

I shook my head. It’d already happened, but I didn’t need to alarm her. “Doesn’t matter. I’m more worried about you. I don’t know what kind of weapons they have to track werewolves. I can’t risk you getting in harm’s way.”

She shook her head vehemently, gripping my sweater, shaking me. “No, *no*, I won’t leave without you, that’s not how this is supposed to work!”

I gripped her wrists, settling her down. “Please, sunshine. I’m begging you. If you run into trouble because you came to see me, I’ll never be able to forgive myself.”

Violet paused. Her breathing was coming out sharp, her hands shaking as she held onto me. She slid her hand to the back of my neck and pulled me down, her mouth crashing against mine. The kiss was fast and hard, passionate, like an explosion that made my knees weak. The urge to grab her and keep doing this with her forever hit me like dynamite.

But then it was over.

Both of us were panting, staring at each other.

Her lips were red, bitten raw, and speaking made every inch of me tremble. “Run,” I rasped. “Don’t stop until you get to the B and B, and don’t let anyone in. Stay on the lookout.”

She nodded sharply, sniffling. She was so beautiful that looking at her hurt. “Be careful too, Charlie. I love you. I love you so much.”

“I love you too,” I whispered.

When we let each other go this time, it was for good.

Feeling like fucking shit and with a heavy heart, I took off sprinting through the woods. Just about when the fence would be out of my eyesight, I turned. Violet was still standing there, watching me.

She blew me a kiss, and then, just like that, she vanished over the horizon.

My throat throbbed. I choked. My allergies had to be hitting hard, because my eyes were burning. I’d had no idea that werewolves had allergies, or that—

Who was I kidding? I wanted to cry.

Feeling horrible about everything, I steeled myself and started to run. The alarm was blaring again, and I knew there would be hell to pay if I didn’t arrive at whatever gathering I knew had to be happening already. Hunters sure loved their gatherings. There was always some sort of emergency, and they liked huddling up and considering their next steps. This time, though, was not a drill.

This time, I could be in danger for real. Violet could be in danger.

Feeling sick to my stomach, I emerged from the woods and headed to the camp. Sure enough, everyone had gathered. Sophie, Zachery, Aisha, Reggie, fucking Chad—everyone. As ever, Sergeant Pepperdine had his megaphone, and I caught the tail end of what he was saying.

“One of the trip wires was activated on the outer edge of the camp!” he barked.

Okay then. That had probably been Violet and me. Fantastic.

“How do we know it’s not an animal?” asked someone in the crowd.

And then Sergeant Pepperdine dropped the bomb. “The trip wires are triggered by supernatural pheromones. Don’t be a fool.”

I was genuinely wondering how Violet hadn’t tripped them earlier. Had we just gotten stupid lucky? I was extremely grateful that she was running away from here as fast as she could. But did I make a mistake giving her the charm and not protecting myself? Was I about to get outed? This wasn’t good.

“Where were you?” Zachery asked, walking up to me. “Did you see anything?”

I shook my head. “I was just out for a run when I heard the alarm. I came as soon as I could.”

A familiar infuriating voice came from behind me. “Sure you did.”

I turned to glare at Chad. What the hell was he going to say? Violet had already been inside the camp, and the alarm hadn’t gone off, so Chad couldn’t suspect her. At least I hoped he couldn’t. I didn’t have him pegged as the sharpest knife in the drawer.

Or at least, that was what I told myself to avoid freaking the hell out.

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Sergeant Pepperdine split everyone into groups. I was with Zachery and Sophie. We’d been told to do some patrols around the camp, and if we found anything suspicious, to report it ASAP. An hour later, we were back with nothing.

“This had to be a false alarm,” Zachery said, grumbling. “I’m so sick of those! I can’t believe I got out of bed for this—I was taking a nap.”

“Yeah,” Sophie said, nodding furiously.

“You were taking a nap too?” Zachery asked her, confused.

She chuckled. “No. I just agree it was a false alarm. Maybe the trip wires aren’t as good as Pepperdine thinks.” But as she finished her sentence, Sophie glanced at me.

Just what I needed.

“I hate this. I’ll go get some water,”Zachery grumbled, and headed toward the fountains.

Instantly, Sophie slid closer to me. After glancing around to make sure that we couldn’t be heard by the other groups, she whispered, “Are you okay? Did you accidentally do something to trip the wire?”

I shook my head. “Not sure.”

I was starting to think, though, that maybe I’d made a huge mistake by giving Violet the charm and coming back here without anything to protect myself. If those supernatural pheromones Pepperdine had mentioned were a real thing, then mine had to be flapping all over the place right now.

Had I inadvertently exposed myself to everyone?

Violet would be pretty upset if anything happened to me—and so would I. But for some reason, her being upset bothered me more. Which was normal, but also not. Like, for a werewolf mate it was normal, but otherwise it was a little codependent. But also, I could actually die today if Pepperdine decided I was a werewolf, so this was a problem, and I was allowed to think whatever random bullshit I wanted.

I wondered if my mother would give a damn if these hunters got rid of me.

*Shit*.

“I didn’t do anything,” I told Sophie, who frowned. She seemed worried, so at least I knew I had her on my team. She’d been very nice to me so far, without asking for anything in return. I hoped that would continue, because I actually had nothing to offer her. Maybe one day, she’d ask for my help. I’d be there for her for sure.

“We found something!” Chad’s aggravating, nasally voice snapped me out of my thoughts. I wanted to stick a sock in his mouth to shut him up.

“Aha! Tell us what you found!” Sergeant Pepperdine exclaimed, looking pleased. Like a predator sniffing prey.

And then Chad threw down a bunch of clothes onto the ground.

I choked in horror.

Those were Violet’s clothes.

I stopped breathing when Chad glared at me and said, “I think we have a werewolf on our hands, everybody.”

**Episode 1557**

“Xavier, stop! Don’t hurt him!” I said, wedging myself between him and Lilac. I could feel Lilac’s firm chest, and for a second, questions swarmed my brain.

*Um, excuse me, but how is this happening exactly? Also, when did Lilac become a man instead of, I don’t know, a seventeen-year-old? Wasn’t he younger than this? When did he get so tall? Did he grow as a ghost? Was he always like this and I had no idea because the* due destini *has been killing me? Why do I sound like an aunt who’s seeing her nephew for the first time in years?*

Oh. My. God. The “ma’am” thing from earlier was hitting me full force.

Meanwhile, Xavier was still talking. “How do we know you really are Lilac? Answer me right now.”

Not-Ghost Lilac spluttered, bless his soul. That was a very living thing to do. “It’s me, I don’t know what else to say!” And then he looked very sad. “I’ll disappear soon anyway, which probably shouldn’t happen while the firefighters are still here.”

I stood there, blinking at him. And then, I decided that enough was enough. “Xavier, let him go. The firefighters are watching, don’t make a scene!”

Xavier let Lilac go, but he was still ready to attack. I could tell. I couldn’t even remember if my mate had been here when Lilac’s ghost had gotten tethered to Marta. *God*, this house had way too much going on, and I had no idea who knew what.

“Don’t get involved in this, Cali,” Xavier growled.

I rolled my eyes. Didn’t he know by now that his growls did nothing to me, unless we were in bed? Ridiculous! “Can you just stop? You’re being way too dramatic right now!”

Xavier turned to me, looking infuriated. “Are you serious? For all we know, this could be Lester in disguise! We may have ripped him apart, but it’s clear that Silas is working with some new level of magic here.”

My mate was just too stubborn for his own good.

Poor Lilac just stood there and shrugged. “It’s okay. He can punch me if he wants. It’ll make me feel… *alive*.” He winked. “Get it?”

Groaning, I spun around and looked for Ava. Her perfect glistening raven hair stood out in the crowd. “Ava!” I called.

She turned, her pale eyes taking me in before she deliberately looked away.

*Wow*.

I would have blasted her away if the firefighters hadn’t been watching.

“AVA!” I shouted.

She flipped her shiny, annoying hair over her shoulder and continued ignoring me.

“Some things never change, do they?” Lilac said, crossing his arms over his chest.

Xavier glared at him. “Don’t try to be cool. I know you’re hiding something.”

“Oh my god, AVA!” I screamed. “I *know* you heard me!”

Ava sighed dramatically and turned around. “*What?*”

“Get over here and be useful for once!” I barked.

Huffing, she marched toward us. “What do you want?” She glanced at Xavier before glaring at me. I was extremely used to it.

“Can you use that aura thing on Lilac?” I asked.

She gave him an unimpressed look. “I can’t do that.”

My jaw clenched. “We both know you’re a liar, so justDO IT.”

“I don’t want to cause any trouble,” Lilac said, but I ignored him.

“Xavier thinks Lilac is dangerous, a revenant, and I need you to help me convince him that that’s not the truth!” I said. “Look at him, he’s so sweet! And Xavier wants to punch him! Why won’t you help?”

Lilac gave her a cherubic look.

Ava rolled her eyes. “Okay, fine. I’m one hundred percent sure he’s not a revenant.”

My eternally suspicious mate scoffed. “Like Cali said, you’re a liar. How do I know you’re not lying right now?”

Before I could start screaming, Marta stepped in. Her voice was hoarse. The smoke had done a number on her, and a pang of guilt hit my stomach.

“It really is Lilac, Xavier,” she said. “I was trapped in the house, and he helped me get out. He saved my life.”

“That’s true, actually,” Lilac said conversationally. “And I’m here in the flesh because, well…” He frowned. “Because of some medium stuff that I don’t really understand.”

Marta cleared her throat and nodded decisively.

Xavier glared at Lilac.

The boy sighed. “I haven’t seen you so pissed off since you thought Colton was dead.”

Xavier’s fierce expression eased, just a bit.

“I sure hope Violet still has that footage of you from the cave,” Lilac continued, and Xavier’s eyebrows were no longer furrowed.

“That was some bullshit, and you know it,” he grumbled.

Lilac grinned. “But so much fun.”

*Aww*, I thought. It really was Lilac! Not Lester the revenant. Or Silas. I mean, I’d already known it was Lilac, but it was good to be sure.

“See?” I told Xavier. “Not everything is evil.”

Xavier scoffed, and Lilac gave him a half-smile. “It’s okay. That’s the Xavier we know and love.”

The very sweet moment was interrupted when I noticed that Lilac was starting to turn transparent.

“Oh no! Why is he disappearing?” I hissed, glancing behind him at the firefighters.

“Shit,” Xavier muttered, instantly trying to shield Lilac from the firefighters’ view.

Marta took a deep breath and then said, “Don’t worry.”

And then she grabbed Lilac’s face and kissed him.

Like, a full-on kiss. With tongue and everything. It was a little pornographic, actually. Was this PG-13? It looked *very* intense! Also, why the hell was Lilac becoming less transparent as Marta kissed him?

*UM… WHAT?*

What the hell was going on here?

“Oh, wow,” Rishika said, blinking rapidly as both she and Artemis watched the two literally making out. “Is he… Is he coming back to life through kissing?”

“It’s some very good kissing,” Artemis noted. Because she was my sister, and as a family we did not have any tact.

*Oh my god*, I thought, excited. *Do I have a new couple to root for in the house?*

Just as my inner shipper started flailing, Marta ended the kiss, leaving Lilac looking a little stunned. Honestly, same. She wiped her mouth, but I noticed that her cheeks were drained of color.

“There,” she said. “That should fix it for a little while.”

“Well,” I said, stepping closer to Marta. “I guess this is kind of a personal question, but *how the hell is it possible* that Lilac’s here and has a physical body?”

Marta, with Lilac still staring at her dazedly, sighed. “It’s a long story.”

It sounded like a story that I needed to know. I was extremely invested in this story, and I had to have it, right now.

But then, my friend the redheaded firefighter ruined my groove by coming up to us.

“Everything’s out, you guys are all good,” he told me. “The source was definitely that huge bonfire you had so close to the house.”

He was literally talking about the funeral pyre. Welp…

“Next time? Don’t do that,” he said sternly.

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The firefighters were gone, and I was a little sad because I couldn’t remember the last time so many werewolves had told me how great humans were. The firefighter with the mustache and the golden badge had told Xavier that the rest of the house was okay, but that we had to air it out. And then we’d all moved closer to survey the damage.

“Are we going to stay here?” Rishika asked Xavier. “This can’t be ideal for sleeping.”

“She’s right,” Sage agreed. “All this smoke needs to be let out.”

“I’m technically not really breathing anymore,” Lilac said randomly, staring at me as if he knew I would be extremely interested in this tidbit. I was, but I was also wondering where Greyson was.

Why wasn’t he back yet?

As the rest of the pack kept talking, I stared at the woods. I didn’t have a good feeling about all this. I was about to dump everybody and go look for my mate when a silver wolf emerged from the edge of the woods.

“Greyson!” I ran toward him, overjoyed. I dropped to my knees and wrapped my arms around him. His torso was massive, and he felt so good against me. So strong. So fluffy, but I wasn’t going to tell him that, because he’d definitely get offended.

“Where were you? I was so worried about you!” I said. “And why are you still shifted?”

*Don’t worry, love, I’m okay*, he said. *Just trying to stay warm.*

I frowned, staring into his wolf’s eyes. There was something in his voice that I didn’t like. But I couldn’t place it.

“Let me get you a blanket, so you can shift back. It’s only gotten colder out here.”

When I brought it back to him, he shifted to his human form and wrapped the blanket around himself.

“Nice of you to join us again,” Xavier said when he saw Greyson.

Greyson ignored him, thankfully. “Can we get Phil to fix this, or is it out of his pay grade?”

“Maybe we should go stay at the Blue Bloods’ place while this one is fixed?” Rishika suggested.

“I don’t want to put that on Mace, not when he’s just lost his Luna,” Greyson said, shaking his head.

I noticed that he was very pale. I hated seeing him so tired. A pang of worry invaded my stomach as I surveyed the damage and wondered what we were going to do.

*But at least Greyson’s okay... I mean, he seems okay. Kind of. He seems like himself, so—*

Something caught my eye in the debris, interrupting my thoughts. It looked like writing on the foundation of the house. I wandered closer, frowning. I was about to reach for the piece of wood and brush the ash away when I heard Kira’s voice.

“Don’t touch that. Get away from it right now.”

**Episode 1558**

GREYSON

“Get away from there, Cali!”

I whipped my head around as I heard Kira’s shout, and saw Cali standing in the middle of the blackened remnants of the pack house.

“Dammit, Caliana,” I muttered. I yanked the blanket she had given me tighter around my shoulders and lumbered over to her. “What are you doing over here?” I demanded. “It’s not safe. Get out of here.”

But she didn’t look up. She was frozen, staring down at the charred foundations of the house.

“Cali?” I asked again.

“I thought there was something there,” she said faintly.

“What?”

She shook her head. “I thought it said something.”

“You thought what said something? What are you talking about…” I stepped closer to her and looked down, following her gaze to the burned wood and blackened concrete. And sure enough, I saw something, too. “What is it?” I muttered. There was a strange symbol carved in the wood, deep and deliberate.

“Have you ever seen this before?” Cali asked.

“No,” I said, frowning. “Never. I wasn’t here when Joss bought the house, but no. Has it always been here?” My stomach tightened. “Is it new?” But how would someone have managed to carve this into the foundations of the house recently?

Cali squinted. “It doesn’t look familiar.”

“It’s not a Fae symbol?”

“I don’t think so,” she said slowly. She looked up. “Mom?”

Orla walked over. “What is it? Are you okay, honey?”

“Mom, look at this. Does it look familiar to you? Does it look Fae?”

Orla looked down at the mark. She shook her head. “No, it’s not Fae.” She looked up and waved Astrid and Torin over. “Does this look like anything you’ve ever seen before?”

“No,” Astrid said. “Definitely not Fae.” She looked at Torin, who shook his head.

Kira batted Torin and Astrid’s curious hands away from the carving. She looked worried, and I knew enough to know that when a witch was concerned we had a bigger problem than we thought.

“I said don’t touch it; what was so complicated about that?” she snapped at Cali, who had reached out her hand. “*That* is a witch mark, and a damn powerful one.”

“That sounds bad,” Tom said. He had walked over with Orla and now stood close beside her. “Caliana, step away from there,” he added sharply.

“A witch mark?” I asked. “What the fuck is a witch mark? Like, witch graffiti or something? Is it a joke? Like, ‘The Wicked Witch wuz here,’ or something?” Judging by Kira’s narrowing eyes, she didn’t find my jokes nearly as funny as I did.

“It’s not graffiti,” Kira said. “And it’s not a prank. A witch mark isn’t anything funny. Witches don’t tend to have a sense of humor.”

“Yeah, you’re telling me.” I snorted. “So, what is it, then?”

Kira shook her head. “I don’t recognize that exact mark, but…” She stared down. “But I can feel the magic coming off it. And it’s pulling energy into itself, too. Can’t you feel it? It may be a summoning mark.”

“Summoning what?” Cali asked quietly.

A chill ran through me as I thought back to the dream I’d just had. Had Silas’s witch, Demeter, done this?

Kira wrapped her arms around herself. “A summoning mark can call forth magic, spirits, entities… even demons.”

“Well, that would explain Silas,” Xavier said grimly. Every eye turned to him. He shrugged. “Hey, I’ve met enough demons to know one when I see one.”

I ran a hand through my hair. “How would that have happened? Silas was meant to be stuck in the Orb.”

Orla shook her head, her eyes wide. “The magic of the Orb is so old, it’s possible none of us know the true extent of its powers.”

A shiver ran up my spine, and I didn’t think it had anything to do with the cold winter wind blowing in from the lake. Demons, summoning marks, old magic—I hated talking about this shit.

“Could this have anything to do with the ghost pond?” Cali asked.

I hadn’t noticed when Marta had first walked over, but she surprised me by answering Cali’s question.

“That place is a portal to the spirit world now,” Marta rasped, her voice still hoarse from the smoke. “If someone wanted to summon something between the living and the dead, this would be the perfect place.”

“It’s possible Silas is a demon,” Kira said. “But what’s more likely is that this witch mark is what opened the ghost portal in the first place. These marks are used to create something bigger than what any one witch can do by herself.”

“Great,” I muttered.

None of this was what I wanted to hear. I reached out for Cali and pulled her gently away from the witch mark. She came willingly, apparently glad to get away from it, and pressed herself to me. But in doing so, she jostled me a little, and the wound on my left leg exploded with pain. I gritted my teeth, trying not to let it show on my face.

“Can you tell how long the mark’s been here?” I asked Kira. “Can you tell if it’s new? Are we fighting someone who’s working with a witch?”

Kira leaned down, inspecting the mark, her nose barely an inch from the charred foundations. For someone who had been close to biting our heads off for standing around the mark, she was getting awfully close to it. After a long moment, she straightened and shook her head. “No. I can’t tell when it was made. All I can tell you is that it’s embedded itself into the house, and its power is only growing stronger.” Her eyes were dark as she looked at me. “This was deliberate.”

Xavier threw up his hands. “That’s just fucking great. We’re living on a demon portal.”

I glared at him. “You’ve got a real way with words, you know that?”

But I was worried, too. I looked up at the house, which was undeniably damaged. With part of the house destroyed, and now this witch mark—on top of the revenants, the ghost pond, and Silas—this was no longer a safe place for the pack.

My thoughts cycled back to Maren. I thought of the haunted looked she’d had in her eyes when she’d loaded Fenrir into the car. Maybe she’d had the right idea about getting out of this place.

I looked around, taking in the worried faces of my pack. Just beyond the Redwoods, Mace and the Blue Bloods stood, listening attentively.

I took a deep breath. “Everyone needs to gather up their stuff. We’re leaving tonight.”

“Where are we going?” Rishika called, over the top of several heads.

That was a good question. All I knew was that I had to get my pack out of danger. I hadn’t even begun to figure out where the next safest place would be.

“We’ll go to the old pack house,” Xavier stated as if he had my full backing already. And I had to admit, grudgingly, it was the best idea for now.

I nodded. “Everyone get what they can carry, and be careful. We’ll leave within the next hour.” I looked over at Kira. “You’re coming, too. I have more questions about this mark.”

With a sigh, I pulled Cali close and kissed the top of her head. “Go get ready, love. It’ll be okay.”

When she looked up at me, her eyes were so full of fear and worry, I pressed another kiss to her head. I knew it was wrong, but I didn’t care about Xavier and the rest of the pack. It had been a shit day, and we just needed to be there for each other.

“Okay everyone, get moving!” I called.

The packs headed back into the house, picking their way carefully through the charred debris.

Cali pulled me close for a moment. Then, with one last glance between Xavier and me, she followed her parents and Artemis into the undamaged part of the house.

I looked back at Kira, who was still examining the mark. “Thanks for your help back there,” I said. “And sorry for snapping. I do have questions about what this means for the pack, but you are welcome to stay with us for as long as you’d like. You’re not our prisoner or anything.”

She peered at me for a moment, then nodded. “Thanks. Love not being a captive.”

Pulling the blanket tighter around my shoulders, I headed inside and went straight for the bathroom. My leg needed attention—which it shouldn’t have. I should’ve been healing already, and the fact that I wasn’t was a big red flag.

I pulled the bathroom door shut and yanked the blanket back.

“*Shit*,” I muttered, looking down. It was worse than I’d thought. The wound hadn’t even closed. It was oozing some kind of yellow liquid, and there was blood seeping out, too. It looked bad. It looked—

“What the *fuck*?”

I whipped around. I must not have pulled the door all the way shut, and Xavier was standing in the doorway, staring at me, his eyes wide with horror.

He pointed to my leg. “What the hell happened to you?”

**Episode 1559**

LOLA

“*The perfect test subject*?” I stared at Emmet, completely baffled. From the corner of my eye I could see Jay, who was looking back at Emmett, stony-faced. “What does that even mean?” I demanded. “Do you know how super sinister that sounds? And given how creepy you’re already being…”

Emmett looked between us for a moment, then his eyebrows shot up. “Oh, I realize how suspicious that sounds. It’s nothing so dramatic as what you’re thinking. Nothing nefarious.”

“You’re really selling this,” I snapped.

“No, I’m just interested in gathering some basic information about werewolves.”

I shook my head. “I still don’t understand. Why would you want that? You’re a vampire, Emmett. I thought you only conducted your little experiments to help other vampires.”

“How can you say that?” He pointed to the shelf of boxes behind me, all holding his taxidermized samples. “Remember the rat-wolf?”

“Oh god,” I murmured, feeling my stomach churn.

“What the hell is a rat-wolf?” Jay muttered.

“What I’m saying is that I’m interested in my own kind, of course—I am a fundamentally selfish being, as most of us are—but I’m also a scientist. I want to learn more about the supernatural world at large, and werewolves are a part of that,” Emmett explained calmly. “The information I gathered from you, Lola, was different to my baseline data for vampires, which was hugely exciting—anomalies always are. I want to learn more about werewolf anatomy by getting a werewolf baseline from Jay. That way I’ll be able to start comparing the two results.” He paused and looked at us both. “I think my findings could end up helping a lot of people.”

I was about to tell him to shove his baseline data where the sun didn’t shine, but I paused, suddenly thinking back to seeing Jacqueline the other night. She’d been out of control, and she’d had those weird orange eyes—what the hell had been up with *that*?—and Emmett’s serum had been able to help her.

I chewed the inside of my cheek as I thought hard. If Emmett’s research and data could help other people in the same way, maybe we *should* help. But… I just wasn’t sure.

“Is this research something the school asked you to do?” Jay asked, speaking for the first time.

Emmett looked caught off-guard, and he laughed a little. “Well, no, not exactly. It’s more of a passion project.” He crossed his arms and leaned casually back against his desk. “Vampires and werewolves really aren’t so different from each other, when you start to really look at the basics.”

Jay snorted derisively. “What? You don’t think being dead is difference enough?”

I glared at him. There was no reason to be so rude about it.

“What about HIPAA?” I asked quickly, when Jay opened his mouth to speak again. “Doesn’t that make things hard for your research?”

Emmett smiled again, like he was laughing at a private joke. “Yeah, that doesn’t exactly apply here. Look,” he said, standing straight, “I’m not trying to force you to do anything you don’t want to do, Jay. I just wanted to extend the offer.”

Jay still seemed suspicious, not that I blamed him.

Emmett glanced between us for a moment. “And Lola, I realize now that I shouldn’t have been so quick to tell you to let go of your mate when you first arrived at Tottenville. I’ll admit that I didn’t understand the intensity of the mate bond.” He shrugged. “And that I allowed my prejudice to dictate the tenor of my advice to you.”

I stared at him, stunned. “Are you… Are you *apologizing* to me?”

A slight smile played at the corners of Emmett’s mouth. “Well, I’m certainly trying to.” He looked over at Jay. “So, what do you say? Are you interested in helping with my research?”

Jay didn’t answer right away. After a long moment, he shrugged. “How does it help me?” he asked, still cagey. “The way I’m looking at it, it’s only helping you. *Your* research, *your* findings, *your* quest to save the world, or whatever.”

“Well, if you helped, you would be staying here at Tottenville in my lab. No one but me would come in, and if Lola were my assistant, she would of course be granted access without a problem.”

“What? How?” I exclaimed. “Winifred follows me everywhere now.” I thought of the tween waiting for me on the other side of the office door, and a flash of anger jolted through me. I wasn’t a child. I didn’t need a fucking babysitter—even if I was a newbie vampire.

“If you had an on-campus job as my research assistant, that would do away with the need for Winifred—or whatever minder you have assigned to you—to watch over you in the evening hours. Jay would stay in the lab, and you could come visit him whenever you want,” Emmett explained, making it all sound very rational and sensible.

“So, Jay’s stuck here? Like a prisoner?” I demanded, determined to find the fly in the ointment.

“Of course not,” Emmett said, looking horrified. “This is completely optional. He can leave whenever he wants. Provided he agrees to even accept the offer in the first place. I can hardly force him.”

*What do you think of all this?*

I jumped as the words echoed in my head. Jay was looking at me, and it occurred to me that it was *his* voice in my head. He had spoken to me through my thoughts, somehow. Was that normal? Was that something we always did? Was that something I could do, too?

I looked at him and tried to focus. Was that how it worked? Did I just think thoughts to myself and then… what? Somehow, he just… heard them? Wait, was he hearing this right now?

I stared hard at Jay’s eyepatch. *It could be good. Can you hear me? Copy?*

*Loud and clear, good buddy. Copy.*

Grinning, I bounced up and down on the balls of my feet. *I did it!*

*Did what?*

*Oh, I mind spoke with you.*

*Mind linked*. Jay sighed. *If you want me to stay—if you want me to do this—I will. I’m here to watch out for you. Especially with this Emmett guy. I don’t trust him. I’m here for you, Lola. Always.*

Warmth spread through my chest as I smiled at Jay. I wished—for the millionth time—that I knew more about this mate bond. I felt like this might have been an easier choice if it was working fully. I bit my lip and looked over at Emmett, thinking again of Jacqueline’s attack. If studying Jay and me could be helpful, then maybe we should both stay. Tottenville was weird as hell, but the professors had tried to help me with my urges and my vampire heat, and I felt a sense of responsibility to help them, too—if I could.

“Listen, why don’t you both think about it?” Emmett suggested, standing straight. “In the meantime, you can both stay here tonight. That way, you won’t worry Irma. I’ll head back up right now and deal with Winifred myself.”

He headed up the stairs, and as his footsteps died away, Jay and I faced each other.

“So…” I started. “Despite all the mad scientist talk, what do you think we should do?”

Jay gave me a piercing look. “I think you already know what that is, Lola.”

I did, and that was so weird that I could just *know* that about a man I barely remembered. I sighed. “This is unfair, though. You can’t do something potentially risky, just for my sake.”

Jay laughed. He raised his eyebrow and pointed to his eyepatch. “I’ve done it before, and I’ll do it again. No question.” The smile faded, and the look in his eye grew more intense. “I love you, Lola Spillane, and I will be here for as long as you need me to be.” He reached for my hand and laced his fingers through mine. “That sound good?”

I bit my lip. What felt good was his hand pressed against mine, and I started having flashes of what *else* I’d like to have pressed up against me. I hadn’t realized how close I’d started to feel to him—it was like it had snuck up on me—but now we were alone, and I couldn’t tear my eyes away from his. I was trying to breathe through it, but my breath kept catching and I was having a hard time keeping it regular.

Then he took a step toward me, closing the distance between us by half, and my heart thumped so hard I was certain he’d be able to hear it. My eyes went to his mouth, like I was lip-reading, and when he spoke, I felt his cool breath on my face.

“Lola, do you want to stay here with me tonight?”

**Episode 1560**

XAVIER

“It’s nothing.” Greyson moved quickly, trying to cover his leg so I couldn’t see the oozing wound.

But it was too late. I’d seen it, and it did *not* look good.

“That sure as hell doesn’t look like nothing.” I grunted.

Greyson looked at me for a moment, then gave a resigned sigh. “It looks a lot worse than it is.”

“Let’s fucking hope so,” I said, taking a step closer. “You want me to try to—”

“No,” he said quickly, putting a hand out to stop me. His eyes flashed angrily. “I told you, it’s not as bad as it looks.”

I shook my head, annoyed as hell. “How’d it happen?”

His jaw worked. “It’s from the fight with Lester, but it’s fine. Just mind your own goddamn business, Xavier.”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. It was just so ironic. All my life, Greyson had given me shit for not caring, and the one time I was showing an ounce of concern, he was telling me to take a hike. Classic.

“Did Lester do that?” I asked, nodding at his leg.

Greyson shrugged, looking down at the wound. “I don’t know. Maybe. Or it was from the fire, or I caught it on a jagged piece of wood while we were fighting. It’s all a blur, honestly. But it’s fine. It should heal on its own.”

I frowned and looked at his leg, which was still bloody. “But that’s the problem, isn’t it? It should have healed already.” I looked at it for a moment longer, then turned away. “I’m sure Torin is around somewhere. He’ll be able to help. I’ll just go grab him—”

“No!” Greyson grabbed my shoulder, holding me back. “I don’t need Torin. My leg isn’t even important right now, anyway.”

“What are you—”

“We have to get the pack out of here, deal with this house, make sure everyone’s safe, and figure out what the hell that witch mark is. All that needs to take priority over a scratch.”

I glanced down at the wound on Greyson’s leg, which looked like more than just a scratch to me, and crossed my arms. “Are you going to tell Cali about this?”

He glared back. “Are *you*?”

Under different circumstances, I probably would have found this funny, but I was too rattled from all the shit that had been going on. Especially that witch mark. That thing was really freaking me out. But maybe it explained some of the supernatural crap that had been going on. I ran a hand through my hair.

“I don’t make a habit of talking about you with Cali at all, man. I try to keep your name out of my mouth when I’m around her, but I think this”—I gestured down to his leg—“is something she should know about. It’s not my business—”

“You usually make everything your business,” Greyson snapped.

I blew an irritated breath out through my nose. “You can tell Cali on your own. I’m not a snitch, okay? But take it from me—she doesn’t like secrets, and she doesn’t like finding out things are being kept from her. Trust me on that. Besides, I’d say if the pack is an Alpha down from an injury like that, we’re all going to be fucked regardless of where we ship off to,” I added grimly.

Greyson took this in for a moment, but he shook his head. “I’m not leaving the pack without its Alpha. It’s going to heal. But right now, I have to get my stuff, and we all have to get out of here. That has to take precedence.”

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It had taken longer than we’d planned to get everyone out of the pack house, and by the time we were on our way, we were running on fumes.

Somehow, I’d ended up with basically the entire house packed into my car. Torin—of course—and Astrid, Rishika, Marta, and—though I couldn’t see him anymore—Lilac. He’d disappeared again, but since Marta was there and they were tethered together, I assumed he was there too. Rishika was in the front seat next to me. Cali was riding with Artemis and her parents in one of the convoy of cars behind me.

We were almost there—thank god. The group in the back had been driving me crazy. Torin had been talking non-stop. He’d had a zillion question for Lilac, and Marta had spent the whole drive relaying Lilac’s answers. Then there’d been the drama with the windows, which had been going up and down the whole drive. Someone was always too hot, then the windows would go down and someone else would be too cold.

I was done, and ready to throw them all out of my car, so I sped up as we headed up the winding road.

As we rounded a corner, the house came into view, and my throat tightened. It was strange, seeing the old place. Strange, and oddly emotional. It hadn’t been all that long ago we’d left, but somehow it felt like a lifetime. It had been fixed up since the last time I’d seen it, and I made a mental note to check to make sure Phil had been paid in full for his work.

“Oh my god!” Torin gasped, directly into my ear. “This place is huge! Are all pack houses *huge*?”

I gritted my teeth. “They kind of have to be. What with it being a *pack house*.”

“Do you know how long we’ll be staying here, Xavier?” Astrid asked.

I shrugged, gripping the steering wheel so tightly my knuckles had turned white. “Nope. I guess until the other house is fixed—or not cursed. Whichever of those comes first.”

“Well,” Rishika said reasonably, “the other house isn’t exactly cursed. It’s marked, but that’s not the same thing. Kira didn’t say anything about a curse.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I said, rolling my eyes. “She may as well have said it. Come on, Rishika. The ghost pond, the revenants, the fire—do you need a flashing neon sign above the place, too? Everything that’s been going on there has been nothing but trouble.”

“And you don’t think at least some of that trouble will follow us here?”

I did not want to think about that.

I pulled into the long driveway and parked, and everyone began to climb out. The other cars began to arrive, and the driveway was soon filled with milling pack members, talking and stretching and grabbing luggage.

Amid the chaos, I looked up at the house again. It really was strange to be back, after everything that had happened since we left. A homecoming of sorts—but under the worst circumstances.

“I call dibs on Cali’s room!” Torin called over the heads of the crowd. He looked over at Rishika. “It is ‘dibs,’ isn’t it?”

She nodded.

I glared at him. “Forget it.”

He pouted. “Why?”

“It’s right there, man. *Cali’s* room,” I growled.

Astrid stepped up next to him. “We figured Cali would be staying with you or Greyson. Or, I guess, you *and* Greyson, depending on the schedule? I didn’t think she’d need a room of her own.”

Rishika made a startled face. “Uh, what? Dude… TMI.”

I glared at Torin and Astrid. Leave it to the Fae to gossip. Though Greyson hadn’t helped any, kissing Cali right in front of everyone. It had just been on the forehead, but still…

Frustrated with the conversation, I turned and headed into the house and right up to my room, figuring that with the way things were going, I’d better claim it before anyone got any ideas. I tossed my bag onto the bed with a huff of frustration. Those Fae needed to keep their mouths shut about the room sharing with Cali. I knew she didn’t like our private lives discussed.

Then again, Greyson had probably blown some of that with that kiss. I turned and looked out the window at the grey sky. If I was being honest, I’d been pretty pissed about that stupid kiss and had gone after Greyson to tell him so, but then I’d seen that wound and…

I shook my head. Whatever. It wasn’t my problem.

I looked around my room. Everything was still in its place, untouched, but musty with disuse. I walked over to the dresser and looked at the thick layer of dust covering everything. Gross.

It was a cold day, but I threw the window open to get some air circulating and stepped out into the hall, but I stopped in my tracks when I saw Cali coming toward me. A wave of memory hit like a tsunami, almost knocking me over. We were back where everything had started between us, and it stirred something powerful within me.

She smiled as she walked to me. “I thought you might be up here already.”

I smirked. “You’d better hurry, or Torin is going to take your room.”

Her eyes went wide, and she stopped in her tracks. “He’d better not be in there already.”

I laughed when she spun and raced down the hall toward her room. Sprinting, I beat her to it and stood in the doorway, blocking her way.

“*Xavier*,” Cali said, laughing. “Get out of the way.”

“Wish I could, but I did promise Torin,” I said, grinning wickedly.

“You wouldn’t,” she said. She sidled up to me, sliding her hands along my body in a way that didn’t seem to have anything to do with an effort to get through the door.

It was such a nice sensation that I considered keeping her out of the room all day, but then I reached behind me and opened the door. “Okay, fine—”

I stopped. The smell hit me all at once, and instinct took over. It was the scent of another werewolf, and I only just had time to push Cali behind me before I saw the shadow advancing on us.

**Episode 1561**

CHARLIE

Everyone went quiet as they stared down at the pile of clothes on the ground—Violet’s clothes. Chad gestured to them as he looked at the assembled group of campers.

“I give you the *proof*,” he said smugly.

A collective murmur moved through the group of hunters like wind through the trees as everyone pressed forward to get a better look.

Sergeant Pepperdine stepped forward, frowning. “Where did you find these?” he asked Chad.

“I found them—”

“*We* found them,” a girl with a red braid corrected, looking huffy.

Chad rolled his eyes. “I found them *with* my search team on the western border of the camp. They were just beyond the wall.”

Sergeant Pepperdine stepped closer and—using a stick—poked through and lifted a bra from the pile. He held it at a distance like it was giving off toxic levels of radiation. It was pink and very lacy—this was no ordinary bra. This was like… *lingerie*.

I hadn’t known Violet had been wearing such a sexy bra*.* And this wasn’t exactly how I pictured seeing something like *that* in relation to her. But she’d chosen to put it on, knowing she was coming to see me… *damn*.

Half of my brain went back to that *very* heated moment we’d shared, wondering where she’d imagined that would take us.

But the other half of my brain was busy thinking that about the fact that everyone in my whole damn camp was now staring at that very sexy bra—and a wave of anger broke over me.

Next to me, Zachery gasped. “Oh my god. Are you saying there’s a naked girl somewhere out there?” he asked, his gaze darting hopefully into the dark trees. It took everything in me to restrain my wolf from lashing out at how giddy he seemed at the prospect of finding her, *my* Violet. I’d never felt that before, and it was a side of being a werewolf I wasn’t sure I was comfortable with.

Chad glared at Zachery. “What? No! It’s not a naked—No! There’s a werewolf out there. Obviously.”

I took a step forward, my mind spinning. I had to say *something*. I had to think of a way to defuse this situation, but I was drawing a total blank. But before I could say anything, Sophie stepped up next to me.

“How can you be so sure?”

Chad looked at her, surprised. “Excuse me?”

She raised her eyebrows. “How can you be sure it’s a werewolf? You found a pile of clothes outside the camp walls. It seems like a pretty big logical leap to go from ‘pile of random clothes in the woods’ to ‘werewolf’. I don’t think one equals the other.”

“Yeah,” Aisha said. “What if someone was just streaking?”

No one could mask the low laughter that raced through the hunters.

“Really, Aisha?” Reggie asked incredulously.

She shrugged. “What? I’m just saying…”

Chad looked even more agitated. “Streaking? In the winter? In the woods? Get real.”

“Did you see anything else where you found the clothes, Chad?” Sergeant Pepperdine asked.

Chad nodded, hauling his smug look back in place. “I—”

“*We*,” the girl with the braid called again.

Chad’s face flushed with anger. “*We* found evidence of a werewolf.” He smiled nastily. “Paw prints on the ground.”

*Shit*. This was not good. Not good at all. This was what I’d been worried about—why I’d been telling Violet not to come visit, even though I’d been missing her so badly it felt like a physical ache. I’d been so worried about something *exactly* like this happening. And now it had. At least she had the charm. But I knew Chad had seen me with Violet before the alarm had been tripped, and he’d given her a very thorough look-over. If he remembered what she’d been wearing, I was in deep trouble. And—if that threatening look he’d given me was any indication—his memory was in perfect working order.

*Shit*.

My hands curled into fists, and I felt my knuckles crack with the pressure. It looked like I was going to have to have a little talk with Chad to find out what he knew and what he was going to do about it—and to stop him from going after Violet, if that was his plan. I could handle Chad, but he wasn’t getting anywhere near Violet. Not if I had anything to say about it.

“All right! Enough of this. Everyone back to your dorms. Wait there for further instructions!”

For a moment, I was too lost in my thoughts to process Sergeant Pepperdine’s barked orders, but by the time I looked up, Chad was walking away, and I was being swept in the opposite direction by Sophie, Zachery, Aisha, and Reggie, who were all talking at once about what had just happened.

“I mean, I can’t *believe* it,” Zachery said, pushing open the dorm door and tripping over the doorjamb as he walked through. “I wasn’t expecting anything like this to happen. Does this kind of thing happen a lot?”

Reggie shook his head. “No way. Not since I’ve been here.” He looked around. “Anyone know what happens next?”

“Patrols?” Aisha guessed. “Keep an eye out in case the werewolf comes back? Maybe with its pack?”

“I mean, we have to figure out a plan, right?” Zachery asked, looking around, his eyes wide with fear. “We can’t just sit around waiting for it to find us, can we?”

“I wonder if whatever tripped the alarm was the same thing that caused all that chaos the night of the dance,” Aisha said thoughtfully. “Maybe we were barking up the wrong tree, thinking it was a vampire when it was actually a werewolf. Get it! Barking up the… ah, never mind.”

“Yeah,” Sophie said slowly. “Maybe. Hey, Charlie, can I talk to you? *Alone*?”

That didn’t sound good. “Sure.” But if I could trust anyone in this camp it was her.

Zachery caught my eye and gave me an encouraging thumbs up.

Sophie grabbed my wrist and pulled me to the other side of the room, on the other side of a set of unused bunks, where the others couldn’t see us or hear us. “Charlie, I’m really worried. Did something happen?”

“What do you mean?” I asked, suddenly sweating.

She gave me a hard stare. “Do you know this other werewolf somehow?”

My stomach sank. God, how had I gotten to this point? Staying at a hunter’s camp, being asked if I knew the werewolf who’d tripped the alarm that had alerted the hunters to the presence of supernaturals? *How did I get here?* There was so much weird shit going on, it made me miss the days when my biggest worry had been having lacrosse conditioning at six a.m. and an econ test at eight.

Now, things were just weird. Some of it I wouldn’t change—Violet, of course. But, as for the rest of it… I just needed a damn break.

Was it too much to ask to, I don’t know, steal away to a deserted island with Violet for a day? Or a month? Or a year?

“Charlie?” Sophie waved her hand in my face, reclaiming my attention, which had wandered. “What do you know about this? Is this werewolf thing connected to you, somehow?”

It was time to just admit what the hell was going on. I took a deep breath and shook my hair out of my eyes. “First of all, Sophie, I’m sorry for roping you into all this craziness. It wasn’t my intention. Like, at all. So, my mate was here—”

Sophie’s eyes opened wide in surprise. “Your *mate*? *What?* That’s a real thing?”

I nodded. “Yeah. It’s a werewolf thing—we find a mate and… It’s different from a romantic connection. Okay, not different, but deeper, longer lasting. It’s more permanent.” I shook my head. “I should have just been honest with you from the start, but it’s all a bit… complicated.”

“Yeah, I’ll say,” she said quietly. “So, she—your mate—was here? Is that what you needed cover for, at the dance?”

“Kind of?”

“Does she know that you asked me to fake date you?”

“Um…”

Things were going from bad to worse. I was trying to make a clean break, but Sophie just looked so hurt, and I felt awful. I knew I’d led her on with all that fake dating stuff, and I wanted to try to explain why, but I just didn’t have the time, because at that very moment, my mom appeared in the doorway and knocked on the doorframe.

“Charlie?” she said, looking around.

“Oh my god,” I muttered. The night was just getting worse. I looked up at Sophie. “Will you excuse me for a minute?”

She nodded, still looked wounded. “This isn’t over.”

When I walked toward the door, I saw my mom’s eyes darting around, and my stomach sank. “Hey, Mom.”

“Charlie.” She reached for my arm and yanked me out of the room. She walked very fast down the hall, and when she spoke her voice was low and as angry as a hissing snake. “What is going *on*?”

“What do you mean?” I asked, stalling for time.

“You know exactly what I mean, Charlie. The alarm was tripped by a supernatural. I saw the clothes a werewolf left just outside the camp walls.” Her eyes pierced through me. “Is Violet here?”

**Episode 1562**

My heart sped up as Xavier pushed himself in front of me. Every muscle in his body was coiled tight—in full defense mode.

For a moment, I was completely confused, but after a second, I saw the shadowy movement in the dark room, and I understood—there was someone in there.

“Oh god,” I murmured, grabbing fistfuls of Xavier’s shirt. “Who is it? Can you see? Is it a revenant?” We could *not* catch a single break today.

“Cali,” Xavier said, his voice a warning. “You need to get out of here.”

“Xavier—”

“*Now!*” he shouted as he lunged forward.

I yelped and jumped back as Xavier grabbed hold of the dark figure in the room. The figure grasped onto him and… didn’t fight back?

Xavier pushed the shadowy person down, pinning him to the ground, and had just cocked his fist, ready to punch when a croaky voice said, “Xavier! Stop! It’s me!”

Xavier hesitated, and I could see confusion flashing across his face in the dark room.

I flipped on the light and, taking a step into the room, gasped when I saw who Xavier had pinned on the ground. “*Ravi?*”

“What the fuck?” Xavier muttered, looking down, clearly baffled.

It *was* Ravi—without a doubt—though he had a thick, black beard. It was actually kind of cool, in a lumberjack hipster kind of way. My brain was struggling to process this massive change. It had been weeks since we’d last seen him, and the last time had been anything but happy—what with him stabbing Big Mac, threatening me, and being generally shady due to the Orb’s influence.

Xavier, clearly remembering those circumstances too, continued to keep him pinned to the floor. “What the hell are you doing in my house?”

Ravi looked up at him. “What does it look like? I was staying here.”

“You little bastard—”

I rolled my eyes and grabbed Xavier’s arm, hauling him off Ravi.

“Thank you,” Ravi said, clambering to his feet. He brushed off his dark T-shirt and well-cut joggers.

Xavier narrowed his eyes. “Are those mine?” he asked, pointing at the pants.

Ravi shrugged. “Maybe. You weren’t here. It’s not like I could ask you.”

Xavier tensed dangerously, and I stepped in front of him, shielding Ravi from the thermal blast of Xavier’s anger.

“What are you doing here? Not that we’re not happy to see you,” I added, though I wasn’t exactly sure if that part was true. But considering we had thought he was a revenant, this was a definite improvement.

I thought back to how Greyson had told Ravi to leave after everything had gone down. It *had* actually been the Orb all along, but still… And it wasn’t like Greyson had banished Ravi forever. It seemed to me that Ravi was a victim, more than anything else. He’d been a wreck after Silas had killed Joss, and the Orb had preyed upon his grief.

Ravi pushed his long hair out of his eyes. “Well, I ran into some unsavory people while I was running in the woods recently, and I needed somewhere to go.” He shrugged. “And I figured this pack house wasn’t being used.”

“So you just moved in?” Xavier asked, looking irritated.

“It was only going to be for a few days,” Ravi said.

I knew I had to ask, even though the answer was probably going to be one I didn’t like. “These people in the woods… When you say ‘unsavory,’ what do you mean?”

Ravi gave an involuntary shudder. “Orange eyes. Weird vibes.”

Yup, worst suspicions confirmed.

“And were you going to share that you’d been attacked by revenants with the pack at some point, or were you planning on keeping that information to yourself?” Xavier snapped.

Ravi stared at him. “Revenants? What the hell are revenants? What are you talking about?”

“Revenants are the things with the orange eyes,” I explained.

“And the bad vibes?”

“The worst kind of vibes. They’re undead, and really dangerous,” I said.

“Well, shit.” Ravi looked between Xavier and me for a moment. “Listen, I was planning on coming back to the house after a while—and I would have told you about it then—but I really didn’t know they were, like, a *thing*. I definitely didn’t know they had a name. And, if I’m being honest, I didn’t even know if I’d be welcome if I didgo back. I mean, showing up a few weeks after everything that went down? Who knows if you would have even believed me?”

I glanced at Xavier, whose expression was still stony.

“We have to tell Greyson,” I said quietly. “If there are revenants in the area, then the packs need to mobilize—”

“Packs?” Ravi looked confused. “What packs?”

“The Blue Blood pack is here, too,” Xavier said. He nodded. “Yeah, we’d better go tell him.”

The three of us headed downstairs, where the packs were still moving things in from the cars. Rishika was hauling two suitcases through the front door, but when she saw Ravi, she dropped them with a gasp and sprinted for him, throwing herself into his arms.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, pulling back to look at him, smiling a beaming smile at him.

“Yeah. What the fuck are you doing here?” Greyson—who’d come in just behind Rishika—asked coldly.

I rolled my eyes and stepped over to Greyson. “He needed somewhere to stay. And there was some trouble in the woods, so he needed to lie low for a while—”

Greyson glared at Ravi. “Still doesn’t explain what he’s doing at a Redwood pack house after I told him to leave.”

“He saw revenants,” Xavier said.

Just the word sent a chill down my spine. I would never *not* be terrified by those orange-eyed, soulless creatures.

Greyson turned to stare at Ravi, his eyes cold as ice. “And? I asked him a question.”

The huge entryway of the house had gone quiet, and every eye had turned to Ravi as we waited for his answer.

Ravi’s dark eyes flashed, and he shifted uncomfortably, but he didn’t look away from Greyson’s stony glare. “I met those—whatever they’re called—revenant things in the woods, and I came here for safety. I didn’t know when they were going to come back, and I wanted to wait them out. I didn’t know you’d be coming back here, and…” He took a deep breath. “And if you want me to go, I understand. I know why you asked me to leave, and I don’t blame you. I really regret what happened with Big Mac. I wish it hadn’t gone down that way. I was wrecked after Joss’s death, but I’m not going to use that as an excuse. She would have kicked my ass out too.”

His eyes grew brighter for a moment, and it occurred to me how fresh his grief still was. He’d only just lost her, and my heart ached for how much he still had to be hurting.

With everything that had been happening, I hadn’t thought much about Joss lately. She had been an incredible Luna. I wondered if I could ever be a Luna like that. For so long, it hadn’t seemed like that was a role I’d ever get a chance at, what with all the drama surrounding my mates.

I glanced over at Greyson, and then at Xavier. Now that I was with both of them… Was being a Luna something I should’ve been thinking more about?

The silence in the entrance hall had stretched and was growing tense. I gave my head a little shake, breaking out of my thoughts, and took a step forward. “No one blames you for what happened, Ravi. We know it was the Orb. You were under its influence. You weren’t yourself.”

Ravi looked over at me, clearly surprised. He nodded. “Yeah.”

“I don’t know if I got it at the time, but you were really hurting, and we all practically kicked you while you were down by throwing you out of the pack—”

“Cali—” Greyson started.

“I know it was a safety thing,” I said, cutting him off. “But still—”

“This is between Ravi and me, Cali,” Greyson said quietly. “The Alpha makes these decisions. They’re not made by committee.”

“Thank you, Cali,” Ravi said, his voice low. “I know it won’t change anything,” he added, glancing up at Greyson, “but it’s nice to hear. I do miss the pack—all of you—but I understand your decision.”

“Then you understand why you have to leave again,” Greyson said coldly.

“Greyson, no,” I said, rounding on him. “Ravi deserves a second chance. He did those things when the Orb was in the house with us. He was grieving, and he was susceptible. He was influenced—like we all were.”

I planted my feet, fully prepared to stand my ground on this.

“We’ve given Artemis a second chance because she’s my sister—what about Ravi?” I continued. “He doesn’t get a second chance because he doesn’t have that kind of connection to the pack? That’s not fair. That’s not what a pack is. A pack fights for each other. I should have done that for him before—but I can do it now.” I took a deep breath. “Greyson, I think Ravi should join the pack.”

**Episode 1563**

GREYSON

I could feel every eye in the house turn to me, but it was Cali’s gaze that pierced me. I hated being put on the spot like this—and not just in front of my own pack. The Blue Bloods were here to see this shitshow go down, too. I could see Mace looking at me over the heads of his pack.

I stood by the decision I’d made about Ravi. It was easy to look back now—weeks later—and see all the things we’d been wrong about, but we hadn’t known everything at the time. All we’d known then was that Ravi had been acting erratically. He’d almost killed Big Mac, and he’d tried to attack Cali. We hadn’t known about the Orb and its effects. I’d done what I had to do to protect the pack, and I didn’t regret it.

Cali’s eyes were wide as she looked at me, and they were—as always—flashing with emotion. Cali always felt so deeply. I knew she was taking Ravi’s side and coming from a place of empathy, but *good lord*—after the day I’d had, it was hard as hell not to just shut this whole conversation down and tell Ravi to get the hell out.

But I didn’t. I pinched the bridge of my nose and shook my head. “Cali, you know Ravi can’t simply rejoin the pack, despite whatever you want.”

Cali’s face flushed. “Greyson—”

“That’s something only Ravi can do,” I said, looking up at him. “It has to be something *he* wants. I wouldn’t even consider letting someone back in if they didn’t really want it.”

I could tell I had thrown her for a loop with my statement, as well as the rest of the pack.

Ravi shifted on his feet, apparently uncomfortable under the sudden scrutiny of so many people.

I had to admit, the guy did look a little worse for wear. He was thin and had a massive, mountain man beard. But he looked better than the last time I’d seen him, when I’d sent him packing. He looked better rested, without the dark circles under his eyes that he’d had in the days after Joss’s death.

*Shit*. Guilt twinged at my heart. Joss’s death had been hard on me, but it had destroyed Ravi. Maybe Cali was right. Maybe we *had* kicked the guy while he was down.

I ran my hand through my hair as another jolt of pain shot through my leg. I just wanted this over and done with.

Ravi swallowed nervously, but he lifted his chin and met my eyes. “The Redwood pack was Joss’s pack, and I know that it meant the world to her. If you accept me back, I will do everything I can to honor her and protect the pack.”

I gave him a long, cool stare. “You sure about that?”

He nodded. “Yes. I swear it. On my life.”

I looked over at Cali, but her eyes were on Ravi. It was clear she was completely taken in by his speech. Xavier was standing next to her, and he looked as wary as I felt. That was something. I blew out a breath, thinking hard. *I’d* gotten a second chance—back when I’d become Alpha of the pack. And Cali had been right when she’d said that pack members fought for each other.

“What happened after Joss’s death was hard on everyone, Ravi. Myself included,” I said. “Do you think you can prove your loyalty to the Redwood pack?”

He nodded without hesitation. “Absolutely.”

All eyes turned back to me. It was decision time. The pain in my leg had dulled, but it was still a constant throbbing. My jeans were rubbing against the wound, making it sting. I needed to wash it out—my brain was spinning with all the things that needed to get done. An Alpha never had time to rest, it seemed.

“Okay, then,” I said. “You can stay, but you’re on probation.”

“Good enough for me,” Ravi said, and a smile peeked out from within his dark beard.

Rishika gave an excited whoop and threw her arms around him. “I’m so glad you’re back!”

I saw Cali’s grateful smile from the corner of my eye—the only thing I needed to confirm I’d made the right decision.

“Okay, that’s it from me. Meeting adjourned,” I said, pushing past Ravi and heading up the stairs.

I needed to get away—I was done with the noise and chaos of both packs, and the luggage, and the planning, and everyone trying to figure out where they were going to sleep. Between the revenants and the fire and getting everyone to safety, I felt like I hadn’t had a moment to breathe in days.

Upstairs, I went straight to my old room and shut the door gratefully behind me. The room was dim and stuffy—it felt like it had been ages since I’d been there—but I leaned back against the closed door, glad to be alone. I flipped the lock and peeled down my jeans. Or I tried to. The oozing blood had stuck to the fabric, and I had to rip it away. I bit back a grunt of pain. Not my finest moment.

I tossed the ruined jeans into the corner and, walking into the bathroom, turned on the shower. I didn’t even give the water time to warm up before I stepped in.

When the water hit the wound, it felt like hundreds of red-hot knives had jammed themselves into my skin.

“*Fuck*,” I hissed. But I didn’t step away. I let the icy water run over the wound, washing the dried blood away.

I hadn’t had a wound this bad since the last time I’d been poisoned with silver—

My heart skipped a beat at the thought. I renewed my efforts to check the wound for the telltale signs of silver poisoning. But no, that wasn’t what this was. There were no streaks on my skin—and besides, this pain felt completely different to silver poisoning. I would have been completely incapacitated if I’d had silver embedded in me. I wouldn’t have been able to drive here, or shower. Hell, I wouldn’t have been able to stand.

No, this was something else.

I reached down, wiping some of the crusted blood away, and was surprised to see that the wound did look different than it had earlier. It had started to heal.

That was good, but there was still cause for concern. There was no good reason for a wound to take so long to heal on a werewolf—*especially* on me, an Alpha.

I frowned as the water sluiced down my leg. The wound had started to scab over, but… there was something else. I reached down and rubbed at it, gritting my teeth against the lightning strike of pain it caused, and looked again.

What was that? A symbol?

I narrowed my eyes. It was hard to see with the water running over it. It sort of looked like that strange carving we’d seen on the foundations of the pack house. But no. That couldn’t be right. It was a wound, a random, jagged break in the skin.

I shook my head, stood up, and—just as I was starting to get used to the now-hot water—turned off the shower.

When I went back downstairs, I was glad to see that the packs had managed to sort out most of the details on their own. Zainab and a guy from the Blue Blood pack were stocking the fridge with the bags we’d brought from the old house, Tom was directing the distribution of the food, and Torin was mixing drinks—to the delight of everyone. Everything seemed to be running smoothly, for once.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of Mace heading out the back door, alone. I walked after him.

“Mace,” I called, shutting the door behind me. “Wait up.”

He turned around. His eyes were a little vacant, but he stopped on the dried grass and waited for me to catch up.

“I’m not really in the mood for a full check-in,” he said flatly.

“Too bad, you’re getting one. My pack house, my rules. I know it’s been kind of a heavy day. I wanted to make sure you’re doing okay.”

Mace nodded.

He wasn’t his usual self, but I hadn’t expected him to be. I put my hand on his shoulder. “Whatever you need, man, just say it.”

Mace looked up, surprised. Pain flashed across his eyes. “I was wrong about you, Greyson.”

“What do you mean?”

He looked down, shaking his head. “I was wrong to be so tough on you when Pip and I first arrived,” he said, his voice cracking. “I should apologize—”

“You don’t need to apologize,” I said, squeezing his shoulder. “For anything. The Blue Blood pack is welcome here, and you can stay for as long as you need. Strength in numbers, remember?”

Mace looked up and nodded. “Right,” he muttered, that vacant look back in his eyes.

“You should go back inside,” I said, looking at the bruise-purple shadows under his eyes. “Go get some rest, man.”

He didn’t need much convincing. He nodded silently, and I led him to the door.

And just as Mace walked into the house, Ravi walked out.

I didn’t know what to say to the man. I hadn’t exactly been expecting to find this blast from the past at the house. Not with everything else I was contending with. Ravi took in the silence, but I could feel his unasked questions. I’d let him tell me when he was ready to talk. Then, finally, Ravi spoke. “Can we talk about Joss?”

**Episode 1564**

MARTA

Chaos. Absolute chaos. The new-old pack house—filled to the brim with two packs of werewolves, all vying for rooms—was about as wild as one could imagine.

The place was huge, with high, lofted ceilings and dusty hardwood floors, but there were a ton of people and everyone needed a place to sleep, and things had gotten cutthroat. Back at the foster home, we’d once played musical chairs on someone’s birthday—and this felt exactly like that. Doors were slamming, people were screaming at others to get out of their rooms, and Torin wasn’t helping by plying the wolves with alcoholic mixed drinks in the kitchen.

It wasn’t fun, by any means, but I hadn’t grown up in a foster home for nothing. Growing up an orphan was eat or be eaten, so I put my head down hurried upstairs, looking for a place to sleep that wasn’t a broom cupboard with a blanket. Looking around, it looked like the people who had lived here before—Cali, Greyson, and of course Xavier—already had their rooms, but everything else was up for grabs.

At the top of the stairs, I found a knot of Blue Bloods arguing in front of a doorway.

“—and I got here first, so it’s obviously my room!”

“But it’s got a view of the woods. And you know I have to see the woods when I wake up, or I’m not myself, Alfie.”

A girl with a long brown braid rolled her eyes at a guy with tight black curls. “Give me a freaking break, Zander. You’re not the only one who likes a view—”

They were so caught up in their argument, they didn’t even notice when I slipped past them, into the room, and shut the door.

One the benefits of this house over the last one was this one had thicker walls. A fact I realized as the three werewolves began to pound on the door. When they started yelling at me to get out, I could barely hear them.

I flipped the lock and looked around. Now that I was inside, I really didn’t see what they’d been arguing about, the room wasn’t anything special—a twin bed, a dresser, and a desk—all covered with dust. The window near the bed was nice and wide, however, and the view overlooking the woods was beautiful. I leaned against the window frame, looking out at the trees silhouetted against the darkening sky.

“This was my room.”

I whirled around. “What? No it wasn’t.”

Lilac nodded.

I closed my eyes, mentally kicking myself. Just my luck. Of all the rooms in this gigantic house, *how* could I have walked into Lilac’s?

He smiled. “You can check the bedframe if you want proof. Violet and I used to carve messages into the wood when we were bored.”

Curious, I stepped forward and leaned over to look, but I stopped when my head began to spin. A wave of fatigue followed the dizziness, so powerful I swayed on my feet.

“Maybe I’ll just take your word for it,” I murmured, gripping the wooden bedframe to stay upright.

I jumped a little, surprised, when I felt Lilac’s light touch under my arm, supporting me as he led me to the bed to sit.

“I didn’t mean you should look now,” he said, gently chiding. “You should be resting. That’s what the firefighters said you should do.”

His touch made my stomach flutter in a way that frustrated the hell out of me, so I pulled my arm out of his grasp. “Don’t tell me what to do.”

He sat down next to me—far too close—and when he looked at me, the air between us seemed to vibrate. I glared at him. What the hell was that? Was that what Violet had been talking about when she’d described people “literally vibing”?

Irritated, I crossed my arms stubbornly over my chest. I did *not* like Lilac. He was a *ghost*. I was a *living person*. I’d only kissed him out of necessity… and stupidity.

Lilac raised his eyebrows. “I think your phone is ringing.”

“Oh!” I said, pulling the phone from my pocket. I’d forgotten all about it. I was actually surprised it had made it out of the fire unscathed. Hell, I was still surprised *I* had made it out of the fire unscathed. Though that was mostly down to Lilac—

But I didn’t want to think about that!

I looked down at the screen. “It’s Big Mac!”

With everything going on, I’d totally forgotten to call her back, and she wasn’t going to be happy about that.

“Oh, tell her hi,” Lilac said, grinning.

“*Shh*,” I hissed. “Be quiet when I’m on the phone.”

Lilac gave me a withering look. “I’m a ghost, Marta. She literally can’t hear me.”

I waved at him to shut up and put the phone to my ear. “Hello?”

“I have been trying to get ahold of you for hours, Marta! Where the *hell* have you been?”

“Well, something happened at the pack house,” I started.

“What?” she asked, her tone going from outrage to concern in the blink of an eye. “What happened? Are you okay?”

“Everything all right?” I heard Mrs. Smith ask, her voice muffled. There was a crackle as they switched to speakerphone. “Marta, is that you, dear?”

“There was kind of a fire—”

“A *fire*?” both women yelled, making me flinch.

“I knew it. I knew one of these days those two idiot Alphas would set fire to that place,” Big Mac muttered. “What happened?”

“Well, I’m not exactly sure,” I started. “I think it started because of the funeral pyre for Pip, and then Silas showed up, and then it just kind of got out of control. Honestly, most of what I know is second-hand anyway, because I got caught inside the house—”

“*What?*”

“But I’m okay now,” I added quickly.

“Well, where are you?” Mrs. Smith asked.

“We’re at the old pack house.” I looked around. “I’m not sure where it is. But I can ask Greyson or Xavier to call you with directions—”

“It’s fine, Marta,” Mrs. Smith said soothingly. “We know where it is. We’re just glad to hear that you’re all right.”

“You can say that again,” Big Mac said gruffly. “A fire. Unbelievable. Glad you got out, girl.”

Something warm flooded my chest, and I smiled. I’d spent most of my life alone, and it was very nice to know that these two women cared enough to be so shaken at the thought of me being in danger. I hadn’t known they cared. I hadn’t known anyone did, really.

“Anyway,” I said, giving my head a little shake. I didn’t like to talk about myself so much. “What’s going on there? I meant to call back and find out.”

Big Mac gave an audible sigh. “Well, we made it to Haystack Rock, and we met with Vander—you remember, that Keeper of All Nature?”

“Yeah, I remember,” I said. The visit definitely stood out in my memory.

“The portal still has no creatures going in an out—”

“But I thought it was open,” I interrupted, frowning.

“It’s acting like…” Big Mac hesitated, like she was casting around for the right word. “Like a screen door. It’s got all this negative energy coming out of it.”

“Like the ghost pond?” I asked.

“That’s possible,” the witch said. “Though none of this bodes well for ghosts. You know how they are—ghosts cling to negative energy, and it’s what can transform them into poltergeists. Or even demons—”

“*Demons?*” I squeaked.

“Well, hopefully not,” Big Mac said grimly.

“Wait,” I said, having a sudden thought. “Since the energy affects ghosts, could it possibly make them solid, somehow?”  
 “Maybe,” Big Mac said thoughtfully. “But the energy would need a conduit to guide it. And those are incredibly rare.”

Casting a nervous glance at Lilac, I chewed my bottom lip. “Okay, but what if I actually did that?”

Big Mac didn’t answer right away. “As in, you think you possibly *could*?” she finally said, slowly.

“No,” I said, my heart beating hard. “As in, I already did. With Lilac.”

There was no answer for long enough that I thought maybe we’d gotten disconnected.

“Big Mac? Mrs. Smith? Are you still there?”

When she spoke again, Big Mac’s voice was low and cold and filled me with sudden fear. “Very carefully, Marta, tell me *exactly* what you did to make this happen.”

“Um, okay,” I said, starting to sweat. “Which time?”  
 “You did it *more than once*?” Big Mac exploded.

“Yeah,” I said. “Is that bad?” The way they were reacting, it was as if I had pulled apart the fabric of reality. Oh god. Had I?

“Okay, okay, okay.” Big Mac sounded like she was talking to herself, trying to calm down. “We’re going to need to get in contact with a person I’ve heard about. Goes by the name of Rain. Marta?”

I jumped as Big Mac snapped me to full attention. “Are you listening to me?”

The urgency in her voice made my stomach clench painfully. “I’m listening. But what’s a Rain, and why do I need to get a hold of him so urgently?”

I heard Big Mac take a deep breath. “Because, Marta, I think you’re more than just a medium.”

**Episode 1565**

CHARLIE

“Charlie.” My mom’s face was as tense and angry as I’d ever seen it. “Answer my question. Is that werewolf Violet here?”

I had to think fast, desperately trying to keep my emotions off my face and my expression perfectly neutral. What had she heard? Had she heard everything I’d just told Sophie? Had she heard any of it?

No, she couldn’t have…

I hoped.

Her eyes narrowed, and I knew I had to say *something*, so I decided my best option was to play the confused card.

I frowned. “Violet? Here in Minnesota? Why would she be here?”

“The clothes that were found. The werewolf pawprints.” She stopped walking and rounded on me, her eyes flashing dangerously. “What exactly did you tell Violet about this place?”

“Nothing,” I said automatically.

She eyed me for a long moment, peering at me like she was trying to look into my soul. I was not going to crack. Nope. No way. Oh god.

After a moment, she turned on her heel and kept walking. I had to hurry to keep up with her as she stormed out the door and started across campus.

“Do you think Violet could have gotten it into her head to come here? To come visit you?” she demanded.

“What? No! Why would she?”

“Could she have found out about your new girlfriend? Do you think she could have gotten jealous and come to take care of things?”

“Mom, what are you talking about? You’re making no sense,” I said, shaking my head. This was a lie, of course. She was making perfect sense, and it was putting me more and more on edge.

The easiest course of action would be to tell the truth. I hated lying. I wasn’t any good at it. I always got too nervous and added too much unnecessary detail. But I knew the truth was *not* an option, and I had to keep my mouth shut. This wasn’t the same as lying about skipping a morning lacrosse practice. I couldn’t let *anything* slip, or Violet could be in real danger.

I gritted my teeth. I wished I hadn’t had to hurry away from Sophie so quickly. I didn’t like how we’d left things. I hadn’t had time to tell her how important it was that she also keep quiet about the whole Violet thing. What if she accidentally said something seemingly innocent, but blew my cover wide open? She probably already knew not to do that, and I *thought* I could trust her, but… I just didn’t know. Not for sure.

She’d looked so disappointed when I’d told her about Violet. Maybe this was the kind of thing—finding out that the guy you’d been crushing on had a mate—that could be the final straw when it came to secret keeping. I hated to think that of Sophie, but I didn’t like leaving the issue up in the air.

“Well?” My mom stopped walking and crossed her arms, giving me a hard stare.

I stopped, too, surprised. I hadn’t been paying attention to where we were walking, and I was startled to see we’d arrived at another campus building.

“Well what, Mom?” I swallowed nervously. “I didn’t tell her anything. When we broke up, it was a clean break. She said she didn’t want to keep talking. She understood why I was breaking up with her, but she didn’t want to stay in touch.”

My mom thought this over. “But she was so adamant about that whole *mates* nonsense.”  
 Anger flared in my chest, but I tried not to let it show. “That’s because it’s really ingrained in werewolf culture. It’s just part of how she thinks. But I didn’t tell her anything about this place.” I shook my head. “There’s no reason to believe she’d show up here out of the blue.”

Before my mom could respond to that, the door of the building opened and Romilly appeared in the doorway.

She looked between us for a moment. “Well, you’d both better come on inside.”

We stepped into Romilly’s office and sat in the chairs she waved us toward.

Sitting down, both she and my mom turned to me, and I could feel the heat of their stares on me.

“He says it’s not the girl, Romilly,” my mom said, not taking her eyes off me.

“Well, that’s a good start,” Romilly said.

“Why would it be Violet?” I asked, huffily. “She’s not stupid. She knows that I’m a hunter. Why would she risk her life coming here? And to do what? Cry and try to get me back?”

Romilly shrugged. “Hell if I know. Could this Violet girl have told anyone else in her pack what you are?”

I flinched. “The entire pack knows, actually.”

This was, evidentially, the wrong thing to say.

“*What?*” my mom demanded. “I never knew this!”

“Well,” I started, “it was kind of difficult to hide when my hunter instincts started to show themselves.”

“And how did this come to light?” Romilly asked, far calmer than my mother, but no less concerned.

“The pack was involved in this stalemate with a coven of vampires. Honestly, the pack knew I was a hunter before I did.”

“Charlie!” my mom snapped. “How could you have been so reckless?”

Romilly shook her head. “Careless,” she muttered. She leaned forward on her desk. “Do you have any enemies in the group? Anyone that would hate hunters enough to follow you out here and come to the camp to hunt them?”

I stared at her, incredulous. “Of course not. Do you really think all werewolves and supernaturals are that heartless? That pack did nothing but welcome and help me. They would never go out of their way to hurt someone. Even a hunter—someone who’s programmed to hate them.”

My mom shook her head. “What about the werewolf who turned you? That could have been calculated.”

“That guy wasn’t even in the pack!”

My mom looked furious. “Charlie, I know you think you know what’s going on, but I’m here to tell you there is more to this than you realize—”

“Mom, I think I know a bit more about this—”

“Your mother’s right, Charlie. You should listen—”

I held up my hands. “Look! I’m sorry, okay? I don’t know what’s going on, or why a werewolf would come to camp. Okay?”

Romilly looked at me for a moment, then nodded. “Alright.” She looked at my mom. “Right now, we need to refocus. Sergeant Pepperdine is on the hunt for the werewolf. They’ll get to the bottom of whatever’s going on.”

“And what about my son?” my mom asked. “Is he being protected from all of this?”

“Of course,” Romilly said. “He even has a charm I gave him. He’s undetectable.”

I cleared my throat. “Uh, yeah, about that…”

My mom and Romilly looked over.

“I, uh, might have *misplaced* the charm.”

The best thing I could say about their reactions was that there wasn’t time for them to yell at me. A bell rang sharply, and then the loudspeaker crackled.

“Everyone on campus report to the main quad. I repeat, everyone report to the main quad. Now.”

I hopped up. “Better get going,” I said, relieved to have found a handy exit out of the conversation.

“Hang on.” Romilly opened the center drawer of her desk and dug around. After a moment, she pulled out another charm and tossed it to me. “Don’t lose this one.”

There was an edge to her voice, and something told me I probably hadn’t heard the last of that.

When I arrived at the main quad, Zachery waved and pushed through the crowd toward me.

“Hey. All good?”

I shrugged and glanced over at my mom, who had walked over with me. She had been silent the whole way, her face set in a way that told me she was pissed, but I didn’t have time to think about that now. I turned my attention to Pepperdine, who had walked to the front of the crowd with a megaphone in his hand.

Everyone else had noticed him as well, and the crowd grew silent as he looked around.

“We’ve confirmed that the alarm was not triggered due to any kind of error or mistake on our part. Which means we have a bona fide supernatural on our hands, folks.”

This statement set off a buzz of conversation among the campers, and the whole place sounded like a giant beehive for a moment. There was a palpable excitement, but it wasn’t making me feel good at all.

Pepperdine put the megaphone back to his mouth. “Some of you will be able to utilize the training we’ve been working on. We’ve assigned a group of you to a taskforce to search for the werewolf. It’s an honor to be chosen, so to those of you selected, congratulations.” He looked down at the list in his hands. “Charlie, Sophie, Kate, Seth…”

I could hear Pepperdine’s voice faintly, but I wasn’t catching anything he was saying. I was beyond worried about Violet, and my mind was spinning out in a million directions. I had to come up with a plan to keep her safe. I had to foil this taskforce—and whoever was chosen for it. I had to do anything I could.

There was a sharp pain in my ribs, and I looked down to see Zachery elbowing me.

“Dude,” he hissed, “get up there.”

“What?”

Zachery looked at me, exasperated. “Pepperdine just called your name.”

**Episode 1566**

After everything that had happened, it wasn’t a surprise that I was still riding high on my part in Ravi rejoining the Redwood pack. Seeing him here at the house had brought back all the guilt I’d felt surrounding Joss’s death, and I felt good knowing I’d stepped up for him. Everyone needed someone to fight for them, and I was glad I’d been able to do that for Ravi.

I looked up when movement outside the window caught my eye. Ravi was outside with Greyson. I gripped the serving spoon, hovering over the pan of stuffing I was supposed to be manning, my heart beating hard as I watched them speaking, but I couldn’t hear anything, and I couldn’t tell anything by their expressions. Surely, it could only be a good thing that they were talking, right? There was a lot of unfinished business between the two, and Ravi could hardly be a full member if he couldn’t talk to his Alpha.

“Cali! You need to hurry up with that stuffing!”

I looked over at my dad, who was wearing an apron and a wild expression.

He gestured to the giant bowl he had given me to load up with the stuffing—it was only half-full. “We’ve got a house full of hungry werewolves, Caliana. You need to *move*. I still need someone to plate the green beans.”

“I can do that, Tom!” Torin said, tossing a towel over his shoulder with a smile. “Just point me toward the beans.”

I sighed and turned back to the stuffing. We were working on what my dad was calling the “Thanksgiving tasting table.” The new pack house’s fridge was a little smaller than the old one, and it was stressing my dad out.

“We are going to have eat all this stuff or lose it,” he’d announced when we’d arrived and he’d gotten a look at the fridge.

I loaded the bowl and tried to tune out my dad’s continued instructions. I was glad he had cooking to keep him occupied—I knew it was something that made him feel grounded, and he’d certainly needed that during the time he’d spent at the pack house—but good lord, did he get bossy in the kitchen. He was this mild-mannered guy most of the time, but he put on that apron and suddenly he was Gordon Ramsay.

Well, like a Midwestern Gordon Ramsay. He wasn’t cursing at anyone, and his voice never rose over a tightly irritated hiss—but for him, that was the same as screaming his head off.

“Torin,” he snapped, “I want the caramelized onions spread evenly over the green beans. And Cali,” he added, “don’t mash down my stuffing. It’s supposed to be fluffy. We’re not paying by the square foot.” Finally he pulled the spoon from my hand. “Why don’t you just go sit down. We’re pretty much done. Just go get yourself a plate.”

I was more than happy to turn over my serving spoon to the drill sergeant of stuffing and grab a plate. We’d arranged all the food along the long counter, and I loaded my plate with turkey, mashed potatoes, roasted sweet potatoes, salad, fresh rolls, and the stuffing I’d been unable to properly move from one dish to another. I moved to the jammed table and took a seat next to Artemis and Rishika on the long wooden bench.

After a moment, Xavier joined me with his own plate, and then my mom managed to drag my dad away from serving and they joined us as well. I looked around at the Redwoods and the Blue Bloods, all gathered in the kitchen and spilling into the rest of the house. Everyone was eating and talking and looking—at least for the moment—calm.

My mom cleared her throat and looked around at all of us. It was kind of an awkward beat, but after a moment, she smiled. “I’m so glad we’re all here together. I’m grateful we’re all okay, and that we can sit down and enjoy this meal together.”

My dad smiled at her, then around at all of us. “This is nice. This is our first meal as a family, isn’t it? Sitting all together like this?”

I looked up at Artemis, then over at my mom and dad. I felt Xavier next to me. “Yeah, I guess it is,” I murmured, as everyone else did the same.

Xavier began to eat, shoving turkey and potatoes into his mouth like he had never eaten before in his life. I rolled my eyes and looked back out the window, curious about Greyson and Ravi’s conversation. They were still out there, still talking.

Xavier cleared his throat, half-choking on a bite of food, and I cast him a sideways glance.

“What’s on your mind?” he asked through a mouthful of stuffing.

I shook my head, laughing. I thought back to that first family dinner we’d had with my parents, back in Minnesota. He’d made that chicken stir-fry and just charmed the hell out of my parents. I glanced over at him, taking in his high cheekbones and the sharp angle of his jaw. He’d charmed the hell out of me, too.

“This is nice,” I said, smiling, feeling warmer and happier than I had in a while. “Especially since Artemis and Rishika are official now.”

My mom looked up, surprised. “Is that so?” She looked over at Artemis with a knowing smile.

“Way to spoil the surprise, Cali,” Artemis said, but her words didn’t have much bite to them. I flushed bright red; I hadn’t realized we were standing on ceremony with that announcement. But luckily, Artemis didn’t seem annoyed. “Yeah, Rishika and I are… yup,” Artemis said, looking down at her plate.

I squinted. Was Artemis actually… *blushing*?

She was! I grinned. I loved to see her like this. Happy. She deserved it, especially after everything she’d gone through. Her whole life had been hard, and we’d all lived through some tough days recently.

“This food is excellent, Tom,” Xavier said, using his roll to mop up the last of his gravy.

“Amazing,” Sage said, passing by as she went to get a second plate.

“If this is just a preview of Thanksgiving, then Thanksgiving is going to be awesome!” a Blue Blood pack member added.

“A toast to the chef!” I said, lifting my wine glass.

Zainab, walking by on her way to get another plate, bumped into the back of my chair, jostling me and making my wine slosh onto my shirt.

“Oh, Cali!” she gasped. “I’m so sorry!”

“It’s fine,” I said, standing and dabbing my shirt with my napkin. “There are worse things than a too-full kitchen. I’ll just run upstairs for another shirt.”

It was funny, the way some things never changed. I could discover magical powers and change so much as a person in so many ways, but I’d probably always be the same klutz I’d always been.

When I got to my room, I pulled open a drawer, looking for a pajama shirt—might as well get a head start on getting cozy. I thought of the massive pile of dishes there was bound to be downstairs and felt a wave of tiredness wash over me. I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to remember if Xavier’s kitchen had a dishwasher.

But my eyes flew open when there was a knock on the door.

“Just a second,” I called, yanking a tank top over my head. “Who is it?”

“It’s me,” a low voice rumbled.

I pulled the door open to find Xavier framed in the doorway. When he smiled down at me, my breath caught in my throat. Seeing him in the doorway—*this* doorway—brought with it a wave of emotion. He leaned casually against the frame, all muscle and shoulders, and I felt my cheeks flame as my eyes traveled slowly up and down his body, taking him in. *How* did he still have this effect on me, even after all this time?

When my eyes met his again, his smile had grown, and his eyes were knowing. “I just wanted to check on you. See if you were okay.”

“I’m fine. It was just wine—”

“No, not about that. I’m asking about being back here. It’s a little strange, isn’t it?”

I shrugged. “Not really. Being back here almost feels like a homecoming. The new pack house was great, but there’s always going to be something about this place in my heart.”

Xavier looked genuinely surprised. “Really?”

I laughed. “Of course. How could it not? This is where I met you. This is where I fell in love with you.” I looked around. “This is where everything started for me.”

When Xavier moved into the room and shut the door behind him, it wasn’t hard to read the smoldering look in his eyes. When he stepped toward me, I felt the same flash of fear and desire I’d felt when I’d first met him, and my whole body thrummed.

“Fell in love with me?”

“Yes,” I breathed, my face flushing hot. “You know that.”

He walked deeper into the room, advancing on me, his eyes flashing. “Do you still love me?”

My mouth was dry, but as I looked into those eyes that burned like blue fire, I couldn’t do anything but tell the truth. “Yes.”

He hesitated for just a moment—just long enough to make me quake with wondering as the air between us flamed like a struck match—and then he leaned forward, capturing my mouth in a kiss.

**Episode 1567**

XAVIER

Kissing Cali felt like coming home. And kissing Cali here—in *my* home—was something else entirely. I threaded my fingers into her hair, feeling the silky strands slipping through my fingers, and thought back to the first time I’d ever seen her. She had been here, standing in my doorway, scared—but there had been a stubborn flash in her dark eyes that had intrigued me, right from the start, even though I’d tried like hell to deny it.

As I slid my arm around her back and pulled her body to mine, she stepped forward, her foot between my feet—a handsy, chest-heaving dance. I thought back to the first time we’d been *together*. It had been right here in this room, and there had been a wild look in her eyes when I’d touched her for the first time. I hadn’t thought we’d be back here so soon, but she was right. This was where everything had begun. And being back here—with her melting like candle wax into my arms—felt like the closing of a perfect circle.

I didn’t bother thinking about how Greyson factored into things.

Cali stood on tip toe to kiss along my jaw, then stretched a little further to nibble my ear. “Did you lock that door?” she murmured.

My body gave a throbbing pulse. “I’ll do it now,” I said, reaching back and flipping the lock.

When I stepped back to her, I slipped one arm around her waist and one beneath her knees, lifting her off her feet. She squealed and wrapped her arms around my neck, holding tight, and when I laid her down on the bed, she grabbed fistfuls of my shirt, pulling me on top of her.

I pushed my body onto hers, pressing her down into the mattress, feeling her flush against me—feeling every hill, every valley, every achingly perfect curve of her body. She was mine, and I knew every fucking inch of her.

She was moving beneath me, arching against me, grinding into me, and I was hardening in response. With a growl, I lowered my head and nipped at her neck. This made her suck in a breath and drop her head back, exposing more of her neck and chest. I grabbed for her tank top and pulled, and she held up her arms, letting me slip it off her. I threw it off the bed and dropped my head to kiss my way down to her perfect breasts.

“*Xavier*,” she moaned, threading her fingers into my hair.

She was writhing as I trailed my tongue across her skin, tasting her—drinking her in.

Her breathing had grown rapid and was starting to hitch. I reached down and flipped open the button on her jeans, then slipped my hand down, sliding my fingers into her slick core.

She let out a wild cry. “Oh *god*, Xavier!”

I had her right where I wanted her. I circled my fingers, unlocking her hunger, feeling her shiver beneath my hand.

She was gasping and pleading with me now, “Don’t stop, *please*, don’t stop. Just like that, Xavier.”

I covered her mouth with mine, claiming her body and soul as she came, hard.

She was ripping my shirt off before she’d even fully finished. “Off,” she panted. “Take it all off.”

I didn’t need to be told twice. I yanked my shirt off and tossed it. My jeans followed. Cali’s jeans and twisted panties flew after that, and we tangled together in the sheets of her bed—here again, after all this time.

I took hold of her hips and rolled her on top of me, and she smiled, straddling me. Her body was warm as a fire and slick with sweat.

“You’re so fucking beautiful.” I reached up and placed my finger in the hollow of her throat, then traced it downward, down the center of her breastbone to her stomach, past her belly button, and to the seam of her sex.

She closed her eyes with a moan, arching her back as she pressed against my hand.

“You like that?” I asked, teasing her with my fingers.

She opened her eyes. “You know I do.”

The lust in her eyes made my cock throb—I was aching for her—so I gripped her hips, rolled her onto the mattress, and buried myself inside her.

“Oh, god, *yes*!” she screamed. She reached up and grabbed the headboard, bracing herself as I drove into her again and again. The mattress squeaked and the headboard banged hard against the wall as Cali panted. “Yes! Xavier! *YES*!”

She wrapped her legs around my back, driving me deeper into her core, and I lost it. I tossed my head back, bucking hard against her as every nerve in my body exploded like dynamite.

Cali was clutching my back, digging in her nails in and screaming my name.

My heart was beating hard, and I could still see stars at the corners of my vision as I rested a hand on either side of Cali, trying to get my breath back. She looked hazily up at me, a smile blooming on her flushed face.

“Get down here,” she murmured, tugging at me.

I dropped down next to her on the pillow. She curled into me, laying her head on my chest, and together we slowly came down from the incredible climax we’d found together. The sheets lay tangled around us, and even in the dimness of the room, I could see our discarded clothes strewn all around. I chuckled as I glanced around the room. Some things never changed.

Cali snugged deeper into me. “Maybe we should head back downstairs, before anyone starts to wonder where we are.”

But she spoke without any conviction, so I wrapped an arm tightly around her. Any time spent away from Cali felt like a freaking age, but it felt like it had been so long since we’d really been together, and I wasn’t in any hurry to end things.

“Let them think whatever the hell they want,” I growled, burying my face in her hair. “As long as I’m here with you, nothing else matters.”

This made Cali smile. No, not smile, this made her *grin*, and it stretched from ear to ear.

I loved seeing her like this—calm, relaxed, happy, and satisfied. And I loved that I was the one who had made her feel this way. I bent my head and kissed her—a slow, languid kiss that she leaned into. The slow kiss grew more heated, and I reached for her, pulling the sheet away from her and—

“Get on up, Xavier,” Cali said, sitting up and pulling the sheet back around her breasts.

“Why?” I asked, giving it a little tug.

She shook her head reproachfully. “You are a bad influence, Xavier Evers. I need to go back downstairs. The last thing I need right now is for my parents to come looking for me and find me…” She gestured around. “Like this.”

“Like what?” I asked innocently.

She narrowed her eyes. “Indisposed. And post-sex.”

I laughed and tugged at the sheet, pulling her down for one more kiss. “Okay, okay. Head downstairs, then.”

“Bathroom first,” she said, stepping out of bed. She headed toward the bathroom, and when I heard the shower turn on, I considered joining her, but something out the large picture window caught my eye.

I stood up and moved to the window, frowning. Downstairs on the lawn, I could make out a figure moving through the darkness. I squinted—whoever it was looked familiar.

*Ava*.

Shit. What the hell was she doing out there? I’d known she was up to something, but having a gut feeling and seeing something with my own eyes were two very different things.

“What are you doing, Ava?” I murmured, staring into the darkness.

She had stopped and was looking around, like she was searching for something—or some*one*.

I jumped as I saw something moving in the trees. It was moving fast—too fast to be an animal, or even another human. Even Ava jumped as a figure appeared next to her, and I went into full defense mode. Not because I was anxious to defend Ava, but because whoever had just appeared clearly wasn’t a pack member.

So who the fuck was it?

Cali was calling to me over the rush of the shower, but I couldn’t listen to her—all my attention was focused on Ava and the figure on the lawn. The figure shifted, moving around Ava, and then I saw his face…

Holy shit, it was Iñigo. That fucking bloodsucker.

I didn’t even stop to think before my instincts took over. I had flung open the window and pulled myself through it before I’d even realized what I was doing. Keeping my eyes on Iñigo and Ava, I moved silently across the rooftop toward them. Then, when I reached the edge, I jumped, shifting into my wolf in mid-air. But before I could land, Iñigo grabbed Ava, and the two of them were gone in the blink of an eye.

**Episode 1568**

GREYSON

As I stood on the porch of the old pack house, staring at Ravi, I tried not to grimace. Ravi was about the last person I wanted to talk to right now. *Am I not already doing more than enough, simply by letting him stay?*

But the look in his eyes—both earnest and determined—told me I wasn’t going to be able to brush him off so easily.

Besides, he wanted to talk to me about Joss. My late Luna, and the woman he’d loved and lost in the fight against Silas. They’d had plans to leave the pack after the battle, to build a life together. But that dream had been taken from them when Joss had been taken from Ravi. The guy probably had enough baggage from that loss to fill the pack house.

There were a thousand things I’d rather have done than have this conversation with Joss’s lover—including participating in one of Torin’s hairbrained schemes—but it was probably best to get it out in the open. Whatever Ravi had to say, it couldn’t hurt to clear the air. It was already way too stuffy in the pack house with everyone on each other’s backs.

I cleared my throat. “Okay. Let’s talk.”

“I wanted to thank you again for letting me stay,” Ravi said. “I know it probably wasn’t a popular decision, and I appreciate your support.”

I shrugged. “Being an Alpha isn’t a popularity contest.”

It also, apparently, meant having uncomfortable conversations with former pack members when you’d much rather crawl in bed and nurse the strange wound on your leg. It still ached and throbbed with my every breath, just as sharp as when the cut had been made. I shifted, trying to take some weight off the leg.

*Not being Alpha doesn’t sound too bad, right now.*

But whether I wanted to do the job right now or not, I was still the Alpha. And I had to put the pack first, and that included Ravi.

He nodded. “When Joss died—” His voice broke, and his Adam’s apple bobbed for a moment before he cleared his throat. “I was filled with such rage. I wanted to take it out on anyone who had a hand in it—and most of all, I wanted to take it out on you.”

I raised my eyebrows. *Is this guy seriously telling me to my face that he wanted to kill me?*

“I can see why,” I offered. “Though, for both our sakes, I’m glad you didn’t. The Orb twisted a lot of people’s anger into something violent and toxic. You might have had those feelings, but the magic made them much, much worse. And that magic, not your anger, was probably what made you act the way you did. You shouldn’t blame yourself too much.”

Ravi nodded. “It sure didn’t feel that way.”

I sighed and shifted my weight again, trying to hold back a wince. Any weight on my wounded leg at all was just short of agonizing. “Maybe I was a little hard on you, but at the time I had to keep the pack safe. That was my job—*is* my job. You understand that, right?”

“I do.” He offered me a weak smile. “At least, I do now. And keeping the pack safe was what Joss wanted, too. That was all she ever wanted.”

His words sent a dull ache through my chest. Things between Joss and me had never been what anyone would consider good. We’d co-existed, at most. But she’d been an amazing Luna. A better leader to the pack at that point than I’d been up until very recently, and no matter what happened, I would always be grateful to her for what she’d done for the pack. She’d been with us right up until the end—when she’d made the ultimate sacrifice.

“That’s… very nice,” I managed. “But it’s not entirely true.”

Ravi’s head snapped up, and his eyes narrowed.

“She also wanted you,” I added.

The fire in his eyes flickered out, and he hesitated. His throat bobbed again, and he forced a smile. “She was a very special person. I want you to know that I don’t blame you anymore. I was too close to it then to admit it, but Joss knew what she was doing. I just wish I could have saved her.”

I put a hand on his arm. “I wish it could have been different, too. Really, I do.”

Guilt tugged at my stomach. I would never admit it to Ravi, but there was a reason I’d chosen Joss as my Luna—and it wasn’t just because she was the most prepared for the job. I’d known when I became Alpha that it wouldn’t be long until I’d be forced to face my father again, and that he would try to take everything from me. My pack, my freedom, even the woman I loved.

I’d been aware that whoever I chose to be my Luna would have a target on her back from day one. I’d chosen Joss to bear that target, and even knowing what it had cost her, I didn’t regret it.

Because as much as I mourned Joss, I knew I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if anything ever happened to Cali.

I thought of my dream of Silas killing Cali. *But maybe it doesn’t matter anyway. Will she ever be truly safe?*

I cleared my throat and forced my thoughts back to the present. “We should head back in before all the dinner is gone.”

Ravi nodded. “Thanks for hearing me out.”

“Of course.” I tried to ignore the pain in my leg as we headed for the door.

Suddenly, the door burst open and Cali ran out wrapped in a bathrobe, her hair wet, and almost plowed into us. Orla followed behind her, and some of the other pack members followed too.

“Cali!” her mother called. “Where are you going? Come back inside! It’s freezing out here!”

*What hell is this?*

Cali’s face was twisted up with worry as she strode forward, and I caught her by the shoulders, forcing her to spin back and face me. “What’s wrong, love?”

She looked past me, to the tree line at the edge of the lawn. “Xavier jumped out the window. Did any of you see him?”

*He jumped out a window?* I blinked, then looked over at Ravi, who seemed equally confused. “Um, no. Why don’t you slow down and start at the beginning?”

She averted her gaze. “We were… together.”

I clenched my jaw. I knew exactly what that implied, and I reminded myself to have a word with Xavier about that schedule. But I also knew that I had to accept that this was part of the deal. I took a deep breath and mind linked with Cali.

*It’s okay*,I said. *Just tell me what happened.*

I wanted to hold her, to tell her she had nothing to feel badly about. But first, I needed to figure out what exactly was going on.

She fixed her eyes on me, a remorseful but grateful look in her eyes. “I came out of the bathroom, and the window was open, and Xavier was gone.”

I glanced around the yard. No Xavier. *Why the hell would he do something like that and run off?* I looked back at Cali. “Do you know why—”

“*No*,” she interrupted. “I have no idea what’s going on, but I’m going to find out.”

She started for the woods, and I had to reach out and grab her.

“Whoa, where are you going?”

“Where do you *think* I’m going? You should know by now that I won’t let anything happen to my mates.”

Inwardly, I winced at that word. *Am I ever going to get used to her using “mate” in the plural?*

I sighed. I knew that determined look. Cali would not be dissuaded.

“Why don’t I go look for Xavier?” Ravi offered.

“I’ll go too,” Rishika said, gesturing to herself.

“Great.” I nodded. “You two can go together.”

“We’ll *all* go,” Cali corrected.

Orla stepped out onto the porch with a bundle of clothes, a coat, and a pair of boots in her arms. “If you’re going to run off into the forest, you should at least dress for the weather.”

Cali’s eyes widened. “You’re not going to stop me?”

Her mother gave me a knowing look. “I think we all know how that would go. Just be careful.” She pressed the bundle of clothes into Cali’s arms and kissed her forehead.

Two minutes later, after Cali had changed and thrown her wet hair into a messy bun, we started for the forest. I let Ravi take the lead so I could stay closer to Cali. Orla would flay me alive if anything ever happened to her daughter—not that I’d ever forgive myself, either.

I really wished she’d stayed at the pack house, but I knew her well enough by now to realize that staying safely behind was never on the table where Cali was concerned. Still, the whole thing had me on edge. It wasn’t like Xavier to just up and run off, especially when he was with Cali.

I picked up Xavier’s scent a split second before Ravi called out, “I’ve got his scent.”

He led the way as we ventured deeper into the woods. I tried to focus on sticking to the trail and figuring out why Xavier would take off without even telling Cali why, or where he was going—

Ravi lurched to a stop and turned to me. “Do you smell that?”

I inhaled deeply. “There’s something mixed in with Xavier’s scent. It’s familiar.”

The trees shuddered with movement up ahead, and I threw an arm around Cali as Gregor stepped out, his fangs elongated and his eyes glowing orange.

Cali struggled against my hold, her eyes on Gregor. “What have you done with Xavier?”

The vampire hissed. “*You cannot escaped the power of Letifer*!”

**Episode 1569**

XAVIER

*Fucking Ava.*

I raced through the woods, following Ava’s scent. *I can’t believe I left Cali to go rescue my traitor ex-mate, of all fucking people…*

I should have just let the bloodsucker have her. Let Ava be Iñigo’s problem now. From the look of things, she’d been playing both sides against each other for a while now. Maybe it was time to let karma do its thing.

But despite all the *should*s that were swirling through my head as I padded through the forest, following her feminine scent that was laced with panic and another, putrid scent that reminded me of roadkill—that fucking vampire—I knew I couldn’t dismiss her so easily.

The thought was certainly tempting. I could write her off as dead, which wasn’t that much of a stretch, even now that I was stupidly barreling to her rescue. Let the pack know she’d been taken, though Greyson would undoubtedly be annoyed by this hiccup in his plot to infiltrate the vampires. Maybe I’d even pour one out for her, for old times’ sake. Old, old, *old* times’ sake.

And then, for the first time since Ava had popped back into the living world, I’d *finally* be able to move on with my life. Without her.

It was a pretty goddamn ideal plan. And what a fucking idiot I was for not being able to follow through on it.

Even though I knew it was probably nothing more than she deserved, even though I knew that Ava had likely brought it all on herself, I couldn’t let Iñigo kill her. Maybe it was some old remnant of our mate bond, maybe it was my own basic sense of decency, but that bloodsucker wasn’t going to hurt another werewolf while I still had the strength to stop him.

And if I was too late, if Iñigo had already snuffed out my ex-mate’s life, well, there would be no saving him, or anyone associated with him. Whatever bad blood still lingered between Ava and me—and there was enough to fill a whole goddamn blood bank—there was still the principle that she was a werewolf and a *vampire* had taken her.

I ducked beneath a low hanging branch and then skidded around a boulder, following Ava’s and Iñigo’s scents. We were far from the pack house, now. Too far for comfort. And it had been too long since I’d seen Iñigo drag Ava into the woods. If he was truly angry enough to kill her, then I was probably already too late.

The thought chilled me, and I put on another burst of speed, half-expecting to stumble over Ava’s drained body at any moment.

*Fuck.* I should have told someone where I was going. I wished I’d said something to Cali before I’d run after Ava. I hated to leave her like that, especially after I’d promised to protect her. I could only imagine how worried she was.

But maybe it was for the best that I’d snuck away. Cali would’ve wanted to come after me, and putting her anywhere near those bloodsuckers was not acceptable. Hopefully Greyson would keep her in the pack house while I took care of this.

I didn’t slow one bit as my feet carried me farther and farther from the pack house. This bloodsucker was fast—that was the main reason why I’d leapt out after him and Ava. Time was critical; every second counted. If I hesitated at all, I’d lose any chance I had of hunting Iñigo down.

Iñigo had the drop on Ava, he was luring me away from the pack house—alone—and he was the fastest vampire I’d ever encountered. But I did have one point in my favor: I knew these woods better than anyone.

I made a sharp corner through a cluster of bushes, following the trail. My mouth watered at the thought of tearing that fucker’s throat out.

*To hell with Ava’s deal. This is personal.*

The trail led me up a slope, and the woods began to thin out, giving Iñigo less cover. I could definitely work that to my advantage. The scent was getting stronger too, and stress was beginning to bleed more and more into Ava’s scent. They must have stopped running and started fighting. Good. If she was fighting Iñigo, that meant she’d gotten free of him. It would be a hell of a lot easier to take that bloodsucker out if he wasn’t using Ava as a shield.

And then I heard a voice up ahead, a woman’s. Ava.

I slowed and listened.

“You need to stop this!” she was shouting. “You’re not thinking clearly!”

I crouched low and crept forward, using the sparse cover of nearby bushes until I could make out the two of them. They were standing together in a clearing, and Iñigo had his hands wrapped around Ava’s throat.

The sight made my chest rumble on instinct, but I couldn’t help wondering exactly how many times I’d wished I could do that very thing to my ex-mate.

“*Shut up*,” the vampire hissed. “I know you’re responsible, you little bitch!”

“I-I haven’t done anything!”

*What the hell is he talking about?*

“I know who you spend your time with these days,” Iñigo snarled, getting right up in her face while she tried desperately to pull his hands away from her throat. “You’ve been consorting with witches, Fae—you’re around so much magic, and you thought you could use it against me!” He tightened his grip. “That was a fatal mistake.”

Ava gasped and wheezed. “I—had—nothing to do—with the—revenants!” She was clawing at Iñigo’s grip on her throat now.

*Is she telling the truth? Or… could she be connected to the revenants, somehow?*

It wouldn’t have surprised me. Ava was always involved in some kind of shady shit or another. Maybe there was something to what she’d been trying to tell me earlier—what Cali couldn’t stop talking about. I’d chalked the whole seeing auras thing up as just another lie from the wolf who had everything to gain and nothing to lose. But apparently—in this, at least—I’d misjudged her.

*Was she telling the truth? Can she see revenants’ auras?*

I racked my brain, trying to remember what she’d said. Like so many other things she’d said to me lately, I’d blocked most of it out. Fuck. I should have listened to her.

But even if she *were* somehow involved with the revenant attacks, I still couldn’t let Iñigo kill her. What kind of wolf would I be if I did?

Iñigo wasn’t buying it. “Do you think I’m stupid? Ever since you showed up at my diner, there’s been nothing but trouble. And now all of my vampires are infected by whatever this thing is! The first time I blacked out, I was with you, darling. Am I supposed to think that’s a coincidence?”

Ava sputtered, but his grip on her throat was too tight for her to speak. Her face was slowly turning red.

“I knew you were bad news,” Iñigo continued. “I never should have made those deals with you!”

Wait a second… *Deals?*

I already knew she’d made some kind of deal with him, but multiple? What the *fuck* did she think she was playing at? I knew I never should have trusted her.

I watched her struggle in Iñigo’s grip. Why wasn’t she shifting? Why wasn’t she trying to fight him with her real strength? If she shifted, I’d be able to mind link with her and let her know I was here.

She was really going to make me jump in to her rescue, wasn’t she? Well, if that was the case, there was no use crying over spilled milk. I needed to put a stop to this. I didn’t like the way Iñigo was choking the life out of her. Once we got through this, I could hold her accountable for everything I’d learned.

But for now…

I leapt out of the bushes and let out a snarl.

Iñigo spun around, still clutching Ava, his fangs exposed. He watched me like he was trying to figure me out, and I realized he didn’t recognize me in my wolf form.

Another advantage.

“Xavier!” Ava rasped, struggling in his grip.

Iñigo’s face broke into a sickening smile. “Xavier Evers. My favorite snack. How nice of you to join us.”

I prowled forward with a growl. *Come on, Ava. Move your ass.* I needed her to break free from the bloodsucker before I could make my move. I slowly circled my intended prey, who was holding Ava in front of him. One wrong move, and that bloodsucker was toast.

Suddenly, the sickening scent of death—mixed with something else, something I couldn’t quite identify—overpowered the clearing, and out of the surrounding trees emerged a group of vampires. I hadn’t even noticed their approach.

I turned slightly to my left, sizing up the closest one—a big, mean vampire who was hissing at me. This wasn’t great, but I’d faced worse odds. I tensed, ready to pounce, and then Ava *finally* managed to break Iñigo’s grip.

She staggered back, her eyes wide, terrified, and locked onto me. “Xavier, run! They’re revenants!”

**Episode 1570**

*Sweet baby Jesus, I am so tired of all the Letifer talk.*

Not even the hissing vampire was enough to cool my fury. “Are you *kidding me*?”

Gregor blinked, as if taken aback by my response. His eyes were bright orange—a color I’d come to associate with all that was evil, ugly, and generally a pain in the ass.

“Seriously?” I tried to step forward, but Greyson wasn’t letting me go without a fight. Still, I never took my eyes off the vampire. “First the Orb, then people coming back to life as revenants, and then there’s some scary ghost prophecy, and now *you’re* a part of it too? I thought you guys had your own thing going on! Ugh, this is so annoying!”

I made a mental note to try to find out what the hell the name “Letifer” even meant or if there was anything about who Letifer had been. There must be SOMETHING. Especially if Letifer was causing this much trouble.

Gregor didn’t move, so I turned my fury on Greyson.

“Why can’t we stop this?” I demanded.

“Cali, you need to calm down,” he said, his voice smooth even though he never took his eyes off the threat in front of us. “Don’t do anything rash, okay?”

Ahead of us, Gregor stared us down with those super creepy orange eyes. The vamps had apparently joined Team Letifer, too. Seriously, what a disappointment. I mind linked with Greyson.

*Gregor is a revenant, which apparently means corpses aren’t the only ones who can be infected. Vampires are also susceptible.*

*That makes sense*, he replied. *They are undead, after all.*

I sighed. I’d thought moving to the old pack house would protect us from this crap, or at least make it harder for any Letifer-ites to bother us. But clearly, it was no safer than the new house. No matter what, the revenants always seemed to find us.

*Is that what happened to Xavier?* Worry cut through me, dousing the heat of some of my anger. *Is that why he lunged through the window and ran off? Did he see a revenant and go after it?*

It wasn’t out of the realm of possibility. I liked to assume that Xavier was levelheaded enough to at least, you know, *talk* to me or formulate some sort of plan before just barreling after a threat. But I also knew that if Xavier felt my safety was in danger, there was nothing he wouldn’t do to neutralize anything he considered a threat.

So, yeah, it was safe to assume that the revenant-vampires were the reason Xavier had run off without so much as a “Bye, Cali, I’m going on a crusade against the undead!”

Except, my mind still couldn’t quite accept what was happening here. Even if vampires *were* technically dead, and therefore susceptible to the Orb’s magic, we were nowhere near the ghost pond. How could they have been changed?

And, perhaps more importantly, how would one kill a revenant-vampire? Could they still be stopped with stakes? Or was fire and dismemberment still the only way to go?

I looked around, still locked in Greyson’s arms. I wished I’d had the foresight to grab something wooden and sharp. I’d been so caught up in finding Xavier when I’d pulled on my clothes that I hadn’t even stopped to think about anything else I might want to bring with me.

*From now on, I’m always carrying a sharpened pencil.*

Gregor snarled again, and Greyson’s voice slipped into my mind.

*Stay back and stay safe, love. We can handle Gregor.*

I huffed but stayed where I was. Fine, then.

He probably wasn’t wrong, though. Three werewolves against one fangy revenant seemed like decent odds, and I could always draw on my Fae power from afar if they needed backup.

Greyson let go of me, took a step toward Gregor, and shifted. On either side of him, Ravi and Rishika shifted immediately and fell into step beside their Alpha.

*Werewolves are kind of like flocks of birds, or schools of fish—they all seem to move together instantly. Like they don’t need words to communicate.*

Greyson hunched down and tensed as if to lunge at the revenant-vampire, but then Gregor fixed those nasty orange eyes on my mate.

“You would attack one of your own?” Gregor crooned.

My head snapped up. *One of their—*

“What, exactly, is that supposed to mean?” I screeched, pulling the vampire’s gaze over to me. “Greyson is nothing like you, you nasty bloodsucking puppet! He’s strong and powerful. I mean, have you ever seen his pecs? Or those abs? Do *you* have an eight-pack, sir?”

Gregor tilted his head to the side slightly, like he was confused by my outburst. This was working out better than I could have hoped.

“No!” I hollered, keeping the revenant-vampire’s eyes on me, instead of the werewolves circling him. “Greyson is nothing like you at all. And when he’s a wolf…” My voice dropped, and I smirked. “Well, no vampire can compete with that.”

With Gregor distracted, Greyson lunged, his jaws open, his sharp teeth flashing—

And my heart nearly jumped out of my chest when Gregor *dodged* Greyson’s attack.

“What?” I gasped.

He’d been distracted! He’d been open and vulnerable, and as fast as vampires were, I had *never* seen Greyson miss. Had becoming a revenant made Gregor more powerful? More dangerous? Faster, somehow?

Then my heart dropped to somewhere near my knees. Suddenly, three werewolves against one revenant-vampire didn’t seem like such great odds after all.

Without missing a beat, Ravi and Rishika both leapt at the revenant-vampire while Greyson recovered. I could barely keep up with the movement. Gregor was little more than a snarling blur of bright orange eyes and flashing teeth, and the wolves were clearly pushing themselves to keep up with him.

Rishika lunged at Gregor, and he dodged her attack—but Ravi anticipated the movement and managed to slam him to the ground. Ravi’s teeth flashed as he went in for the kill—

And flew backward into a tree with a yelp. He wasn’t down for long, though, and he leapt headlong into the fray, with Greyson leading the next attack.

“Be careful!” I called from the sidelines of the fight. “Don’t let him bite you!”

Vampire bites were bad enough without the added possibility of being turned into a revenant. The last thing I wanted was for any of them to be hurt the way Pip had been. My fingers clenched and unclenched. I was desperate to help. I couldn’t even hear them, since Greyson was the only one I could mind link with.

If Gregor could just slow down for a second, I could blast him, but with how fast the fight was moving, I knew the odds weren’t in my favor. With three of them and only one speedy revenant-vampire, I knew I’d hit one of the pack members long before I ever made contact with Gregor—and my blast might be just the opportunity Gregor needed to hurt one of them.

Greyson snarled, and the trio of wolves moved in a synchronized form, pouncing one after the other, until Gregor had nowhere to turn and the scuffle that ensued sent dirt and branches flying.

When the dust finally settled, Rishika and Ravi had Gregor pinned to the ground, snarling, bleeding, and fighting against their grip on him. Greyson stood over the vampire’s prone form, ready to finish him off.

I tensed, ready to turn away. I knew Gregor’s death wouldn’t be pretty, and I didn’t need to see it up close. But then Greyson let out a pained howl and collapsed to the ground.

I didn’t even think. I raced forward as Greyson shifted back to his human form, clutching his leg. “Greyson! What is it?”

And then I saw it—a bloody wound on Greyson’s left leg. Had Gregor bitten him, somehow?

No, I would have noticed if he’d been bitten during the fight.

I dropped to my knees next to my mate. “What happened?”

He grimaced, his face contorted in pain. He didn’t seem able to speak.

I looked at the others. “What should we do?”

Gregor stopped fighting and looked at Greyson. His orange eyes narrowed on the wound. “I told you. You can’t escape her. You’ve been marked.”

I looked down at the wound again. “Is that a mark on his leg? Gregor, did you do this to him?”

The revenant-vampire broke free and lunged at my mate.

“*Kill him*!” Greyson said.

*There is No Fucking Way that he’s going to hurt my mate!*

I threw my hand up with a scream and blasted Gregor back into Rishika. Within seconds, Rishika and Ravi had torn Gregor to pieces. I turned to Greyson as the others shifted back. He wasn’t rallying like I would have expected him to. In fact, he wasn’t moving at all. I gently lifted his head and cradled it in my lap.

“Greyson?” I whispered.

He was pale and limp, his face still tensed in agony.

And then I let out a gasp as his wound began to glow with a familiar orange light.

**Episode 1571**

CHARLIE

My feet felt like they were filled with lead as I walked up to join Sophie, Chad, and a couple older campers I’d never met before. While Sergeant Pepperdine continued to announce the various groups, my head swam with the implications of what was happening.

*They’re hunting Violet.* I’m *going to be hunting my mate*.

My stomach churned at the thought, and sweat broke out on the back of my neck. Violet was out there, somewhere, and now the entire camp was ready to hunt her down like an animal.

“Charlie,” Sophie whispered. “Are you okay? You don’t look so good.”

“What’s the matter?” Chad sneered, careful to keep his voice down while Pepperdine was still nearby, calling out assignments. “You afraid of the Big Bad Wolf? Better watch out. If it bites you, we might have to put you down too.”

The thought of this asshat getting anywhere near Violet made my vision go red. If he hurt her, there would be no saving him.

“Charlie,” Sophie whispered, more urgently this time, putting a hand on my shoulder. “Don’t.”

“All right, hunters!” Pepperdine called. “Life has a way of testing all of us, but I have no doubt in my mind that you will all rise to the occasion. You’ve been training for this scenario for a while now, and some of you have been preparing for this even outside of the walls of our camp. I know you’ll make me proud. Now remember, your mission today is only to *find* the werewolf. Do not take it on—leave that task to the more experienced hunters. Today’s task will be a vital step in your hunter journey.”

I barely paid attention to Pepperdine’s speech. My chest felt hollowed out with terror for my mate, and I jumped when Pepperdine suddenly clapped me on the shoulder. “Charlie Kim, you’re the only new hunter to have faced a real vampire before, so hopefully everyone can learn from you. I can already tell you’re going to be a natural at killing werewolves, too.”

Well, he wasn’t wrong. My combination of werewolf abilities and hunter instincts hadn’t failed me yet. I wondered how Sergeant Pepperdine would react if I told him the exact number of werewolves I’d already killed in the fight against Silas. It was probably more than he could ever dream of.

I glanced around, looking at the faces of my fellow campers. Some of them looked pale, afraid, but most of the group looked absolutely thrilled to be here—on the verge of their very first werewolf hunt.

The hunt for my mate.

I noticed Chad rolling his eyes at me, still up front, with Pepperdine’s hand on my shoulder as he went on about hunter safety and the best tactics for tracking and luring out “stupid, bloodthirsty beasts.”

I bristled at Chad’s dirty look, but his obvious distaste filled me with unease. I had to be careful about this. Maybe if it were just Sophie and me on the hunt, things would be different, but I had to assume that Chad knew about Violet. So what was he up to?

*Is there some way I can get Chad on my side?*

I kind of doubted it, but maybe it was worth a shot. At the very least, maybe getting stuck patrolling with him wasn’t the worst-case scenario. He was a wild card right now, and until I knew what he was planning, it was probably for the best that he stayed close to me. I’d have a better chance at protecting Violet if I could keep an eye on Chad.

Finally, Sergeant Pepperdine stepped forward, and I was allowed to rejoin my group.

“Everyone has been assigned an area to patrol!” he called. “If you come across a werewolf, use your whistles to alert the team. And remember—don’t try and take on the werewolf unless it’s self-defense!” He gave the group a look that made them gulp collectively. “You do know what self-defense means, right?”

“Sir, yes, sir!” we all shouted in unison.

“Good! Now, begin!”

My feet still weighing me down, I followed my group away from the platform and across the campgrounds. We made our introductions as we walked.

“I’m Kate,” one of the older campers said, “and that’s Seth.” She pointed to the other camper I didn’t know. Their seniority showed, because they led our group toward the fence.

“Be on your guard,” Seth reminded us. “Werewolves are not only skilled predators, but they’re unusually vicious and cruel. Like badgers, but a thousand times more evil. Nobody wants to become a victim today.”

I had to bite my tongue. Violet was the least cruel person I’d ever met, and even after joining forces with the Redwood pack in battle, I hardly thought of werewolves as vicious or cruel. I couldn’t help wondering what else hunters and hunters-in-training got wrong.

“Right, so follow our lead,” Kate said, “and be ready at all times.”

Then, after the group took a collective breath, we stepped outside the gated, protected portion of the campground and entered the woods beyond. With each footfall in the deep snow, each breath from the ground and every slight sound from the woods, I tensed, imagining us running across Violet. How was I supposed to defend her and keep my cover intact?

We spread out a bit more as we made our way through the forest, and Chad immediately took the opportunity to wedge himself between Sophie and me.

I gritted my teeth. Could he not wait a full five minutes before making a move on her? I still wanted to explain Violet to Sophie, but obviously I couldn’t do that with Chad skulking around.

“It’s funny that Pepperdine thinks you’d be a natural werewolf killer,” he said suddenly, slinging an arm around Sophie’s shoulders, and I tensed.

*Is he going to say something about Violet? Is he going out her—out* me*—in front of the entire group?*

Sophie shrugged him off. “Stop trying to start something, Chad. We’re supposed to be working as a team. There’s no ‘I’ in team.”

He scoffed and looked ready to dig his heels in for the long haul, but Kate called him up to the front of the group.

“Chad, can you come up here please? We’d love your help looking for pawprints.”

He gave me a pointed look. “Sure thing, Kate. *I’d love to*.”

My fists clenched as Chad moved to the front of the group. The urge to protect my mate was clouding my senses again, and all I wanted to do was shift and tear the guy’s throat out.

“Easy,” Sophie whispered. When I peeled my eyes away from Chad, I realized she was watching me. “He’s not worth it.”

*Does that mean Sophie’s on my side?*

She slowed her steps, and I matched her pace until Chad and the rest of the group were several feet ahead of us. She licked her lips, then turned to me. “So, what’s the deal with your mate?” she whispered. “Is that who we’re looking for?”

I hesitated for a beat too long, and the answer must have been clear on my face.

“You shouldn’t have lied,” Sophie said. “I don’t like being lied to, Charlie.”

“I get that, and I’m sorry.” I sighed. “But what other choice did I have? You know the position I’m in, here. I have to be careful.” I looked up ahead to make sure the group was still far away. “I’m not the only one whose life is at stake here.”

Silence set in as we stalked through the snow, then Sophie asked, “So who is she?”

“I don’t know where to begin.”

“Okay… How about starting with her name?”

A ghost of a smile tugged at my lips. “Violet.” And then, as though admitting my connection to Violet had broken some kind of seal, I added, “She’s… She’s beautiful. And not just physically. She is the kindest person I’ve ever known—human, werewolf, or any other creature. She’s loyal and strong. She’s been through so much heartache in her life, but she’s still so warm and caring. She’s spontaneous, always ready to laugh, and she loves with her whole heart. She’s… She’s everything to me.”

Sophie seemed to mull this over for a moment before giving me a weak smile. “She sounds pretty special.”

Was that a touch of sadness in her voice? “I’m sorry I misled you.”

She shook her head. “I’ve heard about werewolves and mates and never really got it. But I get it now.” She glanced ahead at Chad, who was focused on the trail. “We can’t let them find her.”

My steps stuttered. “Are you going to help me?”

“I don’t want to give Chad the satisfaction of succeeding at anything—especially if it means hurting you.”

“Thank you.” She was a better friend than I deserved, and I’d never needed a friend more. Thank god I’d finally found someone I could trust with all this.

“What’s your plan?” she asked.

I took her hand and pulled her aside. “Are you sure you’re willing to help me with this?”

She nodded.

“Okay, stay right there.” I stepped behind a nearby tree and began pulling off my clothes. I bundled them up and held them out to her, still hiding behind the large trunk. “Hold onto these until I come back.”

Sophie sounded shocked. “Are you… Are you *naked*?”

I poked my head around the trunk. “I need you to promise not to scream or freak out, but I’m about to make Chad wish he never went after a werewolf.”

Her jaw dropped. “What are you going to do?”

**Episode 1572**

MARTA

There was a ringing sound in my ears, and it wasn’t coming in from the other end of the phone line. As far as I knew, these modern-day telephones—which looked more like fat chocolate bars than the large, curly-corded contraptions I was used to—didn’t make those kinds of noises.

*I’m not just a medium? Okay? Is that supposed to mean something to me?*

I shook my head. “What do you mean? If I’m not just a medium, then what am I?” The questions poured in thick and fast. “And who the heck is this Rain person?”

“He’s someone who might be able to shed some light on this situation. Let’s just say he knows his way around the spirit world.”

*And what, pray tell, is that supposed to mean? Is Rain dead? Is he also “more than just a medium”?*

I rolled my eyes. Big Mac and her need to cloak everything in a hundred layers of mystery… “And this situation is…?”

“A delicate one.”

I was ready to say a word that would have made my foster mother shove a bar of soap in my mouth, but then Big Mac added, “It’s possible—and I could be wrong on this—but from what you’ve told me, it sounds like you’re a bridge.”

I stared at the little plastic candy bar the witch’s voice was resonating from. “A bridge? Like the Golden Gate?”

“You’re smarter than that, Marta,” she snapped. “Don’t be like Cali.”

“Well, I’m sorry! I’m still adjusting to the whole medium thing, and now you’re telling me I might be something entirely different. I don’t know the rules to any of this. Maybe I’m not that smart after all.”

Lilac frowned at me but didn’t say anything.

There was a beat of silence, and then Big Mac’s voice slid through the phone again. It sounded softer, restrained. And maybe a bit like she was speaking through gritted teeth. Apparently, comforting a scared teen with supernatural abilities wasn’t her area of expertise. “I meant a spiritual bridge, able to physically connect the spiritual and living worlds.”

While that was a good description for what I’d been doing with Lilac, I couldn’t help the unease that trickled down my spine. I’d kind of assumed that that ability wasn’t unique, that all mediums could, you know, kiss a ghost into corporeality if they felt so inclined.

But that apparently was *not* the case. Wasn’t it bad enough that I was already a supernaturally gifted—ahem, cursed—girl out of her own time? Now I had to be double-cursed? Now I wasn’t even normal by medium standards?

My silence must have spoken volumes, because Big Mac kept talking. “I know this is a lot for you to understand. I’m sure it will take time to process. But being a bridge can be dangerous. Wait for me. Don’t do anything until I get back. We’ll talk more then.”

I groaned. *Am I going to be a prisoner again, like I was with Bert? Is Big Mac going to swoop in with this Rain person and try to control me?*

“Whatever you do,” she continued, “just stay at the new house. Don’t go wandering anywhere until I get back.”

“You don’t have to worry about that, believe me.” Another concern rose to the forefront of my mind. “But what about the witch mark?”

There was a long pause before she asked, “What witch mark?”

I explained what Kira had told me. “It was etched onto the foundations of the other pack house, and apparently it’s a way to summon demons, or something.”

“Don’t worry. It’ll be okay.”

I blinked. *I tell her I’ve made Lilac corporeal a time or two and she loses her mind, but when I tell her the old house is sitting on a demon portal, that isn’t a big deal?*

“But—” I began.

“Stay inside, Marta. I’ll be there late tonight.”

She hung up on me before I could ask for any more clarification.

I stared at the phone for a long string of seconds, trying to make sense of the conversation I’d just had. Being a bridge didn’t sound great—it actually seemed pretty terrifying—but on the other hand, Big Mac told me I would be okay, and she didn’t seem like the type to mince words or lie to make anyone feel better. Despite all of the unknowns and the witch’s brusque nature, I felt a little better knowing I wasn’t alone in all this, that I had a powerful witch looking out for me.

It was a strange feeling though. I could count on one hand the number of times in my life I’d ever felt like I had someone I could truly depend on. All the same, I kind of liked it.

But right now, here in my bedroom, I felt as alone as ever. I was some kind of supernatural bridge—a danger to myself and those around me, apparently—but all I could do was sit here and wait until Big Mac returned.

Half the pack house was gone, so I didn’t even have anyone to talk to about this. Not that any of them would understand, anyway. Who *would* I talk to about this? Everyone else was wrapped up in their own problems. The last thing any of them probably wanted was for me to pull them into my crap, too.

*I’m all alone in this…*

And it was then that I realized Lilac was staring at me—his face no more than six inches away from my own.

“What is it?” I asked, rubbing my nose subconsciously. Did I have something on my face?

“So, you’re a bridge.” It wasn’t a question.

Did he know anything about any of that?

“Is that bad?” I asked.

He shrugged. “No idea. But maybe it helps explain a few things.”

Of course. I didn’t bother to hide my scowl. Sometimes he could be kind of okay, and other times he was a gigantic pain in the ass. Right now, he was definitely the latter.

I stood suddenly and headed toward the door. “I’m going to find Kira. She’s a witch. She should be able to explain this more.”

Lilac appeared in front of me. “Do you really think that’s such a smart idea?”

“Do you have a better one?”

“Kira is a *witch*,” he said emphatically.

*Did I not literally just say that exact same thing?*

“Can you really trust her?” he pressed.

“Well, I need to talk to somebody!”

“You can talk to me.”

I threw my hands up. “You just admitted you don’t know anything about bridges, so what good would that do?”

He shrugged again. “Violet told me that sometimes just talking can help—even if you don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“That makes zero sense.”

“That might not be exactly how she explained it, but that’s not really the point.”

I put my hands on my hips. I was already so, *so* tired of this conversation. “And what *is* your point? And do you plan on getting to it anytime soon?”

He sighed. “My point is, you want someone to talk to? Well, I can listen.”

I froze, looking into his ghostly face. Lilac was obnoxious a lot of the time, but right now he looked like he actually meant what he was saying.

A lock of hair fell into his face, just in front of his eyes, and for a moment I wanted to reach out and brush it away. I stopped myself. He’d already tried to flirt his way into making me kiss him so he could be in the physical world. I wasn’t about to fall for that trick twice.

I cleared my throat. “You’re just saying that.”

“No, I mean it. Completely.”

“And what do you get out of it?” I crossed my arms over my chest. “You want me to help you like before?”

“Uh, I saved you from a fire. Or does being a bridge give you amnesia?”

I eyed him. “That’s a big word. Impressive.”

“That’s not fair. I did graduate high school early. I’m not stupid. And we did *kiss*, unless you forgot that too, so stop acting like you don’t like me.”

I snorted. “I don’t like you. And we only kissed because I needed your help.”

His eyes widened. “See! I didn’t use you—you used me!”

“It’s not like you put up much of a fight.”

“It’s not like I had much choice. What, was I just supposed to leave you to burn like an overdone hotdog?”

I raised a brow. “What did you just call me?”

“A hotdog. What’s not to like about hotdogs?”

“Oh my god.” I rubbed my face. I couldn’t believe I was really having this conversation with Lilac. “I’m going to talk to Kira. I’ve had enough.”

“What, are you afraid?”

“Of what?”

He puckered his lips, making kissing sounds.

“Stop! Now get out of my way.”

“Don’t pretend you weren’t.”

He was talking in circles. “Weren’t what?”

“You were there, too. You were a kiss participant. A kissipant.”

I groaned. “You did *not* just say that.”

“I did. And you’re a chicken.” He made more kissing sounds.

“Fine!” I huffed. “You want a kiss? I’ll show you a kiss!”

And then I grabbed his stupid ghostly face and planted one on him.

**Episode 1573**

XAVIER

What the hell was Ava talking about? I stopped and stared at her, utterly confused. *Revenants*? Why was she talking about revenants right now?

“Have you gone crazy?” I demanded. “These things aren’t revenants, they’re vampires!”

“You don’t understand!” she practically screamed back at me. “I *can* see their auras, you idiot! They’re revenants! You have to get away!”

I remembered the time Ava had told me that she could see the revenant auras, but I hadn’t believed her then. Had she actually been telling the truth?

Before I could make up my mind, Iñigo interrupted us

“You!” He pointed a long white finger at Ava. “You are responsible for the revenants.”

Iñigo turned toward the other vampires gathered in the woods and beckoned them closer.

“Come!” he snarled. “Come and drain this bitch of each and every drop of her lying, wolf-infected blood. But,” he added with a smirk that made me want to punch him in the face, “leave the Alpha for me!”

With that lovely speech, he thrust Ava out toward the vampires like he was offering up a delicious appetizer.

I had to act—*she* had to act. Why wasn’t she shifting? *Shift already!*

There was a moment that spun out for eternity while I waited for her to bring her wolf out, but before she could, a vampire lunged forward, fangs bared, hands outstretched toward… Iñigo! Iñigo stumbled under the sudden strength of his attacker, and his grip loosened. Ava was thrown forward as Iñigo fought to throw the vampire off.

“*Stop*!” he hissed. “Stop! What the hell is wrong with you? I said to attack her! Attack her!”

It did no good at all. Rather than following orders, the vampire continued to lunge, biting and snarling. I stared at it.

“Look!” Ava yelled.

I saw that the other vampires were also headed toward Iñigo. I was pretty stunned, but it finally hit me then, like a ton of bricks.

*They aren’t listening to him.*

I didn’t know why it was happening. Could it be they were revenants? No… It seemed more likely that Iñigo had simply lost his touch. There was no time to wonder about it, though. I heard footsteps growing louder and gaining speed just behind me. I turned and there it was—a vampire, ready to attack. I launched myself at the thing and ripped it into pieces without hesitation.

It was the beginning of a brutal bloodbath, the vampires streaming forth, Ava snarling and growling, Iñigo cursing, and the vampires hissing. Teeth, claws, fists, fangs, the crunch of bone, the tearing of flesh… On and on they came.

In the middle of it, I saw Ava shift into a wolf. She leapt over the heads of the vampire swarm and came to join me in the fight, fending them off left and right. I had to admit, I appreciated her fighting by my side. My gaze was continually locked onto Iñigo.

I wanted him. I wanted him dead. It didn’t matter how many vampires attacked me—if I had to tear and rip through a thousand of them to get to him, I was all for it. In fact, right now, my only wish was that Colton and Gabriel were here with me, to join in the fun.

As for Ava, I had to admit it, she was truly holding her own. It was impressive, the way she stayed by my side, tearing out the bloodsuckers’ throats as we made our way inch by grueling inch closer to the prize.

I let myself mind link with her. *Do you want to help me kill him?*

As much as I had wanted to do it all myself, she deserved to take part. I waited to hear her eager affirmation, but Ava’s answer took me by surprise.

*We have to get out of here!*

She sounded scared. Almost panicked.

*What? You can’t be serious.*

*Listen to me Xavier—they* are *revenants!*

I hesitated. I hadn’t wanted to admit it, but there *was* something different about these creatures. As much as I hated vampires, I knew there was something really wrong here.

*All right, all right*, I conceded. *If they are really vampire revenants, what does that mean?*

Vampire revenants. How I hated the sound of that. I still didn’t want to believe it.

*I tried to tell you!* Even in the midst of the bloodshed and her growing alarm, Ava sounded annoyed. *Don’t act surprised. The Orb affects dead things, and that includes vampires!*

I turned to snap the neck of a vampire and tossed his limp body easily aside. I was so close to Iñigo that I’d be able to get my paws on him at any moment, and then…

As if in answer to my hopes, Iñigo was set upon by several vampires. If they could just take him down, or even distract him, I’d do the rest. I watched, my excitement and bloodlust rising, waiting to join in the kill—but then, to my utter fury, Iñigo threw off his attackers with very little effort and raced away into the darkness of the woods. Seconds later, he was gone.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck!* I howled in rage. I really wanted to kill that bastard.

*Xavier! Forget about him, we have to get out of here, right now!* Ava screamed at me. She sounded frantic.

Before I could respond, a vampire slammed into her, knocking her to the ground. That was it. I lunged for the creature, grabbed the thing by its head, and flung it against a tree so hard I was surprised it didn’t explode.

Ava jumped up. I had to give it to her, she’d always been tough as nails. Only now, it seemed all she wanted to do was run.

*Come on!* she cried.

*She’s right*, I thought to myself. *We have to get out of here.*

We turned to go, but it was too late. The remaining vampires had regrouped, and Ava and I were completely surrounded.

There was nowhere to go, and no escape. Ava and I backed into each other, our eyes sliding this way and that, trying desperately to find a way out. But we were trapped. I growled, and Ava bared her teeth. We stood together, bristling, and braced ourselves for the attack we knew was coming. The vampires drew closer, but then, all of a sudden, they stopped dead in their tracks.

Their eyes glowed orange, and the realization hit me like a bombshell.

Ava had been telling the truth. We *were* surrounded by vampire revenants! I should have listened. Cali had been right. And not for the first time, either. We were fucked.

Then abruptly, the revenants turned away from us and scattered into the woods. Seconds later, we were alone. We stood panting. Stunned.

*What the hell?*

I circled around, scouring the darkness for them. Bracing myself for what had to be a surprise attack. But no, they were gone. Maybe this was part of Iñigo’s plan? It had to be, otherwise it made no sense at all. Ava, meanwhile, had shifted back to human, so I did too. I got up in her face, growling.

“Ava, what the hell just happened?”

She gave a snort of laughter and rubbed her wrist. She actually looked a little amused and hurt. “Now do you believe me?”

“Never mind that—do you know what the fuck happened back there?”

Ava shrugged. For a moment, she looked just as bewildered and frustrated as I felt. “I’m not sure. I guess werewolves aren’t the only ones having problems with the revenants. I mean, we both just saw how Iñigo couldn’t control them.”

Before I knew what she intended, she touched my chest with surprising gentleness. I looked down and saw a large, gaping wound.

“Are you okay?” Her voice was soft and tender.

I flinched. I couldn’t help myself.

“I’m fine,” I growled, willing her to stop touching me.

Ava kept her hand there, though—for what seemed to be an eternity. Finally, she pulled it away. We stared at each other in silence. My head was spinning, trying to make sense of it all. Iñigo and his failure to control the vampires, the vampires becoming revenants, Ava and Iñigo—was it all still a giant plot?

I couldn’t make sense of any of it.

Meanwhile, there was no doubt in my mind that Cali would be totally freaking out right now. I hated that I’d left her like that, though I didn’t know what else I could have done. I had had to act.

“Let’s go back to the pack house,” I suggested gruffly. “We have to let the others know we’re alive.”

We walked together in silence for a long time. The only sound was our footsteps crunching over branches and snow. I glanced at Ava. She was twisting a strand of her hair, a sure sign that she was wrestling with something. Suddenly, she stopped and put her hand on my arm. I stopped too, surprised. Ava looked up at me, her eyes wide and serious.

“You can deny it all you want, Xavier, but you came to save me, didn’t you?”

**Episode 1574**

I couldn’t help it; I was freaking out.

I kept thinking about the orange glow on Greyson’s bloody leg. Was it somehow my fault? Things usually ended up being my fault, didn’t they? Maybe—I didn’t know *how* exactly—but maybe my Fae magic had bounced off the revenant-vampire and hit Greyson instead? As I bent over him, Greyson blinked and tried to sit up. He groaned again, clearly in pain. I leaned forward.

“I’m sorry, Greyson,” I said. “I’m so, so sorry!”

He pulled back and looked at me in disbelief. “Cali, what on earth are you talking about? Why are you apologizing? You saved me, love.”

I swallowed, blinking back tears, and pointed to his wounded leg with a trembling finger. “Because I think I might have done that to you!”

“Cali.” Greyson gripped my hand and kissed each of my fingertips in turn. “Cali, stop. Just stop.”

“But—”

“You didn’t do this, love.” He cleared his throat and muttered, “You didn’t do this to me. I had it before.”

I dropped his head in shock. He groaned and shot me a look, but I was too annoyed, hurt, and angry to apologize.

“Why didn’t you tell me this before, Greyson?”

“I just didn’t think that much of it, to tell you the truth.” Greyson rubbed the back of his head. “And I didn’t want to worry you.”

“Oh, sure.” I made a little *humph* of disbelief and folded my arms. I wasn’t convinced.

Greyson looked both guilty and defensive. “Cali, I was going to tell you, I promise, but we had a lot going on!”

I glared at him. When I heard someone clear their throat, I turned to see Rishika wiping blood from her shirt.

“Guys, as much as I hate to interrupt this…” We were both scowling at her by that stage. “Maybe we should get out of here before more of these things show up?”

She did have a point.

“But what about Xavier?” Surely we couldn’t just leave him. What if he was fighting vampires himself?

“Cali.” Rishika was staying calm, but I could see that it was an effort—she was anxious underneath her cool exterior. “I think it’s best if we get Greyson back to the house first. We can go back for Xavier afterwards.”

“But—”

I saw the concern on Rishika’s face and stopped. As much as I hated to admit it, she was probably right.

“I agree,” Greyson broke in. Again, he tried to get up. I saw the way he grimaced. For him to show pain that way, I knew it had to be really bad. I helped get his arm over my shoulder to support his weight as he slowly got to his feet.

He mind linked with me. *Thanks, love.*

I smiled, despite my anxiety. I enjoyed the feel of his weight on me and the knowledge that I was really helping my mate, and that he was actually letting me help him. Slowly, we started to walk back.

*I’ll be back for you Xavier, I promise.*

We’d only gone a short distance, but still I could tell he was hurting way more than he was letting on. I was really getting worried. One thought kept coming up, over and over again.

*What if Greyson becomes a revenant?*

The idea was absolutely terrifying and made me feel sick to my stomach. I tried to push it away, but another thought swam up.

*He could end up like Pip.*

I gritted my teeth and tried to keep going. We’d have to have the wound looked at as soon as possible. Time was definitely running out—Greyson was leaning more and more heavily against me. I was doing the best I could, but I was starting to struggle to keep us both upright. Carrying an Alpha around the forest was no easy task.

Just then, Ravi came up to me. “Need a hand?”

He seemed to know the answer to the question. Before I could even nod, he had easily slipped Greyson’s arm over his shoulder and taken over.

I was grateful, but I didn’t like being apart from Greyson—especially considering the state he was in.

“Be careful!” I called after Ravi as they started to move again. “Don’t hurt him!”

Greyson gave a wan smile, trying to reassure me. “I’m already feeling better.” Then he winced as Ravi took a step.

I glared at him. Why did he always have to be the hero?

“Don’t worry, Cali,” Ravi said sweetly. “I promise to treat him with all the love and affection he deserves.”

I couldn’t help but be a little comforted. I knew Ravi meant it. As I watched them go, Rishika came up behind me.

“Hey Cali. I have to say, I was really impressed with your Fae magic back there.”

“Oh, thanks!” Honestly I was surprised to hear this from her. Rishika was such a badass.

She smiled. “Yeah, the way you knocked the living shit out of that fanged bastard was really something.”

“Coming from you, that really means something,” I said. “But I can’t take any credit. I was freaking out the entire time.”

Rishika laughed and shook her head, clearly amused.

“All I know is that Greyson will be okay. I mean, look at Artemis. She pulled through, and Greyson is almost as strong as she is.” She gave me a wry smile. But I had to wonder whether she was telling this to herself as well.

“Speaking of Artemis, I’m really glad you two have found each other.”

Rishika beamed. “Me too,” she said. “And don’t worry, we’ll find Xavier. I promise.”

This encounter cheered me up, but it wasn’t long before I started to get concerned again.

By the time I got Greyson to lie down in his room, the whole pack house was buzzing about the Gregor attack. I tried to be patient—Greyson was the Alpha, after all, and it stood to reason that everyone would be concerned.

Then my mom pulled me aside to talk.

“Cali. How are you, sweetheart? I saw something happened to Greyson. Is he hurt? Is his wound bad?”

I swallowed hard and tried not to cry. Something about my mom comforting me and being so protective and loving always got my guard down.

I didn’t answer, but my mom nodded as if I had spoken. “And what about Xavier? Is he still out there?”

It was the final straw. I couldn’t hold back—the tears came. My mom took me into her arms and hugged me tight. “I know honey, I know,” she said. “There’s a lot going on right now. I’m sure Xavier is okay. But I heard you were very brave out there.”

I gave a short bark of laughter. “Great, and now Rishika is spreading lies.”

My mom shook her head and held me at arm’s length to look me in the eye. “Don’t sell yourself short, Caliana. Ever.”

Before I could respond, she kissed me, then turned and walked away. I wiped my eyes. I was really glad that she was there to support me.

I went back into Greyson’s room, where Torin and Astrid both stood, peering down at Greyson.

Torin looked up at me as I entered. My heart sank as I took in his expression.

“It’s not good,” he told me. “I’m doing all I can, but the wound’s not showing any signs of getting better.”

Astrid held up a hand. “But the wound isn’t getting any worse, either. That’s something, isn’t it?”

I sighed. “Thanks to both of you for trying to help. We really appreciate it.”

Both Torin and Astrid nodded, looking as miserable as I felt.

“Is it okay if I speak with Greyson for a few minutes?” I asked.

They nodded again. “Of course.”

The two left, and I went to sit beside Greyson.

He didn’t look well. He was pale and sweating. I could tell by the way his eyes narrowed that the pain was getting worse.

He cleared his throat and made an effort to be casual. “Who’s going to look for Xavier?”

“Rishika is organizing a search party,” I told him flatly. I was glad she was, but I was so torn. I wanted to go out myself except Greyson’s condition had me rooted to his side. “You know, you’re a really bad liar. I knew you weren’t fine.”

Greyson tried to smile. “Oh come on Cali, it’s not so bad. I’ve been through a lot worse. “

“Can you stop pretending that this isn’t serious?!” I snapped. His eyes widened. “In case you’d forgotten, you were attacked by a revenant! Don’t you remember what happened to Pip?” I stood up. “Enough is enough. I’m going to get Kira.”

“Why?” He sounded almost alarmed. “Why Kira?”

“Because Big Mac isn’t here and Kira is a witch!” I yelled in exasperation. “And we need a witch!”

“How about three? Would we do?”

The voices came from directly behind me. I yelped in surprise and whirled around.

The three witches from my dreams were standing in the room with us.

**Episode 1575**

MARTA

Our kiss was way more intense than I’d expected. Lilac’s lips were soft and warm but also firm. It was crazy, but my body was reacting to it and the thought came before I could stop it.

*This guy really knows how to kiss.*

A powerful warmth swept through me. I was surprised by these feelings. I hadn’t expected to be so moved. Within seconds, he’d wrapped his arms around me and pulled me close. I could feel the smooth warmth of his skin on mine, and the rise and fall of his chest.

And then realization dawned: he was touching me, and not like a ghost. His hands were warm and alive. His touch was like electricity, a glow from the top of my head to my toes, tingles reverberating and spreading through my body…

*Whoa. Stop. Hold on girl, you can’t let this affect your judgement!*

With some difficulty and more reluctance than I cared to admit, I pulled away. I was gasping for air. For sanity.

“You know,” I tried to say, “I’m only doing this because—”

But Lilac had already cut me off and was kissing me again.

I started to push him away, but he pressed his lips just underneath my ear and slowly worked his way down my neck. I knew I had to stop this because it was obviously wrong—it was always wrong, and would always be wrong—but then he gently grazed the nape of my neck, and it felt so damn good… His arms wrapped around me and his lips were on mine again and I was falling, drowning, swept away by the strength of his kiss. We were growing more and more passionate, and I never wanted it to end, and then…

I felt a smooth, hard edge pressing against the back of my knee.

Wait! Hold on! Was he steering us toward the bed?

Oh no, oh no way.

That was going too far. I mean, it was bad enough that I was kissing him (and enjoying it so much) but sleeping with him? Forget it. He was a ghost! Even though his hands didn’t exactly feel like a ghost’s hands at the moment… *No*. I’d made my decision before, and I was sticking to it. There was no way in hell I was sleeping with a ghost. I pushed him back. Hard.

Lilac stopped. “Marta?” He sounded breathless and worried. “What’s wrong?”

I was angry. Angry at the situation, and angry at him.

“Everything!” I didn’t like the bitter note that had crept into my voice, but I couldn’t seem to stop it. “Don’t think your little seduction act is going to fool me again, cause it’s not.”

Rather than looking hurt, I was surprised to see him smiling. Then laughing. I’m sorry, was he *laughing* at me?

“What?” I demanded. “What’s so funny?”

“See?” he said “I knew it. I *knew* it.”

“Knew *what*?” I was getting seriously mad now. Somehow Lilac could push my buttons faster than anyone else I’d ever met.

“You’re afraid to admit you have feelings for me.”

I gasped. It was like he’d poured a bucket of cold water over me. He was so infuriating! “I feel nothing for you!” I spluttered. “Just leave me alone!”

I turned and sprinted out of the room. I had to get out of there. Lilac, of course, ran after me. Furious and not thinking, I slammed the door in his face. Lilac screamed. I stopped and spun around—shocked and appalled by what I’d done—just in time to see Lilac pass right through it.

His eyes were squeezed tightly shut, and his face was mid-wince, expecting pain that had never come. Slowly, he opened his eyes and stared down at himself. We both realized it at the same time.

Lilac was a ghost again.

“Marta, why the hell did you do that? You could have broken my nose!” Lilac sounded hurt and upset.

“I would have broken more than that!” I told him as sarcastically as I could, but my heart just wasn’t in it.

Lilac wasn’t listening, anyway. He was too busy examining himself, staring at the way his hand went effortlessly through the door.

“But why?” He was speaking out loud, but I wasn’t sure if he was talking to me, or even aware of it. “Why am I a ghost again? It’s only been a couple of minutes!”

I looked at his face, his pain and unhappiness so intense and obvious that I couldn’t help but feel bad for him.

“I don’t know,” I said, making my voice as gentle as I could. “Why would it be different here?”

Lilac glanced up at me, frowning. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s because we’re back in the old house?” He looked down again at his ghostly limbs. “Or because we’ve moved away from the ghost pond?”

“But what’s so different about this house?” I was growing curious, despite myself.

Lilac paused to think. “Well, for one thing,” he repeated, “it’s not near the ghost pond.”

An idea suddenly struck me. “It’s also not marked by a witch?” I added.

“Maybe. Could it really have something to do with the mark? I mean,” he added, also getting excited, “Big Mac and Kira both said it was powerful, and maybe it was doing something to your magic!”

“But they also said it was evil!” I objected, slightly alarmed. I didn’t like where this conversation was heading. “I mean, why would something evil help us?”

Lilac shrugged helplessly. “I’m not sure.” He then met my eyes for the first time since he’d walked through the door. “But you’re a bridge, so you should be able to figure it out.”

I really didn’t like him talking about the bridge thing. I was about to smack him when someone cleared their throat.

It was Artemis. I wondered how long she’d been standing there.

I backed away a little. I remembered how Artemis had attacked me at the other pack house. It had been pretty terrifying. I didn’t want to go through a repeat of it any time soon.

“Hey Marta, are you okay?” Artemis looked concerned—I couldn’t see a hint of the vicious Fae who’d assaulted me. “You look a little pale.”

“I’m fine,” I said. “It’s probably just the lighting in here.”

I knew the attack was in the past, but I couldn’t help feeling uncomfortable around her. Artemis seemed to sense this.

“Listen,” she said, then hesitated, like she wasn’t sure how to continue. She swallowed and then looked at me. “I owe you an apology. I mean, we never really had a chance to talk about what happened.”

“You mean when she tried to kill you?” Lilac murmured in my ear.

I glared at him as Artemis continued.

“You know, when I almost killed you.”

“See!” Lilac was triumphant. “I told you—she admits it!”

I tried my best to ignore him as Artemis struggled to talk.

“The thing is, I wasn’t really myself then, you know? I think the dark magic affected me, the same way it affected Ravi.”

I nodded, remembering how I’d heard them talking about that bearded guy and how he had stabbed Big Mac while under the influence of the Orb. It tied in and made sense with what Artemis was saying.

Artemis seemed more relaxed now, like she was relieved to have gotten that off her chest. “You know, I have to say, I feel much better now that we’re away from that house and the scary mark.”

I nodded again, glad to hear it. “Yeah, Big Mac did say we should stay away.”

The effect was immediate. Artemis’s eyes widened. “Big Mac? Wait! You spoke with Big Mac? What else did she say?”

“Uh… Just to stay away from the lake house.”

Artemis’s eyes narrowed. She clearly knew there was more. “And?”

“And that I’m some kind of a br—” I cut myself off. Why was I telling her any of this? Like she’d even said herself (I was ignoring Lilac), she’d tried to kill me.

“A what?” she asked.

“Nothing.”

“No, you were going to say something,” she said.

“No I wasn’t.”

“Yes… You were. A ‘br’ something.”

I sighed. “A *bridge*, so I have to be careful.” I mumbled reluctantly. I wanted to be anywhere but here.

“A bridge?” she repeated.

I swallowed. “Yeah. I’m not really sure what that means.”

I didn’t even know how it happened, but suddenly Artemis had gotten a lot closer to me. One moment there had been space between us, and now she was right up in my face. Her skin had turned pale, and her eyes were wide and staring.

There was something very eerie about it—downright freaky, in fact. I sucked in a breath and felt the hairs stand up on the back of my neck. I wanted to step away. In fact, I wanted to run away—or at least gain a little more space between us—but there was nowhere to go. The wall was directly behind me. I was trapped.

Artemis stared at me for what felt like forever. When she spoke, her voice was cold and clear, but also soft and calm. Somehow, that frightened me more than anything.

“It sounds like your powers might be dangerous if you’re not careful.” She leaned in even closer and whispered in my ear. “Maybe even deadly.”

**Episode 1576**

GREYSON

I pulled Cali back and tried as hard as I could to get up. The three witches were in my room. What the *fuck* were they doing here? One thing was for sure—I would like them a lot better if they stayed away from me *and* my mate.

I had to put as much distance as I could between them and Cali. I managed to stand up, and I tried to put my full weight on my leg and nearly collapsed. I grabbed onto the dresser and gritted my teeth. Cali rushed to my side, wrapping her arms around me.

“Greyson, you shouldn’t stand,” she said.

I shook my head. “No. Not while they’re here,” I growled out, eyeing the witch sisters. No amount of pain would keep me from protecting Cali. She was my mate, my love. She would always come first.

Chloe, Posie, and Lauren each made a “tsk, tsk” sound, taking in my disheveled appearance.

“He doesn’t seem to be doing so well,” Posie muttered. I grunted. I was thankful that at least I’d been able to put on some clothes before they’d appeared.

“Greyson Evers.” Chloe addressed me sharply in her clear, cool voice. “Just *what* have you gotten yourself into?”

“What are you doing here?” I asked. “Get *out*.”

Next to me, Cali’s eyes were wide with astonishment, and I could feel her slightly trembling. She was looking from one witch to another in disbelief. “Excuse me, but have we met before?”

All three witches turned to look at her.

They spoke in unison, sounding almost amused. “In a way…”

Cali glanced at me, comprehension dawning on her face. *Greyson, they’re from the dreams, aren’t they?*

I nodded reluctantly.

Lauren and Posie began to circle around her, making casual observations.

“She’s pretty.”

“Yes, unexpectedly so.”

“Probably not very bright, though.”

I bristled at their behavior. Predators circled their prey, and Cali would not be their prey. I turned back to address them.

“Hey! I asked what you’re doing here.”

“That’s entirely up to you, Greyson.” Posie smiled at me nicely.

I didn’t smile back. I hated their bullshit games. They needed to get out of my head, and out of my pack house.

“Stop speaking in riddles!” I snapped. “Just say whatever it is you want and *leave*.”

I wished again that I’d never saved them, back in Portland. I should have just left them in the exploding building and saved myself a lot of hassle.

Lauren raised a brow at me and looked amused. “What a warm welcome this is.”

“Ha,” I said, my tone beyond bitter. “I never invited you here.”

Lauren shrugged. “We just show up where we’re needed.”

“Well that’s funny,” I shot back, “because I don’t need you.”

Posie started laughing. “Really? And how is that leg of yours doing, then?”

“You heard Greyson, you need to leave.” Now Cali was also bristling. I smiled despite my annoyance and pain—trust Cali to always defend me. “And you need to leave *him* alone.”

“Oh really?” Now Chloe was smiling archly. “Is that what you want, Caliana Hart? Are you going to save him? Don’t you have enough problems of your own? *Due destini*—isn’t that what it’s called?”

Cali inhaled sharply and started to move toward them, but I pulled her back sharply and cleared my throat. *Don’t listen to them, love.*

But it was too late. Cali was already hooked.

“What do you mean? Do you know something about Greyson’s injury?” she asked, a fire in her eyes. “You just said something about ‘saving’ him—does that mean Greyson’s in some kind of danger?”

Lauren nodded. “Yes, in fact he is. Greyson bears the mark of Letifer. It should have killed him already.”

Cali gasped as though Lauren had struck her. I squeezed her hand, trying to calm her down while I glowered at the witch.

“As you can see,” I informed her coldly, “it did not, in fact, kill me, so you’re free to go.”

Chloe snorted at this rudeness. “And this is how you thank us? Really? When we’re the ones who stopped it from killing you.”

What? How was that possible? How would they have done that?

“If you did that, then why didn’t you get rid of the mark while you were at it?” Cali asked.

It was Posie who answered this time. “The mark of Letifer is an ancient one. And truthfully, we don’t know much about it. And we don’t have the power to erase it completely. But…” She smirked. “We did owe Greyson a favor. And so we saved him.”

This was too much. I thought of all the blackouts and nightmares. *Saved me?* They had done nothing but harass me since I’d rescued them. I was pissed. Pissed enough to ignore the pain—or at least try to—as I limped forward.

“Thanks a lot, but I don’t need any more of your help. You should go.”

“Huh.” Lauren cocked her head as she scrutinized me thoughtfully. “You know, ungrateful isn’t a good look on you. At all.”

And with that, all three witches disappeared.

The moment they vanished, Cali was on me, firing off a million and one questions. I was trying to work out how to answer them when I was saved by a huge commotion happening just outside. I heard my brother’s voice calling my name, right before he burst into my room. Ava was hot on his heels, and Torin followed after them, looking apologetic.

“I tried, Greyson,” Torin said. “I tried to tell him that you needed privacy, but they wouldn’t listen.”

I gave Torin a brief smile, trying to reassure him “Don’t worry Torin, it’s fine.” I looked back toward Xavier. “Where the hell have you been?!”

Xavier had the nerve to raise an eyebrow at me. “Out.”

I sighed inwardly and tried my best to keep calm. Why did my brother always have to be like this? Xavier must have felt like he’d made his point, because he kept talking.

“We were so worried about you,” Cali said. “We went out searching, but then Greyson was hurt.”

“I went after Ava. I had to, after Iñigo took her. And then we ran into some trouble with revenants.” He paused meaningfully before dramatically delivering his last line. “Vampire revenants.”

I nodded. “Yeah, we did too.’

“*What?*” His eyes shot to Cali, scanning her.

“She’s not hurt,” I told him. “I would never let that happen.”

He glared at me.

Cali shook her head. “We’ve got an even bigger problem right now. Greyson’s injury could get worse if we don’t do something.” She paused, took a breath, and then said it. “He could die.”

All the air seemed to be sucked out of the room. Xavier stared at the corner, looking at neither of us. I couldn’t gauge how my brother was feeling. He’d always wanted me dead, and now that maybe it was a possibility? I thought he’d be jumping for joy.

After an eternity of silence, Cali spoke up. “We think it has something to do with those revenants.” She swallowed. “These witches said Greyson was marked for Letifer.”

Xavier cleared his throat. “Like, he’s becoming a revenant?” He stared intently at Greyson, then abruptly left the room. Cali and I looked at each other, speechless. But before we could react further, Xavier came back, but with Ava.

“What do you see?” he asked her.

She stared at me intently.

I stared back at her. “What the hell is going on, Xavier?”

Xavier didn’t answer me, and Ava shook her head as if in answer to Xavier’s question. “No. He doesn’t have that weird orange glow.”

Cali pointed a triumphant and accusing finger toward Ava. “So you finally admit that you can see revenants! I was right!”

Ava didn’t say anything else, just scowled.

“But how do we get rid of the mark?” Xavier asked.

I thought back to what the witches had said and grimaced. “Unfortunately, I don’t think we can.”

“What about the source, though?” Torin asked.

“The what?” I asked.

Cali nodded in agreement. “The Orb of Letifer!”

“Remember that warning from the library, the prophecy? ‘Cut off the living head’?” Torin said. “That has to be Silas, right?”

“It has to be,” Cali said, looking from Torin to me. “Who else would it be?”

“There’s only one problem with this theory,” I said. “Silas isn’t exactly living, is he?”

“He’s not exactly all the way dead either though,” Xavier said with a shrug. “He’s controlling the Orb and the revenants, so I don’t see any other options of who it could be either.”

“Careful, brother,” I said. “You’re acting like you care what happens to me.”

Xavier glared at me. “I care what happens to the pack. This affects all of us, not just *you*.”

“Stop.” Cali spoke quietly, with a disturbing calm. “If the prophecy is right and we have to cut off the living head… Silas is our best bet. We need to kill Silas before this mark kills Greyson.”

**Episode 1577**

CHARLIE

I was about to shift into my wolf when Sophie stepped forward, all but getting in my face. “*Hey*! What are you going to do to Chad?” She paused, gave me a look, her cheeks turning dark in the night. She stepped back. “Um… seeing as how you’re naked and all?”

“I’m going to lead him on a wild goose chase,” I said. “But I’ll need your help.”

Sophie looked confused. “I don’t understand.”

I tried to keep my voice down, just to be safe. “I’m going to shift to throw Chad off Violet’s trail. That’s where you come in. I’ll need you to distract them from Violet’s trail and put them on mine instead,” I explained. “Oh and also, if possible, could you give me a few seconds’ head start?”

“S-Sure…” Sophie started.

Despite the circumstances, I couldn’t help but grin. “And if I happen to scare Chad, no loss either, right?” Then I saw her expression. “What?”

Sophie was staring at me, clearly stunned. “Charlie, are you sure you want to do that? I mean, there are so many hunters scouring the woods right now!” She bit her lip in worry. “Not to mention Sergeant Pepperdine.”

“I know.” I cleared my throat. “I wish there was another way, but I just can’t let them get to Violet. I hope you understand.”

To my relief, she smiled at me. “Yeah, I guess I do. And I think you’re very brave.” She laughed. “And also very naked.”

“Thanks?”

“Good luck, Charlie.”

I smiled back at her, then took a step away and allowed myself to shift. My bones cracked, and I felt the itch to howl in my throat. Immediately, I felt liberated—so much more powerful and strong. I might not have asked to become a werewolf, but the way this felt—I wouldn’t want to be anything else now. I turned to see Sophie staring at me in complete shock, her mouth hanging open.

Oh shit.

I hoped I hadn’t misjudged her and made a terrible mistake—I knew how terrifying I had to look. And it wasn’t like the shifting process was anything but brutal, especially to the eyes of a human, I imagined. But to my surprise, she stepped cautiously toward me. Then, slowly and carefully, she reached out a hand.

“Can I?”

I answered her by lowering my head, and Sophie patted it. I was impressed—the girl had guts.

Just then, I heard Kate calling for us. Her voice was faint, but she was getting closer. I took a last long look at Sophie who nodded, then turned and raced off into the woods.

I was running flat out and counting the seconds—*1… 2… 3… 4…*—when I heard Sophie’s well-timed scream high and clear, echoing through the forest.

“I thought I saw something!” The words drifted through the trees. “It might have been a werewolf!”

I bared my teeth in a wolfish grin. *Nice work, Sophie.*

I had no doubt they would fall for that, and no fear that I would be caught. I was moving way too fast for them. I intended to lead them down to the river, then double back as fast as I could, shift, and rejoin them. For now, at least, everything was going according to plan.

I used it as a mantra as I ran. *Keep to the plan. Keep to the plan. Keep to the—*

*Violet!*

Violet’s scent was in the air, lingering between the trees, close to the ground. It was strong. Powerful emotions flooded through me: love, protectiveness, passion, and fear. Was she okay? Where was she? Did she know I was coming for her?

I couldn’t shake another feeling too: What if I screwed this up? Violet meant everything to me. She was my heart, my mate, my reason for living. What if I accidently led the hunters straight to her? If she got hurt because of me… It was too terrible to think about.

I put my head down and changed course, zigzagging to make the hunters work as hard as possible. It was laughably easy—I used to move the same way when I broke for a shot at the net during lacrosse games.

Hiding my true self at hunter camp had been hard, but I hadn’t realized how much I’d missed being a wolf—the joy of running, the freedom, the smell of the earth. I remembered how Violet and I used to run together, and how much fun we’d always had. As I was thinking about it, I saw movement up ahead and slowed down to check it out. I could see something—or someone—moving through the trees.

*Violet?* I tried to mind link. *Sunshine is that you?*

Was she there? I did my best to hold myself perfectly still, waiting to hear her voice come through the mind link.

But there was nothing.

Eventually, there was a rustling in the bushes, and a deer delicately stepped out from the undergrowth. I exhaled a long, deep breath—it wasn’t Violet. Thank god for that. I hoped with everything I had that she was safe at the B and B, away from all this madness.

I was about to continue when I heard voices nearby. I cautiously turned around and paused to listen. I winced. Ugh. It wasn’t hard to identify Chad’s annoying voice. I wasn’t sure what to do, so I stood there listening to him mansplain something to a very patient Sophie. Finally, I heard her tell him to stop.

“Chad! We’re supposed to wait until we hear the signal.”

I circled around carefully. I could see Chad and Sophie now, but it was just the two of them. What happened to Kate and Seth? I looked around—I had a decision to make. I could either continue to make sure they stayed off Violet’s trail, taking them as far away as possible, or… Or, I realized with a growing sense of excitement, I could take this opportunity to scare Chad to death. Well, perhaps not exactly to *death*—but enough to shut him up for a few weeks, at the very least.

But scaring Chad would *also* mean throwing them off Violet’s trail. At least for a little while. A little while was all I needed.

I concentrated on using all my stealth and strength to sneak up behind Chad. I just had to hope that Sophie would know it was me. She had seen me briefly, even patted my head, but an encounter with a huge hairy beast in the woods could be incredibly stressful, and sometimes panic and adrenaline could make people do strange things.

I’d just have to take my chances.

I slipped behind a tree and let out a hair-raising growl.

“Did you hear that?” Chad’s voice had risen; he sounded excited. *Asshole.*

“I did.” Sophie sounded calm, but a little anxious—perfect fuel for Chad. I was so thankful that I’d trusted her.

“We should be careful,” she continued. “Maybe we should blow the whistle?”

I took this as my cue to growl again, making it sound even more ominous and creepy. I had to admit it, I was enjoying myself.

“Chad? We should blow the whistle.” Sophie said again.

I heard Chad make a scoffing noise. “Oh please, Sophie—I think I can handle some stupid wolf.”

Music to my ears.

I heard Chad’s footsteps as he took one step, then another, coming closer and closer to me. I could see him now, peering out into the dense, dark woods. I crouched down and then clumsily lunged away. I was making a lot more noise and commotion than I would have normally, but I needed to get Chad’s attention. And it worked.

“Sophie! Over here!”

Chad had started to follow me.

“Sophie!” he called again. “Come on, I think I saw it!”

I started to run, but I tried to pace myself. I knew that there was no way Chad would ever catch me. Why not give the guy a bit of a work out?

I ran for a bit until I decided he’d had enough. Then I crouched down again. It was time to surprise Chad, and I was more than ready. I waited patiently until he finally came into view and I knew he’d be able to see me. Slowly, I moved away from the tree and stood up, unfolding and stretching out to my full wolf size. I hated to admit it, but watching his eyes grow wide with shock made me feel powerful. I savored his expression and frozen stance and chuckled internally.

*Gotcha, you asshole*, I thought. *Karma’s a bitch*.

As I stood there in all my wolf glory, savoring the moment, Chad moved. He reached down and removed something from his boot. What was he doing? The thing glinted in the moonlight, and all sorts of alarms started going off in my head.

*Silver*. The bastard had a silver knife.

And before I had a chance to react, Chad threw it with deadly precision—straight at my chest.

**Episode 1578**

All eyes were on me as everyone processed what I’d just said. Then they launched into questions about the mark on Greyson’s leg. I couldn’t take my eyes off of the bandage that covered it.

It was making me sick to my stomach to see it.

“If it’s a revenant mark, that probably explains why I couldn’t heal it…” Torin said. “Killing Silas might be the best option to get rid of it.”

“Should we be worried about this mark? Are you seeing things? Do you feel like you’re losing control?” Xavier asked his brother. “Should we lock you up somewhere just in case you get the urge to attack us as soon as we let our guard down?”

“This place is a madhouse, just like the last pack house,” Ava cut in. “Greyson, just do me a favor and make sure to give me ample warning before you go all orange-eyed death zombie on us.”

“Everyone stop!” Greyson yelled.

I could tell he regretted letting the cat out of the bag. No wonder he’d tried to keep the wound a secret from everyone—including me. We were all so on edge that any hint of revenant influence drove us into a frenzy.

“It’s true,” Greyson said. “We need to go after Silas before whatever this is on my leg gets worse. There’s nothing guaranteeing that whatever the three witches did to me will prevent that.

My stomach tightened. I couldn’t lose Greyson.

“But as we’ve all seen time and time again, killing Silas isn’t so easy,” Greyson continued. “He appears when he wants and disappears without leaving a clue behind. How are we supposed to find him? And even if we do manage to track him down, how do we kill a ghost?”

Things were spiraling further out of control, and I didn’t like it one bit. Although I knew why Greyson had kept the wound and the mark it had left on his leg from me, it didn’t bode well for us. Then there was the whole thing with the witches, and now Greyson stating the hard truths about Silas. It was a lot to deal with all at once. Still, there had to be a way to put an end to all this. If Torin was right, Silas had to be the “living head”—whether he was really alive, or really undead.

“Silas seems to be connected to the revenants. If we capture one, maybe it can lead us to Silas,” Xavier suggested.

“That could work. Enough of them seem to keep popping up,” Greyson said.

“But how do we *find* one?” I asked.

“We can use her,” Xavier said, motioning to Ava.

I was more than a little surprised at Xavier’s sudden change of heart. Before, he hadn’t even been willing to hear me out about possibly using Ava to help us identify revenants, and now, suddenly, he trusted her? What had happened to change his mind? He should have believed me when I’d suggested it in the first place. *Why hadn’t he?*

I cut off that line of thinking immediately when I felt an unwelcome twinge of jealousy. This wasn’t the time to be harboring jealous thoughts, especially when it came to Ava. Xavier had unmated from her, after all. That said it all, didn’t it?

“It’s too bad we don’t have a revenant magnet,” Torin said.

“From the looks of things, we already do. The damn things have been crawling out of the woodwork everywhere we go,” Xavier said.

I thought about what Torin had said. “Well, we do have a magnet. Sort of,” I offered.

Greyson and Xavier turned to look at me.

“What are you talking about?” Greyson asked.

“What about Marta?” I said.

“What *about* Marta? What does she have to do with this?” Xavier asked.

I could feel the plan forming in my mind as I explained. “If Silas is a ghost, Marta should be able to summon him—she’s a medium, that’s what they do.”

Greyson smiled. “There’s something to that, Cali.”

I couldn’t help but feel proud that Greyson agreed with me. Sure, I wasn’t a werewolf, but I could more than hold my own with these two Alphas. Could I really be Luna one day? Maybe. Has there ever been a half-Fae Luna before? I pushed my mind back on track—there would be time to think about all of that later. Right now, there were more pressing issues at hand.

“So, Marta, huh? What do we really know about her?” Xavier asked.

Greyson shrugged. “Violet and Charlie brought her here.”

We all turned at the sound of a car approaching. Xavier peeked through the curtains. “Greyson, Big Mac and your mom are back.”

“Maybe they have some answers,” I said, hoping to god that they did. We had so many questions circling around right now that I was beyond overwhelmed. If we could get at least one solid solution to even one of our problems, I’d feel much better.

Everyone shuffled out of the room to go greet them. I lingered behind and helped Greyson to his feet, still relieved that he wasn’t too proud to accept my help when he needed it. I could tell that he was still in a lot of pain as he struggled to stand, wincing and groaning despite the tough exterior he was trying to maintain.

“Take your time,” I told him. “There’s no need to rush.”

Solid on his feet, finally, he took my hand. “It’s going to be okay, love.”

“Don’t do that, Greyson. You always do that. You don’t need to make me feel better by pretending things aren’t what they are.”

Greyson reached out and caressed my cheek before lifting my chin so he could look me straight in the eyes. I couldn’t ignore the fire that ignited in me. “I appreciate that you’re looking out for me, Cali. I should probably show you my appreciation more, but I meant what I said. It’s going to be okay.” He kissed me gently. “Trust me.”

My heart swelled with the love I felt for him.

No matter what type of trouble we were in, whenever I looked in his eyes, whenever he kissed me, all I could think about was how much I adored him and how happy I was to have him as my mate, even if things weren’t always simple between us. I wanted so much to trust him without question, but I also wanted to help him. I couldn’t help it.

Greyson pulled away. “Let’s go see if Big Mac can shed any light on all this,” he said, squeezing my hand and trying to hide his grimace of pain as he moved toward the door. When we got to top of the stairs, I tried to help him, but he waved me away. “I can handle a flight of stairs, Cali. It wouldn’t look good for an Alpha to appear too weak.”

“It also wouldn’t look good for an Alpha to appear vain,” I grumbled.

Greyson grinned. “It comes with the job.”

Downstairs, everyone was gathered around Big Mac and Mrs. Smith, lobbing loads of questions at them. Mrs. Smith caught sight of Greyson and broke away from the group to pull him into a long hug, a hug Greyson returned with no small amount of reluctance. I realized then that I should talk to him about being more accepting of his mother. It would be good for both of them.

“Where’s Marta?” Big Mac asked.

“She’s here,” Greyson answered. “We were looking to talk to her at some point, actually.”

“About?” Big Mac said. I could already see that her hackles were up. She hadn’t been back ten minutes and she was already revving to give us a sharp talking to about some misstep that we weren’t even aware we’d taken.

“We want to ask her about summoning Silas’s ghost,” I said, trying to take some of the heat away from Greyson.

“Who’s Marta? Someone new?” Ravi asked.

“If you do that,” Big Mac continued, railroading over Ravi’s ill-timed question, “you’ll have no idea what you’re walking into. You’ll only make things worse.”

“Worse? How could things get any worse? That doesn’t even seem possible,” I said.

“Oh, things can get worse. Marta’s more than a medium,” Big Mac said, her gaze narrowed.

“Tom was teaching me about meat temperatures… Is she medium rare?” Torin interjected.

Big Mac shot him a withering look, and he slunk away into the kitchen to hide. It was the right decision.

“I suspect that the girl is a bridge,” Big Mac continued, prompting a wave of confused murmurs among the pack. I’d never heard the term before, and from the look on Greyson and Xavier’s faces, they hadn’t, either.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“It means that there could be dire consequences if a séance goes wrong, for example. If Marta summoned him, she might call forth a breathing, live, in-the-flesh Silas into the real world. No one wants that, right?”

She was right. Bringing Silas back to the world of the living would unleash a brand of problems that we were in no way prepared for. As everyone started discussing alternate solutions, my mind wandered to Artemis. Silas had wanted to infect her with dark magic again… But was that still what he wanted? As much as I hated to think about it, I couldn’t help but ask myself: *could we use Artemis as bait for Silas?*

**Episode 1579**

VIOLET

I was getting close to the bed and breakfast. I recognized the scent of the rose bushes that peppered the woods near the back yard, and I could make out the wide trunks of the large oak trees out front that I’d passed on my way to see Charlie. I slowed a bit once the house came into view, happy for a bit of rest.

I’d been as careful as I could after leaving Charlie, stopping a few times to listen and make sure that I wasn’t being followed. I’d taken a super circuitous path to get here, and now I was tired, out of breath, and covered in dirt. I wanted nothing more than to settle into the deep whirlpool tub that came with my room. I’d also spotted candles and bath salts in one of the cabinets, and a thick terry cloth robe behind the bathroom door. After the day I’d had, I was ready for a bit of relaxation.

I couldn’t stop thinking about Charlie. I hoped he was okay. That camp alarm had been so scary. And why had it gone off in the first place? I didn’t even want to consider the fact that I might’ve been the cause. I wished we’d had more time to talk about what to do, but Charlie had been pretty insistent that I get out of there fast.

I studied the looming B and B as I approached. A bright light streamed through the first-floor window. It had to be the older woman who ran the place, Mrs. Riggins. I moved into a cluster of trees to shift back to human. I looked down at the charm shining around my wrist. Thank goodness I hadn’t lost it on the way here. I just needed to get dressed and walk inside like I’d just come back from dinner.

I bent down, reached for my bag, and froze. *It’s gone!* Where were my clothes? I took a frantic look around the yard. I knew I’d taken my clothes off and put them in my bag before I’d shifted, but the bag must have fallen off somewhere along my journey. *Shit!*

There was no way I could stay out here tonight. The night was getting colder as the chilly breeze gained strength, and I was completely naked. I’d freeze to death. Another thought occurred to me. *What if someone from the camp finds my lost clothes?* That would complicate things for Charlie, for sure.I had to let him know about my mistake. What would he want me to do?

I ducked low and circled around the back of the house. I looked up and spotted my room on the second floor. I’d left my phone in there. *Is the window open?* I hoped so. If I could jump in, I’d be able to sneak in undetected, call Charlie, and warn him. I shifted back into my wolf and was getting ready to jump when a low growl cut through the air. I paused and whipped around to see a big dog with long sharp teeth eyeing me from the porch.

The porch light turned on, and Mrs. Riggins’s muffled voice came from inside. “Pookins? Is everything okay?”

*Pookins? This dog did not look like a Pookins.* Mrs. Riggins had described Pookins as her “sweet little dog.” This dog was not what I’d pictured, and from what I could see, he was neither sweet nor little. He was every bit a ferocious watch dog, who was undoubtedly bored to tears out here and ready to chase and attack anything that seemed even moderately interesting.

*Nice doggie*, I thought.

Pookins was practically frothing at the mouth as he stepped forward a bit, sniffing the air like a sadistic bloodhound. I backed away as slowly as I could manage. *What do I do?* Pookins took a few more steps toward me. *Go back to… whatever you were doing, Pookins. Were you sleeping? Go back to sleep, Pookins!*

No dice. Pookins was off the porch now and coming closer, licking his chops like he’d found something tasty to eat.

Then it dawned on me. *Hold on a sec. I’m a fucking werewolf. Enough of this.* I stepped toward Pookins, baring my teeth and growling low in my throat. Pookins got the message. His eyes went wide and, with a whimper, he scampered back onto the porch and barreled past Mrs. Riggins, just as she opened the back door. I dropped down low behind one of the rose bushes, hoping that it was too dark for Mrs. Riggins to spot me.

“Precious!” Mrs. Riggins called after Pookins. “What’s gotten into you?”

I was close enough to see the porch light reflecting off Mrs. Riggins’s eyes as she peered out into the yard. She looked hard for a few seconds before huffing. “Probably those damn coyotes. Gonna have to call the sheriff if this keeps up.” She slammed the door, and the porch light clicked off.

I took a few deep breaths and waited a couple of tense moments before making my move. With a running leap, I shot up to the second floor. I hadn’t accounted for the ice, and my claws scrambled for purchase as I slid down the small awning below my window and crashed to the ground with a loud thud. So much for being quiet.

No sooner had I hit the ground than Pookins was at the window, barking like a maniac and trying to claw straight through the glass to get to me. I could see his spittle covering the window as his barks turned into snarls. He was like a dog after a bone—a bone that he wanted to destroy by any means necessary.

Mrs. Riggins appeared behind Pookins, holding the curtains back so that she could take a good look at the yard. She didn’t look scared, exactly, but she was definitely on high alert. Before I could be seen, I turned and raced back into the woods. I kept running until I stopped hearing Pookins barking in the distance.

After I was sure that I was out of harm’s way, I stopped and leaned against a tree to calm down. My heart pounded hard against my ribs, and this time it wasn’t from running, but from almost getting caught. Now what? I couldn’t call Charlie, and I couldn’t risk going back to the house just yet. Pookins was out for blood, and I had no desire to hurt him, no matter how much the dog wanted to do just that to me.

If I couldn’t call Charlie to warn him, then I’d have to take care of the missing clothes issue on my own. I took off into the forest, following my trail back toward camp. In that moment, I felt so alone. I missed Charlie so much, and I knew that I’d feel so much better if I had him beside me. Together, we weren’t just a great match—we were absolutely unstoppable.

I thought again about all the things we’d been through, and all the things that had brought us so close together over the life of our relationship. I couldn’t wait to make more memories—and better memories, too. I was confident that we would. We just had to get over this latest hurdle, and then it would be smooth sailing on the other side. At least that was what I told myself.

As I ran, I couldn’t help but worry that one of the hunters might have found my clothes. If they had, would Charlie get into trouble? That other hunter had spotted us together, and there was something about him that made me feel like he would tell on Charlie if he got a chance. He and Charlie hadn’t seemed friendly, exactly. If I got Charlie into any sort of trouble, I would never forgive myself. I’d have to be more careful if Charlie and I were ever going to survive this. I gave myself a mental kick in the ass for being so careless.

Suddenly, I detected Charlie’s scent, and it filled me with hope. He was close. He’d been here. My heart ached with longing. For a second, I got lost in remembering the time we’d spent in that shed, and how soft and warm Charlie’s lips had felt in the cold… I dashed the memory away and focused. I had to be close to camp, now. I slowed down, sniffing the air to see if I could determine which direction Charlie had gone, and how long ago he’d been in the area.

I took a look around. My clothes had to be around here somewhere. I thought about following Charlie’s scent, but I could tell from the hints of other scents mingled with his that he wasn’t alone. I had to avoid him; I didn’t want to compromise him—at least not any more than I already had.

A branch snapped behind me. I stopped in my tracks and turned to see two people—and one of them had a crossbow aimed straight at me.

**Episode 1580**

LOLA

I could barely believe myself. I’d turned hot-as-hell Jay down. What was I thinking?

It would have been so easy to agree and spend the night with him in the lab. Just the two of us, all alone, spending real quality time together… And if I *had* stayed with him, I was sure that I wouldn’t have been going through what I called vampire heat withdrawal syndrome right now. Ever since I’d left him, I’d felt feverish and sweaty. I couldn’t sit still, so I paced back and forth in my small dorm room, trying to calm down.

Besides the physical symptoms I was experiencing, I didn’t trust myself to stay away. All I could think about was how soft and sweet Jay’s lips had tasted. Delicious. Like candy, or apples, or blood…

*Stop it Lola!* I dislodged my dresser from its place and pushed it in front of my door. *There. Now I’d stay put.*

“What’s going on in there?” Winifred’s annoying voice rang through from the other side of the door.

I groaned. *Really?* Not only was I denying myself the company of the sweet, thoughtful, and ultra-foxy Jay, I was stuck with the most annoying babysitter anyone had ever had in the history of the world. Was she really going to camp outside my door all night? What type of person would agree to do that? *A person who has absolutely nothing better to do, clearly.*

“I’m redoing the layout of my room! There’s bad feng shui in here, and I have to correct it!” I lied.

Then I spotted the window. I’d jacked it open, hoping that a bit of fresh air would help cool me down. How easy it would have been once to just shift and take off and run as far away from here as possible until this damn vampire heat cooled off. But I couldn’t shift, and I would probably fall and break a leg or something more serious trying to escape.

Even if I did manage to break out without hurting myself, I didn’t trust myself to not just go and break into the lab just to get to Jay. Handsome, tall, warm, sexy Jay. Even thinking about him intensified the fever searing every inch of my clammy flesh. This was complete torture.

I didn’t remember Jay, but he still got to me. How was that possible? I felt like a trapped animal—in heat! I needed to do something to calm myself down soon, or I might just explode all over the walls. Now *that* would be bad feng shui.

I pulled off my sweat-drenched clothes and tossed them into the hamper. A shower would fix this. An *ice-cold* shower. I turned on the water and hopped in, biting my lip to keep from screaming as the cold water pelted me. I stood under the water, hopping from foot to foot and turning around to make sure the water hit every inch of me. After a few minutes, I stepped out, shivering. The cold air felt good against my chilled skin. I felt a bit more in control.

No sooner had I gotten dressed in a fresh pair of sweats than the feeling returned. It was like there was a ball of heat inside me, gradually expanding outward until it took over my whole body, igniting me in searing, burning heat.

“*Argh!*” This was driving me crazy! I had to get out of here. I couldn’t take it anymore. I looked out the window. There was no way I was going to risk jumping down. I wasn’t as stupid as Cali. *No offense, girl.*

I wrestled my dresser back to its original spot as quietly as I could and opened the door a crack. I breathed a sigh of relief. Winifred was gone. I stepped out, taking a cautious look around, expecting her to pop out at any moment to ask where I was going. The stairs were just down the hall. I could sneak downstairs and be outside in less than a minute. I ducked back into my room and snagged my coat.

I was halfway down the hall when I wondered how Jay was doing. It had to be hard for him, being stuck in a strange place like this—and Tottenville was the definition of strange. It had to be even harder without me by his side, especially since I was his mate. It was still strange to think of myself that way. But, since I *was* his mate, I probably had to look out for him.

*Maybe I should check on him? Just as a courtesy? I mean, as his* mate*, it wouldn’t be right for me to just up and leave him, right?*

I knew I was just making excuses, but my self-control had burned away with my composure, and I wasn’t going to stop myself.

I changed course and headed for the opposite stairwell, the one that led down to the lab. I tip toed down the stairs, stopping and looking and listening every few seconds to make sure no one was sneaking up on me. I kept telling myself to go slow and be careful. I was on that stupid probation, after all, and I couldn’t afford even one more mishap.

Who knew what Irma would do if she caught me “misbehaving” again? Would she kick me out, or do something way more sinister? You never quite knew what vampires were capable of. Maybe Tottenville had some weird, scary torture punishment for people who didn’t follow the rules. It wasn’t like she could call my parents and have them give me a talking to. At least I hoped not.

I couldn’t believe I was in a situation like this again. It was actually kind of embarrassing. Here I was—an adult—sneaking around like I was afraid that my parents were going to catch me breaking curfew.

At least it seemed like I’d finally annoyed Winifred into leaving me alone. I reached the bottom of the stairs, then hunched down and waited, peering around the corners and looking back up the stairs to make sure no one was watching me. I felt like a cat burglar.

I slunk through the darkened halls, walking toe to heel, the very personification of sneaking. I was sure I looked ridiculous, but I didn’t care. *A girl has to do what a girl has to do to sate her vampire heat.* I pictured Jay. Not only was he a complete smoke show when he was human, he was also a smoking hot wolf. Maybe that explained why I’d always found the Beast in *Beauty and the Beast* so hot! And the lions in *Lion King*? Yes, please! And then there was that *Robin Hood* movie where Robin Hood was a foxy fox. Now, it all made sense.

How many vampires could say that they had a hot werewolf for a boyfriend? *Definitely not Winifred*, I thought, rolling my eyes. It would be weird to see her with any kind of boyfriend at all…

I stopped myself. Jay wasn’t my boyfriend, but he definitely could be. Maybe he would be after I visited him tonight. *No, Lola. Stop!* I was really losing control. It was starting to feel like I was obsessed.

Finally, I reached the hallway that led to Emmett’s lab. Internally, I screamed with glee. Finally, I was going to be with Jay again. I could just imagine feeling his touch again, hugging him, kissing him. Doing other things…

I stopped cold. A sound rang out behind me, and I turned to see none other than Winifred, standing at the end of the hall with her hand on her hip. “Where do you think you’re going?” she hissed.

“Oh, wow. Winifred. I cannot tell you how glad I am that you found me! We’re going to laugh about this one day, I know it! You see, I tend to… sleepwalk. It happens when I get really tired, and today was a long day—you know with all the getting caught and being put on probation stuff. Lots of mental stress. And I’m sure you’ve heard how dangerous sleepwalking can be, so thanks! Way to go, averting certain disaster like that!” I said with a tight smile.

“Sleepwalking or not, I have to report this to Irma. I’m sure this is something she’d be interested in hearing about,” she said.

“What? Why? I was just going for a walk… a sleepwalk. What’s the issue? You found me, great, so let’s just head back up to my room. No harm, no foul!”

I stood there, waiting for Winifred to outline all the reasons that she had to tattle, but she didn’t look like herself all of a sudden. She had a strange look in her eyes, and she was standing stock still, as if she were frozen in place.

I walked toward her slowly, cautiously. “Winifred? Are you okay?”

Winifred opened her mouth, bared her razor-sharp fangs, and ran toward me, her eyes glowing bright orange. This was just like what happened with Jacqueline! I stumbled back and screamed.

**Episode 1581**

XAVIER

I recognized the look on Cali’s face. I’d seen it so many times before—more times than I’d ever wanted to see it. She was worried about something, I could tell. I wanted to talk to her about it, but not with everyone standing around.

“Hey all, we should probably call it a night,” I said. “It’s been a long, tiring day, and we’re not going to solve the Silas problem tonight. We can regroup in the morning, when we’re fresh.”

There were murmurs of agreement as everyone left to retire to their corners of the house. I watched everyone file out, hoping to snatch a few moments alone with Cali.

“Good call,” Greyson said, surprising me. Hell must have frozen over if Greyson was agreeing with me. Maybe he needed to get hurt more often. It seemed to make him a bit more agreeable.

Greyson hobbled toward the staircase, still favoring his wounded leg. *Was my Alpha brother beginning to show signs of wear and tear?* Cali looped an arm around Greyson’s waist and started helping him up the stairs.

I watched them, wondering if Greyson could be making it seem worse than it really was just so Cali would stay close by to help him. We were locked in a competition for Cali’s time and attention, and while I hated to think that Greyson would stoop so low, I had to admit that it was something I would do—given the circumstances. *When it comes to Cali, and keeping her close, anything goes.*

No matter what we’d agreed to in an attempt to deal with this *due destini* shit, I still hated the sight of Cali with Greyson. It just wasn’t right, and I didn’t think that I would ever get used to it. And I was fucking trying. I guess I wasn’t evolved enough. No matter how hard I tried to deal, it still struck me somewhere deep, where logic and compromise had no meaning, where my deepest desires lived. I wanted Cali to myself, period. Seeing her attached to my brother’s hip was getting harder and harder to deal with.

“Wait,” I said. “There’s something we need to discuss.”

“I thought we were going to save talking about Silas for the morning,” Greyson said.

“No, it’s not about that. It’s about this.” I gestured between the three of us.

“What?” Cali asked.

“The schedule,” I said. I couldn’t help myself. I was tired of this. It was becoming painfully obvious that if I didn’t speak up, things would continue in an unequal manner, and there was no way that I was going to get the short end of the stick.

Cali rolled her eyes and groaned. “We need to discuss that right now? With everything that’s going on?”

“We need to figure it out,” I said, struggling to hide my irritation. I couldn’t believe she was giving me a hard time about this. I wondered how she would feel if she had to share either of us with another woman. She wouldn’t have been able to handle it even as well as I was—I was sure of that. “So. Who are you staying with tonight?”

“Come on, man. Don’t ask her that right now. Are you being serious?” Greyson said.

I was getting more and more annoyed. They knew as well as I did that there would never be an opportune time to discuss this. Every moment was fraught and stressful. If we waited to talk about this when everything was perfect, we’d never do it.

Cali looked between the two of us, speechless, color blooming on her cheeks. “I’m staying with Greyson. He’s hurt, and he needs me. I hope you understand, Xavier.”

I felt like she’d struck me. I waited a moment before responding, wanting to make sure that neither of them could hear the hurt in my voice. I clenched my jaw. Sure, I understood her reasoning, but that didn’t make me hate her decision any less. After all, I was the one who’d stayed outside Artemis’s room, up half the night, barely sleeping, listening out for any strange sounds, all to protect Cali.

Not Greyson. *Me*.

“Xavier?” Cali said my name so quietly, I could barely hear it. Or maybe I was partially deafened by anger and frustration. Either way, I was over this, and things had to change if I was going to go along with it for even another day.

I forced a smile. “Of course. I get it. Greyson’s weak.” I shot a glance at Greyson to drive my words home. “He needs someone to help him. Of course you have to be the one to step in and do that for him.” Greyson glared hard at me. *Careful brother. I wouldn’t want you to injure your eyes, next.*

“Okay, great. Now that we’ve settled that, Greyson, let’s get you off that leg,” Cali said. They turned away to continue their pitiful journey up the stairs.

“Just one more thing,” I said. I had to admit that I derived some pleasure from holding them up. They were in such a hurry to go lock themselves away together. “So, this means you’re with me tomorrow. Like, we alternate? Greyson tonight, me tomorrow.”

Cali stared at me. “Stop it, Xavier. We’re not deciding anything. Not like this.”

“Not like this, huh?” I repeated. I was livid. “So, when are we going to? This is turning into a problem.”

“Only because you’re making it one!” Cali shot back. “When we agreed to this, you both told me you wouldn’t get jealous.”

I held up my hands and flashed what I hoped was an easy smile. “I’m not jealous.” *I’m fucking* beyond *jealous.* “I just want some clarity. Is that too much to ask?”

“We’ll discuss it in the morning,” Cali said, her jaw set.

With that, I let them go. I watched them, anger churning around in my stomach. I knew that I had to keep myself in line or I’d risk alienating Cali again, and that was the last thing I wanted.

Ava appeared at my side, as if out of nowhere. “Trouble in paradise?” she sang.

I didn’t need Ava’s shit right now. I was on the edge, and she had the power to push me right over that edge to complete ruin.

I rolled my eyes at her. “Get lost.”

I turned to walk away, trying to figure out how to best make it through tonight. I just needed to numb my feelings a bit. A cold beer and a silent room sounded perfect right about now. Or maybe I’d shift and go running in the woods. But that probably wasn’t a good idea with Silas on the loose.

“You’re really good at avoiding difficult questions, you know that?” Ava persisted. “Haven’t you learned by now that they don’t just go away?” She flipped her hair over her shoulder and looked up at me, a smug expression on her face. I’d seen that look millions of times before, and now that things were irreparably sour between us, I absolutely hated it.

I laughed. How could I not? “So, you have a deal with a vampire, and I’m the one avoiding questions? Sure, Ava. Whatever you have to tell yourself.”

“No, you’re wrong. He tried to make one, but I refused,” she said. “And you *are* avoiding.”

“Don’t lecture me right now, Ava. I’m warning you. I am not in the mood.”

“What? You don’t believe me?” she continued. “How come you never answered me before?”

“Before when? What are you talking about?”

“Before, after you saved me from Iñigo.”

“I didn’t answer because it doesn’t matter. Just be happy that I didn’t let Iñigo kill you.”

“Tsk tsk, Xavier. I thought you knew me better than that. I wouldn’t let just anyone have that privilege,” she said.

“What are you up to, Ava? What’s your goal here?” I asked. She’d worn me down. I noticed that I’d lost the angry edge to my voice. I was just tired. The one person I wanted to be with right now was pressed up against my brother, meanwhile, I was left to speak with the ex I hated and couldn’t get the fuck away from. I was convinced I had the worst luck in the world, and it showed no signs of improving. “Are you sticking around to help us? Or are you waiting for an opportunity to stick a knife in someone’s back when the time comes?”

Ava looked taken aback, as if I’d said something ridiculous. “Xavier, come on! Are you really worried that I’d do that to you?”

She was so good at playing innocent. Even though I knew she wasn’t to be trusted, even though I knew she was up to something and didn’t have any of our best interests in mind, I had to admit that she seemed genuinely contrite. I knew it was bullshit, an exceptionally good act, but once again, she had me off balance.

“Ava, give me a break with the innocent shit. You’ve done it before!” I snapped. “What’s stopping you now? Tell me.”

Ava looked at me, her eyes wide as her gaze bored into mine, like she was searching for something in my stare. “Because there’s still something going on between us, X. You realize that, don’t you?”

**Episode 1582**

I helped Greyson back to his room, distracted and simmering with annoyance at the scene Xavier had just caused. I couldn’t believe him.

Greyson gave me a thoughtful look. “You’re bothered by what Xavier said, aren’t you? About the schedule?”

“Yes,” I admitted. “It made me feel dirty. Like a piece of property being moved back and forth.” It was exactly what I’d feared when we’d agreed to do this, and there was no way I was going to let it fly. I had a say in this, and I was a person—not one of Xavier’s many possessions.

Greyson eased down onto his bed, and I sat down beside him. He reached out and caressed my cheek. “I’m sorry if my brother upset you. I’ll be first to admit that he isn’t always… tactful, though he’s leaps and bounds above Colton.”

That was just like Greyson. Despite the fact that he and Xavier were often at each other’s throats, lately, Greyson seemed to be going out of his way not to bad talk Xavier to me.

Plus, he was right about Colton. I laughed, remembering how Colton used to interrupt at the worst times when Xavier and I were first getting to know each other. My laughter melted into a sigh, and I turned to Greyson. “You know, the whole idea of having some sort of set schedule really rubs me the wrong way. Isn’t there some other way to make this work? Otherwise it could turn out to be like one of those meal plans. You know, where you’re supposed to have broccoli on Thursday, but then when Thursday comes around you don’t want broccoli, you want green beans?”

Greyson hit me with an open-mouthed stare. “Wait, what, are you broccoli? Or am I? Wait, are you the green beans?”

*Okay, maybe my explanation isn’t perfect.* “Greyson! That’s not the point.”

“I’m just trying to understand your analogy.”

“No, I just… I’m not comfortable being someone who gets passed back and forth. Do you get that? Wasn’t the whole point of this agreement to make things easier? Cause it’s sure not feeling that way right now.”

“I’m sorry, Cali. If Xavier could just stop long enough to listen, I’m sure he’d be sorry, too. All we wanted was to make your life easier in the face of all this *due destini* stuff.”

Greyson’s sincerity was hands down one of the sexiest things about him, and with a mind, face, and body like Greyson had, that was saying a lot.

I took a deep breath, trying to make sure I found the right words to let him know how I felt. “I know that you two agreed to this to make things better. It’s just frustrating sometimes. There’s so damn much going on, and I don’t always know what I’m feeling. What I’m supposed to do.” Not to mention, the stakes were so much higher than me just making the wrong decision and hurting someone’s feelings. Our lives and my sanity were on the line.

Greyson wrapped me in his arms and held me tight. I leaned into him and buried my face in his chest. I could finally feel myself relaxing. I hadn’t even realized how tense I’d been. I needed his strength, his assurance. It was the only thing that I knew I could depend on at times like these, and I wanted to soak it all in.

“I never want you to feel unwanted, Cali. Know that I will always take care of you, even when things are unclear. That will always be my goal, no matter what.” Greyson’s voice rumbled against me as he stroked my hair.

I pulled away from him, feeling guilty, suddenly.

“What am I doing? I should be the one taking care of you, not the other way around,” I said. “Let me take another look at your leg. Maybe we should get Big Mac to take a look at it? Get her opinion?”

“No thanks,” Greyson said, shaking his head emphatically. “I don’t want Big Mac right now. I want this.” He pulled me close to sit beside him on the bed and leaned over to give me a tender kiss. “This is the best cure for what ails me,” he said with a lazy smile.

It was so easy to get lost in him, and I managed to do so for a few seconds before I pulled away.

“Don’t try to distract me. I have to take a look at your leg. I’m still worried about you, especially after those witches appeared,” I said. It had been shocking, to say the least. Our lives had become a revolving door of strange occurrences, and yet the witches appearing out of nowhere had still managed to shock, and trouble, me.

“Fine, it’s all yours,” Greyson conceded. He sat up and swung his feet to the floor, then rolled up the leg of his jeans, exposing the strange wound.

I got down on my knees in front of him and carefully removed the bandage. The wound was better, there was no doubt about that, but I could still make out the mark. I ducked into the bathroom to get a washcloth, hoping to clean it up just a little more. I paused to take a breath and caught a glimpse of my face in the bathroom mirror. Wow. I was kind of a mess. For some reason, though, I didn’t really care. Greyson had seen me in far worse shape than this, and he still loved me.

I smiled at the thought, enjoying the warm feeling it gave me. It was nice to feel confident in your lover. I turned to see Greyson trying to hoist himself up from the bed.

“What are you doing? Get back in bed!” I scolded him.

“Come on, give me a break! I’m just trying to take off my shirt. Is that okay, doctor?” he teased.

“No, I’ll do it!” I said. I sat beside him and yanked his shirt over his head in one smooth motion. *Wowza.* The sight of him shirtless still managed to completely take my breath away, even after all this time. I urged him back down into bed. “Now hold still.”

I used the washcloth, which I’d dampened just a bit with warm water, to clean his wound. I dabbed at it, trying not to hurt him.

“Ow!” Greyson yelled.

“Oh my god, I’m sorry!” I said.

“Just kidding!” he said, laughing.

I gave him a swat on the chest, and again he reacted like I’d just hit him with a roundhouse kick.

“Stop it! That’s not funny!” I said, laughing despite myself.

“I thought it was hilarious,” he said, taking my hand. “Really, I do feel better. But maybe that’s because I like being cared for by a hot doc?”

I felt my cheeks heating up and knew I was blushing. Greyson’s eyes gleamed. I couldn’t believe he was flirting with me right now, in his current state. Not that I minded in the least. He always had a way of getting to me, even when I least expected it.

I returned to the bathroom and pulled a fresh bandage from the medicine cabinet.

My annoyance over what had happened with Xavier persisted, despite our light moment, but I didn’t want to mention it again and ruin the mood. I realized that I wasn’t exactly upset at Xavier—more at the entire situation. But, as always, Greyson had found the perfect way to distract me, and I didn’t want to fight it. Why not give in? We both deserved a moment of levity now and then.

I went back into the bedroom and went to work putting Greyson’s new bandage on while giving him a look that said, “no funny business.” After I was done, Greyson took my hand and squeezed it. That was more than enough for me. We locked eyes, and he leaned in slowly, almost agonizingly slow, before he brushed his lips against mine, a prelude to a deep kiss that literally took my breath away.

I leaned into him, running my tongue along his lips and his teeth and thrusting it deep into his mouth, wondering if he could tell how much I longed for him. I’d been so scared for him, and I still was. I needed this, and I felt certain he did too. He met my kiss with the same heat, and we wrapped our arms tight around each other as I moved to straddle him, taking care not to bump his wound in the process.

I moaned against him as heat crested in my chest. I pulled away for just a moment, and our gazes connected again. Greyson’s eyes were unfocused, and he pulled me back into the kiss. It was an urging kiss this time, asking for more than might be safe with him in his condition. But I couldn’t pull away again to tell him that we should stop, to ask him if he was okay. I leaned into him so that he fell back against the headboard. I felt his arousal beneath me.

What were we doing? With everything going on, with Greyson needing to heal from the attack, was he really trying to have *sex* right now?

**Episode 1583**

CHARLIE

My years of intense sports conditioning had trained my body to react quickly to whatever came at me, and there was no doubt that my werewolf and hunter blood enhanced my ability to easily dodge the knife that flew at me. But it was still a close call. It whistled by my head and lodged in the tree behind me. I lunged toward Chad before he could react, and we crashed to the ground, struggling and tearing at each other like wild animals.

It was all touch and go for a bit—one moment I had the upper hand, the next he did. I shifted my weight and managed to get on top of him. I pressed his face into the dirt as I tried to immobilize him when he rolled over, bucking me to the ground. He stood up and made to kick me in the side, but I rolled away just in time. He came at me again and managed to punch me in the neck, nearly knocking the wind right out of me. I had to admit, he was no slouch in the hunter department. He was giving me a run for my money.

Chad ran over, yanked the knife out of the tree, and lunged at me. I dodged out of the way just in time, feeling more than a little shaken at how close he’d come to stabbing me. I resisted the urge to really ramp up my strength and tear Chad apart, knowing that I had to be careful—I didn’t want to seriously hurt him. Not because he didn’t deserve it, because he seriously deserved nothing less, but because I suspected that if the camp found Chad seriously hurt or dead, it would only cause more problems for me and Violet.

Chad sliced out at me over and over again as I struggled to dodge every strike. I got a good look at the knife. It was long and serrated, and the silver blade glinted dangerously in the moonlight. Every time Chad missed, I knew that I was mere inches away from being sliced deep, and I knew that if he got me, I would be done for.

Chad was majorly skilled with the knife and wielded it with well-practiced precision. What I wouldn’t have given to just unleash on him… But I stuck to evading his attacks, realizing that I was coming dangerously close to being stabbed. It was clear that Chad wanted me dead, and he was coming remarkably close to achieving his goal.

“Just die already, you werewolf asshole!” Chad screamed, the knife slicing through the air as he advanced on me. His movements were quick and sure, and though mine were quicker and surer, panic seized me as I realized I was getting a little winded. We’d been going at it for a while, and things showed no sign of slowing down.

Chad made a wild jab with the knife that threw him off balance, and I took that opportunity to lunge, tackling him to the ground.

We struggled, me trying to keep the knife as far away from myself as possible and him fighting to throw me off and get the upper hand. He managed to roll on top of me, but seconds later I was back on top. We did this a few times before the ground beneath us crumbled away, sending us crashing over a ledge to the rocky slope below.

“Fuck!” Chad screamed as we crashed to the ground, clutching his arm in agony.

I’d fared better in the fall, but not by much. I got to my feet, wincing against the pain that ripped through my body. I was beaten, bloodied, and bruised. Chad was on the ground right in front of me, and he was in no state to get up. But even so, he swung the silver knife around wildly with his good arm in an effort to keep me at bay.

“Back the fuck off, wolf-mutt!” he screamed, his eyes wild with pain and anger.

I was all too happy to oblige. I was tired, cold, and felt like I’d been hit by a Mack truck. I looked up at the ledge we’d fallen from and then back down at Chad. It was clear he wasn’t going anywhere and was no longer a threat. I could easily climb back up the slope and take off—but I still needed to make sure that Violet was okay.

I began to make my way back up the slope after casting one last glance at Chad. His arm was bent at the wrong angle, definitely fractured, and he was no longer swinging the knife around. I could tell that his strength was waning. I was no expert at this type of stuff, but it looked to me like Chad was going into shock. *Serves him right. Prick.*

I scrambled up the slope, and when I reached the top of the ledge, I paused and stared back down at Chad. His groans had turned to whimpers, and he seemed delirious, had even started making weak swipes with the knife again, but there was a strange, faraway look in his eyes.

I was torn. He’d tried to kill me, and he’d been nothing but a douchebag from the moment we’d met. Still, I couldn’t just leave him there to die. I took a deep breath and slid back down the slope. Chad’s eyes went wide with fear, then they rolled back in his head, and he dropped the knife.

I nudged the knife away with my snout, just in case, then bent down and bit Chad’s collar, half-carrying, half-dragging him back up the rocky slope. He was slipping in and out of consciousness, and whenever he came to, he struggled weakly to get out of my grasp. Even when he was injured, he was unbelievably annoying. Didn’t he realize I’d just saved his ass?

Once we got back up to the top I looked around, realizing that I couldn’t just leave him here in the woods. He’d either die from hypothermia or would be eaten by a regular wolf. Not a bad thought—but I knew that I wouldn’t allow that to happen, no matter how much I hated the guy. I’d been attacked by a Rogue and left to fend for myself, and to this day I thought about how lucky I was to be alive. I knew what it felt like to be left alone, to think you were going to die—and even after everything that had happened between us, I wouldn’t let Chad go through something like that.

I paused to listen. I could just make out the sound of a car driving by. We had to be near a road. I grabbed Chad again and headed in that direction. Still, Chad flailed at me, mumbling every nasty thing about werewolves that he could think of, and he had quite the arsenal of insults. I blocked it out. All I wanted to think about was getting Chad to a safe place so I could head off and look for Violet. I missed her so much that it hurt worse than the bruises covering my body. Just to see her smile would make all of this worth it. I could see the road just ahead, and I dragged Chad toward it.

Then suddenly, I caught Sophie’s scent in the air.

I stopped and listened. I could hear her running toward us. I pulled Chad over to a tree and was trying to prop him up against it when Chad grabbed me by the scruff of my neck. I couldn’t believe he was still trying to fight! To his credit, he didn’t give up easily.

Chad looked at me, his eyes heavy-lidded and hazy. “Why? Why are you saving me?” he rasped.

I pulled away just as Chad passed out, his head lolling against his chest.

“Chad?” Sophie yelled, running toward us. I slipped into the woods, glad that Sophie was here and could get Chad to safety. I was surprised at how relieved I felt that he wouldn’t die out here. I was just about to take off when Sophie spotted me. “Charlie?”

I froze, realizing that she knew it was me. I looked back to see Sophie staring at me from the side of the road, her eyes wide with panic. She tossed me my bag of clothes.

“Get out of here!” she urged.

Grateful, I snapped up the bag and sped off. She’d keep my secret, right? I hadn’t hurt Chad, maybe scared him a bit more than I meant to… But I’d saved him. No, Sophie would see that. And what mattered was that she trusted me, that she’d helped me, and that she was a true friend.

I ran for a few minutes before I picked up Violet’s scent again, and this time it was fresher. My heart raced in anticipation. I followed the scent, picking up speed. Suddenly, I slipped in something wet and sticky. Was that blood?

I stopped, fear gripping me as I caught sight of Violet’s wolf up ahead. She was sprawled on the ground, with Kate and Seth standing over her. My heart stopped.

Was she *dead*?

**Episode 1584**

XAVIER

I looked at Ava, her question echoing through my mind. *Something going on between us? Was she fucking serious right now?*

“You have to be kidding,” I said, trying to keep the laughter out of my voice.

Her eyes flashed. “Deny it all you want,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest and getting defensive. “You might have unmated from me, you might actually hate me, but you can’t deny that there’s still some tension between us.”

*Yeah, the tension being that you’re a pain in the ass.*

It dawned on me that despite unmating from Ava… she still had a candle burning for me? I couldn’t quite wrap my mind around that. The unmating was a straightforward thing, and I’d done it exactly how my mother had taught me and Colton. Things should have been crystal clear to Ava.

I knew that I’d been “nicer” to her lately, but that was only because I knew she was hiding something. Did she really still have feelings for me? Truthfully, I could admit that I’d sort of had a feeling that might be the case, and I’d tried to play it down if only because in the end, it was all incredibly awkward.

If Cali unmated from me, would I still feel the same way about her? Would I still long for her? Would I still want to protect her? I guessed that I would, but I didn’t even want to consider that reality. I heaved a heavy sigh. I kind of felt sorry for Ava, but it was a mixed emotion, because I didn’t really feel bad about anything I’d done when it came to her—I just felt bad that she was stuck in this limbo.

Ava was completely on her own, after all. She had no pack, no mate, no nothing. All she had was her life. I stopped myself from pitying Ava—I didn’t have the mental real estate for it. There were too many other things on my plate. She wasn’t my responsibility, after all. Not anymore.

“Ava,” I began, slowly and calmly. “We are unmated. You get that, right?”

Ava sucked her teeth and rolled her eyes. She turned her back on me for a second, and when she turned back to face me, I could see that she was trying to regain her composure.

“You can break bonds with me all you want, Xavier,” she said with a smirk, “but our memories, they still connect us. That’ll never change.”

I was getting pissed off, now. She needed to get it through her head that we were done. Finished. We would never be together, ever again. Why was I even standing here trying to convince her of that? This was her problem, not mine.

I turned on my heel and walked away.

*Shit. My room is the other way. But I can’t turn back, not while she’s standing there.*

I figured I should’ve been more shocked about Ava’s feelings, but again, I’d sensed it, that Ava was still holding on to what we’d had between us. She was right—we were forever tied together by our memories, by our history, but that was exactly what it was. History. *She’s delusional.*

“I need a damn breather from everything going on in this—*my* house,” I huffed to myself.

*You’d think I’d have more control over things, seeing as I own the place.* On the contrary, nothing seemed to be going my way. Greyson was injured and spending yet another night with MY mate. Our awful father was on the loose somewhere, causing all types of havoc. It was a lot.

What I needed was to find some semblance of control again. Since it *was* my house, I decided to go around and check to make sure that everyone was secure and settled. That way, at least I’d feel like I was doingsomething. I needed to make sure there were no loose ends, no vulnerabilities that would put us at a disadvantage if anything else cropped up unexpectedly.

I started downstairs, checking to make sure the back patio doors were locked, as well as all the windows in the kitchen, living room, dining room, and library. I turned on a few lights to dash away the shadows.

I ducked into the bedrooms on the first floor, making sure everyone was okay. Before I made my way upstairs, I spotted an open door with light streaming out. I peeked inside and saw Mace. I did a courtesy knock and stepped inside. Mace looked up at me. He was seated in the bedroom’s lounge area, a glass of something in his hand. He lifted it as I got close.

“Want one?” he asked me.

“Is that from my stash?” I asked. “Does everyone think everything in this house is theirs?” First, I’d spotted Ravi in a pair of my pants, and now this.

“Thank you for your hospitality, man,” Mace said with a wry smile.

I sat down across from him, deciding that if anyone deserved to raid my stash of expensive, rare scotch, it was Mace.

“Sure man, I’ll have one with you,” I said.

Mace left and brought back one of my crystal tumblers. He picked up the bottle of scotch from where it sat on the floor at his feet and tipped a measure into my glass before handing it to me. We clinked glasses in a toast.

“So, how are you doing?” I asked, after we’d both taken a long sip.

“Not the best,” Mace replied. “But seeing Silas today… That ignited something in me, at least. I was worried that I’d lost my mojo, but no—I’ve still got it, and I’m ready.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I don’t know what’s coming next, but I want in on killing Silas.”

I chuckled. “Well, at this point we might as well have a ‘Kill Silas Club.’ I’m happy to see that you’re doing better—though I know that better is relative.”

“I don’t think I’ll be okay for a long time. But at least now I can focus on the fucker who caused Pip’s death. The way Silas used the revenant magic on her, the way he tricked all of us… That can’t go unpunished.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” I said.

We sipped our drinks in comfortable silence, each of us lost in our own thoughts. My mind drifted to Silas, like it always did these days. He was responsible for so much death, so much pain, so much confusion. It was strange, to share blood with a man so evil. It just made me happy that I wasn’t like him. Neither of my brothers were.

Sure, Greyson burned me up sometimes—hell, most of the time—but he was no Silas. Far from it. I knew that now. Mostly. Colton could be a little rough around the edges, but still, he was a good guy and a far cry from Silas. How could one man be so evil and not pass any of it on to his children? I guess I should’ve just been happy that evil wasn’t hereditary.

When I’d drained my glass, I stood up to leave.

“Goodnight, Mace.” I clapped him on the back. “I promise we’ll figure out how to get that fucker Silas, and we’ll avenge Pip—you have my word on that.”

Back out in the hallway, I stretched and yawned, realizing right then that I was pretty tired. I hoped that Ava had finally gotten the hint to make herself scarce so I could get to my room. She was gone, but Kira intercepted me at the foot of the stairs.

“You saw Iñigo?” she asked.

“Yes, I did. Right before his army of revenant-vampires attacked,” I said dryly. It sounded ridiculous and horrifying and unbelievable to my own ears, even though I’d witnessed it with my own eyes.

“Revenant-vampires? Well now I’ve really heard it all,” Kira said.

“Unbelievable, right? You haven’t seen anything until you see a crowd of fangs and glowing orange eyes running at you. I thought I was a goner for a second. They were unbelievably powerful, and there were a LOT of them. Even Iñigo was caught off-guard. They attacked him.” I shuddered at the memory. There weren’t a lot of things that truly shook me to the core, but seeing those vampires like that had gotten to me.

“Hmm. I imagine the dark magic might have a hard time taking them over,” Kira said. “Because even though vampires are dead, they’re not truly as vacant as an actual dead body.”

“That makes sense,” I said.

“You let Iñigo get away?”

I glared at her. *Really?* “As I’m sure you might have guessed, that wasn’t my intention,” I said. “I promise we’ll get the chance to take him out,” I added, moving around her to head toward the stairs.

Kira moved to stop me again. “That wasn’t actually what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Oh? What’s up?”

“It’s about the other pack house. There’s something you need to know about the witch mark we saw there.”

**Episode 1585**

LOLA

I dodged out of the way just in time as Winifred lunged at me. What the hell was going on with this vampire? She had the same glowing orange eyes as Jacqueline had, and she’d tried to attack me as well! Whatever this was, it wasn’t good.

“Winifred, relax, calm down. We’re all friends here.” That wasn’t exactly true, but we weren’t on such bad terms that we should’ve been trying to rip each other’s throats out. “Why are you attacking me? Is it because I left my room?”

I was saying anything to get her to stop, but nothing seemed to work, and she was still coming at me.

Winifred lunged again, and I sprinted off, finally deciding that she was in no state to listen to reason. I headed for Emmett’s office. I knew that he wasn’t there, but I needed to grab the same serum we’d used to calm Jacqueline down. Winifred was right behind me and gaining on me fast, her movements erratic and jerky. She was upon me in no time. She grabbed me by the hair, throwing me off balance.

I rounded on her, pushing her off me and tugging my hair free. I gave her a slap for good measure, thinking that maybe it would snap her out of it.

“If you wanna go, Winifred, we can go!” I said, balling up my fists.

For the first time since my transformation, I could really feel the electricity of my vampire powers racing through my veins. I reached out and grabbed Winifred by the neck, lifting her high in the air so that her feet dangled.

But Winifred was too fast, and in a flash, I was holding nothing but air and she was right behind me, her mouth open and her fangs inches from my neck. I was fast, too, so I zoomed away, putting a safe distance between us before speeding back toward her, my fangs out as well. *Two can play at this game.* I caught her with a swift strike to the leg, and her knee buckled as she howled in pain. She recovered quickly, grabbing me by the throat and tossing me against a wall. I crumpled to the floor, pain radiating through my body. There was no doubt that Winifred was a powerful vampire. Her movements were beyond swift, and her power was mind blowing.

I knew I had to move fast, and I was right—Winifred was standing over me in a flash, ready to finish me off. I sprang to my feet and put up my fists. We jabbed at each other like boxers, moving down the hallway at a fast clip as we threw and dodged punches. She snarled, and I snarled back. I could only imagine what we looked like. I spotted a huge, heavy-looking vase out of the corner of my eye. I made a beeline for it and picked it up. Without a moment of hesitation, I swung it at Winifred and shattered it over her head.

Winifred stumbled and started to fall backward, her hands clawing at the air in an attempt to stop her fall. Yes! Got her! If this were a cartoon, there would’ve been birds flying around her head. Under different circumstances, I might have laughed out loud at the imagery. I’d hit her hard, that was for sure. At the very least, maybe the knock on the head would wake her up from her jack-o-lantern eyes thing.

Right before she hit the ground, though, Winifred righted herself as if she were being pulled up by invisible strings. I had to admit, that was a cool trick. She sneered, opening her eyes, which were now glowing even brighter than before.

“That was the wrong move, Lola!” she said with a chilling smile.

Before she could strike out again, I heard a growl. I flinched as a large form shot past me and tackled Winifred to the floor. It was a werewolf! Jay!

Winifred lashed out, clawing at Jay’s leg like a wild animal. Jay slammed her against the wall and turned to look at me. Suddenly, I heard his voice in my head. *Get on!*

At first, I didn’t know what he meant, but it only took a second for me to remember the last time Jay and I had escaped a bind—and I’d ridden away on his back. The pure adrenaline I’d felt, the sense that I was at home there with my mate beneath me, sure and steady and leading me away from danger… I had loved it.

I didn’t hesitate to heed his command and hop on. He sprinted off down the hallway, and I heard Winifred’s angry shouts echoing behind us. I turned to see that she was gaining on us with amazing vampire speed. I reached up and yanked a sconce off the wall, then flung it at Winifred, striking her on the shoulder. It managed to slow old orange eyes down a bit, but not enough.

“We have to find somewhere to hide!” I said to Jay. “She’s too fast—we’re not going to be able to lose her!”

*Okay, hold on!* Jay said. *We’ll go back to the lab and lock her out.*

That sounded like as good a plan as any. He made a sharp ninety-degree turn, and I held on for dear life. We zoomed into Emmett’s office and slammed the door behind us. We rushed into the secret lab, flinging the door shut just as Winifred slammed into the office, snarling like a wild beast.

I slid down off Jay’s back and sat on the ground, shaking and panting with fear. That had been terrifying. I flinched as I felt a pair of warm human hands on my shoulders, comforting me. I looked up to see that Jay had shifted back to human, and he was completely naked! I gasped and looked away.

“Are you okay?”

“I think I will be,” I stuttered, still recovering from such a sight, and trying not to look anywhere I shouldn’t. These last moments gave new meaning to the term sensory overload. I noticed that he had a scratch on his arm. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine. I’ll heal up in no time.”

“What *was* that thing?” I asked. Jay sat down beside me and held me close. “That was terrifying,” I continued. “What the hell was wrong with her eyes?”

“Has this ever happened before?”

“Yes, with another student here, Jacqueline. That’s why Emmett wants to do all his weird tests. Jacqueline was scary, too, but there was something absolutely horrifying about seeing Winifred like that. She literally wanted to kill me. I don’t think I’ll ever forget those orange eyes for as long as I live.”

“You’re sure?” Jay asked, an urgency in his voice that I hadn’t heard before. He sounded… scared? “You’re sure you saw the orange eyes?”

“What? What’s the matter?”

“The glowing eyes indicate that someone is a revenant,” Jay said.

I vaguely remembered him mentioning something like that before. “But what does that have to do with orange eyes?”

“That’s what happens when dark magic possesses a dead person,” he said.

“Like an orange-eyed zombie?” I pictured Winifred gnawing on my arm, her eyes as orange as a pumpkin. I shuddered.

“Not zombies, but sort of.”

I was stunned. “But how can that happen to a vampire? They’re dead, but not *dead* dead*.* We need to speak to Emmett—maybe he’ll know more? We have to tell him about this. I think maybe that’s why the serum that gave Emmett a heartbeat worked to help Jacqueline. It made her ‘alive,’ which forced the dark magic out, since she wasn’t a dead body anymore.”

Regardless, I hoped that Emmett was on to something. It looked like whatever was happening was spreading.

Jay nodded. I liked how he looked at me. It was like he was in awe of me, maybe. I was definitely in awe of him. He was so fast and powerful, and he’d saved my life. I looked at his eyepatch. It seemed he made a habit of saving my life.

It was then that I realized that I couldn’t hear any noise from outside anymore.

“Do you think she’s gone?” I asked.

I turned to look at Jay, abruptly realizing how close his face was to mine. Suddenly, the vampire heat was back with a vengeance. He was so damn close, and my heart was still racing, and even though I was trying to keep my eyes on his face, I couldn’t help but notice that he looked damn good naked.

I knew that it was probably the wrong time for this, but after that chase, all my senses were heightened. I leaned forward and kissed him. He made a surprised sound, but he kissed me back. We wrapped our arms around each other and lay down, rolling around on the floor as we explored each other’s mouths. We bumped into a table, and vials crashed down around us. We shot apart as a splash of liquid hit Jay’s arm. The thick serum seeped into the scratch mark from the fight, and he let out a scream as the wound began to smoke.

**Episode 1586**

GREYSON

“Are we going to do this?” I asked.

I couldn’t think of anything else as I waited for Cali to answer me. I knew that sex shouldn’t have been on my mind, but when it came to Cali, it was hard to avoid. I loved every inch of her—her eyes, her lips, her smile, her mind, her breasts… I couldn’t have cared less about my leg. I didn’t care about revenants. Just her. Feeling her, touching her, kissing her, giving her pleasure.

“I’m up for it if you are,” I said, noticing the uncertainty in her eyes. I knew that she was worried about me hurting.

“I’m not sure,” she answered, her cheeks flushed. “We should be careful… and quiet.”

“I think we can manage that,” I said, looking deep into her eyes. “So, what do you prescribe, Doctor Hart?”

Cali sighed, settling in on top of me. She leaned in and kissed me slowly, her tongue dancing around mine as she did a slow grind on my lap. I breathed in her scent. She smelled good enough to eat. I was getting harder by the second, and soon the only thing I could think about was being inside her. It was amazing, the effect she had on me.

I feigned calm as I reached under her shirt and palmed her breasts. They were heavy and soft, especially at this angle. I tunneled my hands into her delicate lacy bra so that I could feel her nipples. I sighed and leaned back against the headboard, stifling a groan of pleasure. I could do this all damn day.

Cali pulled away a little to remove her shirt. She looked me straight in the eye as she unclasped her bra, letting her beautiful breasts spring free. My heart went crazy. I loved it when she looked at me that way, like she wanted to devour me. Like I was the only man in the world. I wanted to grab her and do every bad thing that was running through my mind right then, but I decided to let her take the lead instead.

“I like to make sure my patients get the absolute best care,” she said. “I’ve heard that touch therapy goes a long way in ensuring recovery.”

She took my hand and slid it into the waistband of her leggings. I took over from there, edging around her panties and rubbing the slick nub of her clit. She sucked in air through her teeth and threw her beautiful silky hair back over her shoulders.

She moved against my hand, her eyes closed. “Yes, that’s right. I think you’re well on the way to recovery, from the feel of it,” she whispered.

She fell forward and laid her head on my shoulder as I continued stroking my fingers over her slick folds. When she started to shudder against me, I changed things up and slid a finger inside her. She gasped.

She sat up straight and leaned back so that she could unbutton my fly. I helped her slide off my jeans, both of us taking care not to disturb the bandage on my leg. Once we were both naked, she straddled me again, her warm wetness resting against my pulsing erection. I stopped myself from grabbing her, flipping her over, and taking her from behind. I knew she had other plans, and I knew that whatever her plans were, I’d enjoy every single moment.

“Doctor Hart, is there anything else that’ll help with the pain?” I slid my finger back inside her, marveling at how wet and warm she was.

She moaned. “Yes, I heard massage, um, works really well with almost all… um… symptoms of… everything.”

She reached down and took me in her hands, giving my cock a few languid strokes before she rose up on her knees and lowered herself down onto me. *Fuck.*

I moaned so loudly that Cali shushed me and pressed a finger to my lips. “Don’t disturb the other patients,” she said.

I sat back as Cali rode me with the same rhythm as before. Her movements were slow and languid, and I kept my hands busy by massaging her breasts. I leaned forward and kissed the warm flesh between them, then nibbled at her neck, stopping short of leaving any marks. Then I leaned down to pop each of her nipples into my mouth.

I let her control the pace, sitting back and admiring her beautiful porcelain skin and her beautiful face, a mask of pure pleasure and ecstasy. I felt her tight channel start to pulse around me, and I knew she was close. I put my hands on her hips and guided her up and down on my shaft, catching my lip between my teeth as I felt the tickle of my own climax coming close.

I felt it when she came, and I came right after, unable to hold back at the sight of absolute pleasure flooding her features. When we were done, she slid off me and lay down beside me under the covers. We were both spent.

I placed a lazy kiss on the top of her head. “You should get some sleep, love. It’s been a long day.”

“Shouldn’t we be worried about what the witches said?” she asked. “Your leg?”

“No, I don’t think so. They claim that they helped me. And I’m still alive, right? Lester could have killed me, but he didn’t. I don’t fully trust them, though.”

I thought about the witches, wondering if they’d really kept me from dying from the mark. If that was true, then I was grateful. I only wished that they’d be more upfront about things. Maybe they could actually ask me before they performed complicated spells on me—though I hadn’t been very lucid after my injury.

Still, I needed to hold firm with these witches. The next time I saw them, I was going to tell them that there was a little thing called consent that they needed to be mindful of. They needed to get my permission before performing magic on me.

I heard Cali’s breathing change and realized she’d fallen asleep in my arms. I was starting to drift off, myself. I knew that we had a lot to figure out, but I was grateful that she was here with me, safe, and that we were together.

I leaned down to kiss Cali’s forehead.

“We need to get up and get dressed again, or we’ll be late,” she said.

“Late?” I asked. I looked up and spotted a poofy white dress lying across the chair at the foot of the bed. Then I looked down and realized that I was wearing half a tuxedo.

Cali laughed. “I told you that we didn’t have enough time to do this and still make the ceremony,” she said. “And I still believe it’s bad luck for the bride and groom to see each other before the wedding.”

I laughed. “I still think it was worth it.”

Cali got up and looked in the mirror before letting out a long groan. “I have to get my hair fixed! You messed it up!” She grabbed her dress and slipped out the door before I could protest.

I got out of bed, whistling as I put on my tuxedo pants. Then there was a knock on the door, and Xavier thrust his head in. “You ready?”

I cocked a brow. *Xavier’s my best man? Huh.* I nodded and followed my brother out to the chapel. It was the same place where my parents had been married. I looked over and saw my mother, Sabine, in the front row, and in the row behind her, Silas. I took my spot at the altar as the music started. The doors opened, and sunlight flooded the small chapel.

Cali appeared in the doorway in her large, flouncy wedding dress. I smiled. I couldn’t believe it. I was finally marrying Cali. I’d waited for this day for so long.

As she walked down the aisle, the sunlight seemed to brighten the space around her, like a halo. I couldn’t see her face. I squinted against the bright sunlight and lifted a hand to shield my eyes from the glare.

Suddenly, the room went dark. Surprised shouts rang out from all the guests.

“Don’t worry, everyone,” Xavier boomed. “We’ll fix it!”

Then Xavier moved away, and I was alone. Hands reached out for mine, gripping them tight. Cali. I smiled. I leaned forward and kissed her, but something felt off. “Cali?”

“No, my prince,” a voice said. It wasn’t Cali. I knew that, but it looked just like her, seemed just like her. What was going on here?

I tried to pull away, but a shooting pain raced up my leg. I crumpled to the ground, groaning in shock and pain. Not-Cali crouched in front of me. I still couldn’t see her face, but I could make out her outline, her flowing hair. Her glowing orange eyes.

“You have been marked by Letifer!” she said. “And you will be my Dark Prince!”

**Episode 1587**

ARTEMIS

Rishika and I were entwined in bed, snuggled under the warmth of the covers. I could feel Rishika’s heart beating against my chest, and I couldn’t imagine being anywhere else in the world.

“It’s been a long day,” Rishika said.

I smiled and nodded in agreement. We laughed in unison, and I pulled her tighter to me.

Rishika brushed a finger lightly along my cheek. “At least one good thing came of it,” she said, and stretched up to give me a soft kiss on the lips.

I felt so safe with her—so much so that I felt like I could explain to her what had been going on with me.

“I have something to tell you,” I said softly. “I’ve been… blacking out. There are entire parts of my day that I can’t remember.”

I waited, afraid of what her reaction might be. I trusted her, but that was a lot to drop on someone. What if she left me? What if she went and told someone?

Rishika pulled away a little, concern coloring her face. “Maybe you should see a doctor? That sounds serious, Artemis.”

She grabbed my hand beneath the covers and squeezed it reassuringly. I let go of my breath. She wasn’t going anywhere. I knew that she’d stay right here by my side.

I squeezed her hand back. “It’s not like that,” I said. “Besides, I’m Fae—do you know a Fae doctor? I think it’s magic related. From when I broke the promise to my mom…”

“Do you think that it might have anything to do with that mark they found on the other pack house? Kira said that it was dark—who knows what its purpose is, or how it might be affecting us,” Rishika said. I could see the wheels turning in her head.

I nodded in agreement. “Yeah, but I still wonder.”

There were so many strange things happening; I knew that it could’ve been anything causing these strange behaviors. I only hoped that I could figure out exactly what was going on before it was too late.

Rishika smiled at me. “The good news is, we’re at this new-slash-old pack house, and this place doesn’t have the mark. You should rest, and don’t worry—I’ll make sure nothing bad happens to you.”

I was touched. She sounded so confident, so sure, and I knew that she would do whatever she could to protect me, no matter what, just like I would for her. I couldn’t believe my luck. Not only had I met someone amazing, I’d fallen for a legitimate, real-life badass.

I snuggled closer to her. “Okay, that sounds good. Maybe things will be better here,” I said, believing it. Things most definitely couldn’t get any worse.

Rishika nodded and kissed me before reaching up and clicking off the light.

I drifted off to sleep, listening to Rishika’s breathing. I closed my own eyes, feeling weighted down. Tired.

Finally, I could take over the Fae’s body.

I rose up, filling Artemis’s body with my essence. I had finally taken over. I had control, and it felt so good.

First things first—I needed to convene my eager underlings. We had much to do, and there wasn’t much time.

I thought about the mark on Greyson’s leg. If not for those damned witches, I’d have everything I needed, right here, under this roof. Now, I’d have to return to the lake house. I supposed it was a small inconvenience, and soon, none of it would matter.

I slipped out of bed, taking care not to disturb Rishika. I slid on a pair of black fleece-lined sweats and headed downstairs. The house was quiet. Everyone was probably asleep. How easy it would be to turn on them now. They were all so vulnerable, unsuspecting, weak. Not yet, though. Everything had to be in place first.

I came across Mace, asleep in a chair. *Drunken fool.* Did he really think he was going to be able to stop the inevitable? Did any of them really believe that they could stop what was coming? I chuckled to myself, awash with pleasure. It was finally time.

I left the house and walked toward the thick darkness of the woods. I felt energized and clear-headed as I wove through the trees. I was drawing the power of the Orb into me, absorbing it. It felt right, and its power made me feel sure and unstoppable. I moved with stealthy, effortless speed—a mere glimpse of the limitless possibilities that awaited me. I couldn’t wait to show the world just what I was capable of, what had been lurking right under their noses.

The cold air didn’t bother me as I raced through the woods. Actually, it invigorated me. I made it back to the lake house in no time. I immediately felt the urgency, the anticipation, circling within me. *It won’t be long.*

The smell of smoke filled my nose as the house loomed into view. It was just as we’d left it. I didn’t need to search, didn’t need any light but that of the moon. I knew exactly where the mark was. I could feel it, calling out to me, drawing me in, just like it would draw the demons and the poltergeists when the time was right. I smiled to myself, barely able to contain the excitement bubbling within me. I’d waited so long for this.

I knelt down, placing my palm on the cold foundations. The rough surface felt familiar under my fingertips, just as it had been when I’d placed the mark there—a summoning mark for the ghost portal to release dozens of revenants. But the medium’s power had acted as a gatekeeper, stifling my plans. She’d been another unexpected barrier to my mission, but that was all taken care of now. As I traced the mark with my fingertips, the wind picked up around me and the air crackled with raw energy. The Orb began to give off a welcoming, soothing orange glow.

Behind me, York emerged from the forest with about a half-dozen revenants behind him, an orange glow pulsing around them. He bowed to me. “What does my mistress desire?”

The other revenants lowered their heads and stood motionless, waiting for my command. I knew that I needed to stay in full control. The real Artemis was getting too cognizant of what was happening, and I didn’t need her running her mouth to her sister, of all people. I was too close to let things fall apart now.

“All the puzzle pieces are falling into place,” I said with a smile. “With Greyson now marked by Letifer, he is weakened. A weakened Alpha makes the rest of the pack vulnerable to whatever I desire. Now, they all foolishly believe that Silas is the true threat. No one even suspects me anymore.”

It had been so easy to mislead them. People tended to believe whatever was put right in front of them, without giving any thought to what might be lurking under the surface. They ignored the smallest signs, no matter how many of them there were.

“Mistress, what is your next move? Should we deal with the werewolves?” York asked.

“The werewolves aren’t my concern, especially if we manage to get hold of the Alpha. Though I didn’t expect the witches to interfere with him.”

“And the medium? Do you still want her dead, mistress?”

I mulled that thought over in my mind. Things were now back on track, and Marta’s power was no longer the problem that it had been, but there was no use leaving any loose ends that might emerge in the eleventh hour and throw everything off track.

“Yes. Yes, that is still necessary. It’s too bad that she didn’t perish in the fire. But no matter. Now that she’s no longer blocking the mark with her magic, we can gain an advantage over her.”

I flicked my gaze toward the water and began to walk. The earth was soft beneath my feet, and I could feel the power of the Orb vibrating through me, allowing me to see everything as clear as day in the moon-touched darkness.

York and the revenants fell into step behind me, following me to the ghost pond. I took off my clothes, relishing the feel of the biting cold wind against my skin. It was the perfect night for what I had in store, and I couldn’t have been happier with how things had turned out.

I waded slowly into the ice-cold water. The cold felt like life as I turned my head up toward the moon, allowing it to bathe my naked body in its penetrating light. Then, all was silent. Not a thing moved in the trees—not the wind, not a creature, nothing. I lifted my hands to the sky, threw my head back, and summoned them.

“The portal is open. Come now and bow to your queen, and we will take back what is ours!”

**Episode 1588**

CHARLIE

My mind was racing. My heart was pounding.

*Did Kate and Seth… Did they hurt Violet?*

The roar that brewed in my chest was made of rage. My instinct was to rush over to them, rip them to pieces first and ask questions later, watch them collapse to the ground like Violet’s wolf, eyes closed, unmoving.

*Violet! Violet, can you hear me?*

There was no response.

My gaze moved from her face to the two people standing over her. To me, they were no longer human. They were moving targets to destroy, and I struggled to stop myself from becoming the beast that they believed I was.

*No. Violet’s not dead. This can’t be happening. This can’t be happening, this can’t be happening, this can’t be happening, this can’t be—*

With those thoughts on a loop, I moved cautiously toward her.

*Violet?*

Still, no response.

*This can’t be fucking happening!*

It just couldn’t. Violet was my mate—if she were dead, wouldn’t I know? Wouldn’t I have felt it? Wouldn’t our mate bond have felt broken, shattered?

All the questions rolling inside my head made me feel full—overflowing with hurt and worry and anger. I forced myself to shove them all away and think rationally before acting. If Violet was alive, I had to get her out of here before the hunters *did* kill her.

*I’m going to fix this, Sunshine*, I mind linked.

The responding silence was a stab in the gut, but I ignored it. I watched as Seth and Kate moved cautiously toward Violet, their weapons up and ready.

“What should we do?” Kate whispered to her partner.

“We should signal the others,” Seth said.

She shook her head. “Or finish this right here, right now.”

“Do you think we managed to kill it?” Seth asked quietly.

*They’re people, Charlie, and they don’t know any better*, I told myself.

I reminded myself that I couldn’t fucking kill them. But I needed to do something—and fast. So I reared up on my hind legs and growled, drawing the immediate attention of Kate and Seth.

Seth spun around, screaming, “SHIT!”

It was like watching a set of dominoes—he stumbled back, knocking into Kate, who misfired her crossbow. The bolt whizzed straight past my head and into a tree.

*Damn*. That was close.

“Oh my god!” Kate yelled, and I growled, about to attack, when…

*Get out of here, Charlie!*

Violet mind linked me. She was alive!

*Violet? Are you hurt? I’m not leaving you!* I replied.

*I’m okay, just get out of here before they hurt you!* she said, still keeping her eyes closed as she lay on the ground.

Had she been pretending? I had no idea what to do, but I was certain that there was no way that I could leave her.

*Just keep playing dead*, I said. *I’ve got this.*

*But what are you going to do*? she asked. Her voice was shaking.

*Trust me, Violet. I’ll take care of you. Run when I tell you!*

I’d barely finished my sentence before I started snarling at the two hunters. They had recovered from the first shock, and I saw a flash of fury show up on their faces. I turned and raced into the woods—slow enough for them not to lose sight of me.

Would they take the bait?

I needed to draw them away so my mate could escape.

From a few feet behind me, I heard the conversation between them.

“We should stay here with this werewolf!” Seth yelled.

“That one is dead or dying—we have to get this one before it gets away!” Kate shouted back, and a second later, I felt the rush of wind as another crossbow bolt whipped past my side.

Yes! They were chasing me!

*Run now, Violet! Leave!* I told her.

Now all I had to do was make sure they didn’t kill me. I’d be in big trouble if the crossbow bolts were silver-tipped. But I chose to be optimistic. And if I did die, at least I would have saved Violet in the process. I would have saved my mate, and without her I wouldn’t have been able to live, anyway.

I moved erratically through the woods, my stride clunky enough to give the hunters hope that they’d be able to catch me.

Kate and Seth were all, “Fuck!” and, “Shit, catch him!” as they kept missing their shots.

And I kept leading them further and further away from Violet.

But as I continued into the woods, I realized that I had no plan beyond leading them away from my mate. If they caught me, I was toast. Done for. How would that make Violet feel? If it was anything like how I’d felt when I’d thought she was dead, I knew that she might never recover. I couldn’t allow her to suffer like that—I had to come out of this alive, for my mate’s sake.

I would do anything for her.

And then, a thought struck me—Sophie had given me my clothes! Something clicked inside my brain, and I broke into a real run this time.

“Damn it, it just got faster!” Kate hissed, but I kept putting distance between us.

After a brief moment, I paused to listen and sniff the air, realizing that I had about twenty seconds to get shit done. I shifted back to human quickly, scrambling to put my clothes on. The second my T-shirt was on, I let out a blood-curling scream.

“Did you hear that?” Seth shouted in the distance, and I realized I didn’t have much time.

I took a few steps back, and then deliberately ran headfirst into a tree.

The impact and pain knocked me to my knees, my entire body suddenly feeling heavy as I came down from the adrenaline rush. Fear, anger, and anguish were all one inside me, but the most important thing was that Violet was okay.

*Violet is okay. Anything else that happens doesn’t matter.*

“Gotcha!” Seth shouted, bursting through the trees with a wild-eyed Kate by his side. Their weapons were up, and they were ready to strike. They didn’t even lower them when they saw me on the ground.

“Did you see it?” Kate asked me, panting.

“I—*shit*,” I hissed, grabbing at my head as I sat up. I added a groan for effect.

“Damn, are you okay?” Seth asked, walking up to me. He inspected my head and turned to Kate, his expression grim. “He’s hurt.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t see it. I… It just happened so fast,” I said, wincing in supposed pain.

Kate scowled. “Did you see which way it went?”

I sighed deeply, shaking my head. “No.”

Seth shot me a cautious look. “Did… Did it bite you?”

“No. I just hit my head,” I mumbled, rubbing my forehead.

Seth nodded. “That’s gonna leave a bump. You’re lucky it didn’t try to fucking eat you or whatever.”

“That’s exactly why we should go chase the thing!” Kate said.

“Sorry I can’t help you guys,” I said, coughing. “My head feels like it’s about to explode…”

“He’s got a concussion,” Seth told Kate. “We can’t leave him like this. Concussions are serious.”

Kate stared at me, her eyes narrowed. Then she took a deep breath. “Fine.”

With Kate still grumbling, they both agreed to bring me back to camp for medical attention.

“Here you go, big guy,” Seth said, pulling me to my feet. Kate helped too, even though she was still glancing around to find the elusive werewolf. I made sure to lean on them as much as possible, pretending to be truly suffering. Anything to slow them down.

Anything to buy Violet more time.

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“Charlie!” Sophie said breathlessly, when Kate and Seth brought me back to camp.

Sergeant Pepperdine and the others had surrounded Chad, but now their attention was on me. I just stared at Sophie and gave her a nod, trying to communicate to her that everything was okay. Violet and I owed her big time.

“We saw TWO werewolves!” Seth started, the moment the group circled us. “And one of them attacked Charlie!”

“It was pretty bad,” Kate added grimly, patting my shoulder.

“Thank you, guys, for helping me out,” I mumbled, because I had to. But I kind of… was glad I hadn’t let the rage take over. I was glad I hadn’t hurt them. Things were fucked up enough as it was without adding murder to all my problems.

This was the best outcome I could have hoped for.

“This is unacceptable!” Sergeant Pepperdine declared, flailing about in fury. “These beasts are attacking us from every direction! This needs to end!” He kept ranting and spitting until he finally calmed down enough to say, “Everyone, go rest and heal. You need it. Make sure you visit the medic if it’s necessary.”

I fought off my sigh of relief.

We were out of the woods.

But then, before anyone could move, Pepperdine spoke up once more, his expression thunderous.

“I want you all sharp and ready tomorrow,” he barked. “In the morning, we’ll resume—and we will not rest until both those wolves are dead!”

**Episode 1589**

XAVIER

Kira was being cryptic again, but what else was new? That was her whole vibe. The woman was basically a massive cryptic cloud floating around us.

“Did we really need to go outside?” I asked her, after she led me to the front porch. “It’s cold—why couldn’t you just tell me whatever you know inside?”

She rolled her eyes at me. “I can’t believe you’re whining about being cold right now. Aren’t you a wolf? Aren’t you always running hot? There are important things to discuss.”

“Then stop being evasive and tell me what this is about,” I said.

Kira glanced over her shoulder, into the house, and took a step closer to me. Cryptically, of course. “I’ve been thinking about the witch mark we found on the other house.”

I frowned. “You already explained that part.”

If I sounded impatient, it was because I was. All I could think about was Cali spending the night with Greyson. Maybe that wasn’t important to the grander scheme of things, but it burned me up. And I fucking knew I couldn’t complain—that would only upset Cali, and if she got upset, then I would be even *more* upset.

It was a vicious, never-ending cycle.

*Fuck.*

“That mark isn’t quite like the others I’ve seen, Xavier,” Kira told me, serious.

I rubbed my face, groaning. “I have no idea what that even means. What’s your point?”

“Xavier—”

“Seriously, why can’t you explain shit to me in a simple way? Why is everything always so complicated?” I demanded.

Kira glared at me. “When you’re dealing with ancient dark magic, you’d better have your facts straight, so—”

“But isn’t all magic ancient, anyway?” I huffed. “It’s *always* something ancient!”

Kira’s glare got even harsher, her voice lowering dangerously. “Are you going to keep interrupting me, or will you let me finish?”

I sighed deeply. “Go for it, witch.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You’d better watch your tone with me, Xavier. You know I could literally blow you apart with a flick on my hand. You’ve watched me do that to ten men.”

“But you’d also die from the guilt if you ever did anything to me, so we both know you wouldn’t do that,” I said, arching an eyebrow.

She smiled at me icily. “Sure. But you’d better watch it.”

I looked up at the sky, sighing, hoping for some higher power to give me the strength to deal with this bullshit.

Meanwhile, Kira continued. “The symbols of the mark predate all the others I’ve ever seen in person.”

“How do you even know that?” I asked.

“Like all witches, I’ve studied traditions, spell books—and that mark has the look of the most ancient magic,” she said.

“But what exactly is it?” I asked. “What does this mean?”

She scowled. “That’s the point, Xavier—I’m not sure. I just know that if we really want an answer to that question, we need to do some research. You shouldn’t ignore this.”

Kira looked pretty alarmed. Her expression reminded me of when I’d first realized that under all that bravado, she was a secret softie. She was just trying to warn me here, and I was being a dick.

I sighed, making sure to keep my tone lighter now. “Fine, but not tonight.”

I knew that Kira meant well, but I couldn’t deal with this right now. I just wanted to fall into a deep sleep and forget everything—especially Cali and Greyson. Together. In bed.

*God dammit…*

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I mumbled, and was about to head inside when Kira spoke up again.

“By the way—you promised to include me next time you went Iñigo hunting.”

I paused, turning to face her. “I didn't have time to invite you. Iñigo literally ran off with Ava, and I had to act quickly.” I paused before adding, “Iñigo said that Ava had multiple deals with him. Do you know anything about that?”

Kira arched an eyebrow. “Why are you so interested?”

“You mentioned that there was some sort of deal going on, but you had no recollection of what it entailed.” I moved closer to her. “Isn’t there anything useful you can share with me about that?”

She scoffed. “Not really. But if Ava’s got multiple deals… That’s really fucking bad, Xavier.”

“No kidding,” I deadpanned. “That’s why I was hoping for some more insight.”

“Iñigo didn’t exactly talk to me about his deals while we braided each other’s hair,” Kira said dryly. “Ava’s the only one who knows the details. So you might want to get her on your side. Maybe she’ll open up then.”

I scowled. Spending more time with Ava was the last thing I needed. I’d almost tried that once, and honestly I didn’t want to try again.

“Iñigo isn’t someone you want surprises from, though,” Kira added. “They’re usually bad. So you should try to play nice with Ava, and—”

“Too bad I just told her to fuck off…” I trailed off, cussing under my breath.

Kira snorted, patting my shoulder condescendingly. “Wow. Not very smart, are you?”

I glared at her, bristling. “Shut up.”

She ignored me, like she always did. “You might want to fix things with Ava. Put on the charm or whatever. If you even have any. I mean, you’re not entirely ugly, and Ava did fall for your BS once.”

I ignored her comment, because I knew she was fucking with me. I groaned at the thought of having to do anything with Ava other than putting her on a one-way train out of my life. This really sucked. My goal was to be with Cali, and Ava was an obstacle I could’ve done without.

“What are you thinking?” Kira asked.

“Don’t you have another method to get her talking? That doesn’t require me to be nice to her?”

Kira eyed me. “Even if I did, I wouldn’t use magic in that way.”

I snorted. “You said that about killing Garren, yet you seemed to get over it pretty quickly.”

“That was different,” Kira snapped. “You know she wants to be with you, Xavier—stop being a fool and exploit it. You should be good at that.” She turned her back on me with one last glare.

I hadn’t meant to really upset Kira. Fucking with her was one thing—she kept fucking with me, too—but truly upsetting her was another. Perhaps I shouldn’t have brought up Garren.

Oh, well. She’d get over it.

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With Kira vanished, I stomped upstairs, but I slowed as I passed Cali’s room. I heard a creak inside, and my heart skipped a beat. Could she have changed her mind, decided not to sleep with Greyson?

Heart racing, I was reaching to knock when the door opened. It wasn’t Cali who I saw, though.

“Oh, hey,” Ravi said. He seemed startled.

“What are you doing?” I asked, suspicious.

He gestured to the duffel bag slung over his shoulder. “Just packing up to leave Cali’s room. Sorry.”

I swallowed thickly. That meant Cali wasn’t in her room. It meant that she was with my brother, the two them together, the two of them…

I didn’t finish that thought.

The disappointment felt acidic in my stomach, but I tried to cover it. “Yeah. No big deal.”

Ravi gave me a look.

“What?”

“Just…” Ravi started. “I’m grateful that everyone is cool with me returning to the pack.”

That was the last of my worries right now. I shrugged. “Again, not a big deal. The more pack members we have at the moment, the better off we are.”

Even if it meant the house—*my* house—was filled to capacity.

As I spoke, I glanced behind Ravi and into Cali’s room. It only reminded me that she was with my brother. It only pissed me off, made me feel just… *horrible*. I reminded myself that this situation was better than the alternative—not having Cali at all—but still. Being the bigger person sucked balls. I wasn’t made for this kind of bullshit. I was a jealous asshole, and as a werewolf, I wanted to mark my territory ten times over.

“Anyway. See you around,” I grumbled to Ravi, ready to finish this conversation and go to my room to stew.

But he lingered.

“I know you’re upset that I didn’t tell you about the revenants sooner,” he said quietly. “Truth is, I was waiting to find the right moment.”

I wanted to tell him that I had bigger problems to be fucking upset about, but I stopped myself. I snorted bitterly. “Well, there’s never a dull moment around here, so in the future, just say whatever it is you’ve got, okay? There’s never going to be a ‘right moment.’”

Done with this little chat, I was heading toward my bedroom when Ravi spoke again.

“Then you should know that I’ve seen something else that might interest the pack,” he said.

Slowly, I turned to face him, intrigued. “What is it?”

Ravi arched his eyebrows. “More like, *where* is it?”

**Episode 1590**

LOLA

“Oh my god!” I screeched. “You’re on fire! Literally!”

Jay hissed, writhing in pain as his arm smoked. I had to think fast, and I panicked as I looked around. My eyes fell on something red under the lab counter.

The fire extinguisher!

Gasping, I dashed to grab it and blasted Jay with it. But Jay, the weirdo, shouted, “Shit, Lola, stop!”

When I did indeed stop, Jay looked like he’d just lost in a pie throwing contest. He was coated in thick white foam, with most of it landing on his beautiful face. He was clutching his arm, panting.

“Okay, then,” I said awkwardly. “Maybe I went a little overboard?”

Jay chuckled, shaking his head. “True. But thanks for saving me.”

The surge of fondness I felt made me spring into action—I grabbed some tissues and started to wipe the foam from his face and body. And whoa, I had to admit that my mate was built like a truck. He was so… *solid?* Like, *damn, son.*

“You don’t look like I saved you—you look like you’re covered in shaving cream,” I said in a self-deprecating tone, but Jay grinned.

He took my hand. “It’s okay. I’m okay. And I guess… I guess that proves it.”

I was confused. “Proves what?”

He smirked. “You really have feelings for me. You know deep down that we’re mates. Why would you have reacted the way you did otherwise?”

I stared at him. The remains of the foam made him look like he was kind of wet. The way he looked at me was so intense that I felt like hiding my face in my hands.

“I—um, I was only doing what anyone would have done,” I said.

The spell was broken. Jay looked away. “Thank you, all the same.”

He’d barely said the words before he grimaced, clutching his arm.

I scowled. “Does it hurt?”

Jay snorted. “At least it’s stopped smoking.”

Maybe I’d gone a little too far with the extinguisher, but how else were you supposed to put out what looked like a fire?

“Do you have any idea what that stuff was, though?” Jay asked as we both stared at the broken vials on the floor. “It stings like a bitch.”

I instantly got to my knees to look through the glass all over the floor. They all had different labels, but I couldn’t make out any letters. “It’s just a bunch of numbers…” I trailed off, annoyed. Under other circumstances, I could’ve asked Emmett—but how the heck would I explain what happened?

*Oh hi, Emmett! Forgot to mention, my mate and I were making out in your office and then a thing broke and fell on him, was it safe?*

“Eh, whatever,” Jay said, shrugging. He made a move to get up, but I shook my head.

“You’re not going anywhere, mister. I should dress your wound first.”

Jay shrugged. “Lola, it’s fine, I’m a werewolf—it will heal by itself.”

I squinted at him. “I’m not so sure. Who knows what that stuff is doing to you? What if you turn into a frog or something? Or a llama?”

Jay chuckled. “I assure you, I’m fine.”

“Yeah, yeah, shush now,” I muttered, looking around.

“What are you even looking for?” Jay asked. He sounded amused.

“Cali caused an explosion in our high school lab, once,” I said, looking through some drawers, “and the teacher used a first aid kit on Alex. She’d said that all labs have to have a first aid kit, and this is a lab, *so*…”

“That’s for normal labs, not evil vampire labs,” Jay said, smirking.

I scoffed. “You have a point, but I’d like to think—hey, here it is!” I found the kit under one of the trunks. “See? I was right,” I said, setting it on the floor next to Jay before I started to work on his wound.

“What are you gonna do now?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Stop the bleeding,” I said. “I totally know what I’m doing.”

“Just like with the fire extinguisher?” he asked.

“Yes, that’s—” I realized he was teasing me. “Hey, don’t be a brat!”

He laughed. It was gorgeous. It did funny things in my stomach, butterflies flapping their wings and all. The feeling got even worse when I leaned toward him. He was so close to me as I wrapped his arm with the gauze, and the warmth emanating from him was so freaking distracting.

Clearing my throat, I asked, “Is it too tight?”

Jay leaned even closer to me, gently touching my wrist. I swallowed roughly, glancing at his mouth. The air between us was vibrating, just like his voice when he spoke once more. “Make it tighter.”

I rolled the gauze more firmly as Jay slid closer. He glanced between my hands and my eyes, then my mouth. My fingers were shaking. *I* was shaking.

“I like this,” he murmured.

“What?”

“You taking care of me.”

I gasped softly, and then I wasn’t moving at all because his lips brushed over mine. It was light and feathery, but it felt so good, and I wanted more. I wanted all of it, so I grabbed him by the back of his neck and kissed him harder, the sound that escaped him firing me up.

I knew we shouldn’t have been doing this in Emmett’s office, but also I couldn’t help myself. I hadn’t protested earlier, and I wasn’t going to protest *now*, no fucking way, not with Jay devouring my mouth like that. I moaned, clinging to him and trying to fall back, to pull him on top of me because that sounded like an awesome idea, but then he stopped.

*Why did you stop?*

I stared up at him, panting. “What?”

He scooped me up like I weighed nothing, and I squeaked. “Gotta protect you from the glass,” he mumbled into my neck. “Don’t want you to get cut.”

I shuddered at the contact, at his words. I was pretty sure I would’ve been fine with bleeding to death if it meant him continuing to kiss me. He placed me on the counter, and the feel of his strength had something inside me coming unhinged. I wasn’t sure if this was about my vampire heat or just the heat between us, but my temperature was rising, and I wanted to feel every second of this.

I wrapped my legs around his waist, dragging him near, my fingers digging into his sides to keep him locked onto me, my mouth on his neck to kiss and lick. He made a sound that shot straight through my body, and then his lips were back on mine, forceful and reckless, just like I felt. He grabbed me tight, pushing me back against the wall, hard enough that some books fell from the shelf on our right.

He was startled for a second, but I didn't give a damn. To hell with the books—I wanted him. Mate or no mate, in that moment, he was the one for me. I might not have remembered everything we’d been through, not like he did, but I could feel the connection between us. I could feel the rough brush of him between my legs, where I was throbbing.

His heart was racing—I could hear it, feel his blood under his skin—so I was certain that he could sense every bit of this too. His taste was incredible, intoxicating, and the pressure he applied to every bit of skin he touched, from my wrists to my waist to my thigh, was divine. I locked my legs tighter around him, urging him to keep sliding up against me, over our clothes, as our mouths didn’t stop. The kiss felt never ending, and I slid my arms down his back, under his T-shirt, feeling the tight hot skin there, the hard planes of his back. His scent was perfect, and I felt every part of me melting against him, my senses filled and overwhelmed by him.

I whimpered into his mouth, feeling dizzy at the sensation of him under my fingertips, the strength with which he held me, how hard he felt between my legs, how good and right this moment was. I needed more of it, more of him. I felt delirious and desirous enough to reach for his belt, my hands shaking.

He broke the kiss, panting as he stared into my eyes. Resting his forehead against mine, he murmured, “I don’t think we should go there.”

I licked my lips before kissing the corner of his mouth, trembling all over. “What if I want to?”

A groan that sounded more like a growl erupted from his chest, and I found myself pinned to the wall again. I wanted more of this intensity inside me, right now. Right the fuck now. I reached for his belt again, and this time, he let me, biting at my neck, and I couldn't wait—

The door burst open.

The lights came on, and I choked. Jay, though, went on high alert. With a snarl, he spun around, protecting me with his body, ready to fight off any threat.

But when I looked at the intruder, it was not actually a stranger.

It was Emmett, looking shocked. “What on *earth* is going on here?”

**Episode 1591**

I woke up the next morning tucked into Greyson’s arms. It was cold outside, but I felt warm, and happy to be with him. He smelled amazing, as always. I looked up at his face only to find him staring at me already.

“How long have you been awake?” I asked, covering my mouth to smother a yawn.

He gave me a smile that made something in my chest twist. “Long enough to realize that this arrangement sucks. You should just be with me.”

It was hard not to flinch. “I thought we already went through this.”

Greyson kissed my forehead. “I know. I’m just kidding.”

“I don’t really think you are, though, are you?” I said quietly.

Greyson shook his head. “Cali, come on.”

“I’m just saying that you shouldn’t joke about this. I’m insecure enough about this whole situation as it is,” I said truthfully. “It’s kind of a whale of an arrangement after all.”

Greyson rolled onto his back. “I’m sorry, then.”

I paused for a moment, realizing how ridiculous it was that I got to have both of these amazing men to myself. But at the same time, what was I supposed to do? Choose? Then someone would die!

*I’m not going to have this conversation with myself again! God have mercy!*

I rested my hand on Greyson’s chest, ready to change the subject. “Did you sleep okay?”

I expected him to say yes, since I’d been in his arms the entire night and he hadn’t moved. I’d fallen asleep like I didn’t have a care in the world. But then again, that was kind of easy for me when I was next to Greyson. He made me feel so safe.

And yet, right now, when he didn’t make eye contact, I felt… funny.

“I slept fine,” he muttered, starting to get out of bed.

There was something in his voice, in the way he looked away from me, that I did not like one bit. “I know you’re lying. Tell me what’s wrong.”

Greyson sighed. “I… I just had another nightmare.”

I inhaled sharply, alarmed. Before I could freak out, though, he rested his hand over mine.

“It was just a regular nightmare,” he said. “Had nothing to do with the witches. It was probably because of everything that’s been going on.”

Greyson was trying to be comforting, but I wasn’t done worrying. “What was the nightmare about?”

Greyson shrugged. “I can’t remember.”

I wasn’t sure I believed him. I nodded toward his leg. “Show me your wound.”

“Bossy,” Greyson scoffed, but he still pulled his leg up on the bed.

I frowned. The wound had healed, but the witch mark was still visible.

*Is there a chance that the supernatural injury caused the nightmare?*

“See? Good as new,” Greyson said.

I didn’t want to share my thoughts with him and alarm him. Not right now, at least. Instead, I reached up and planted a kiss on his mouth. “Now you are.”

He smiled and got up, giving me a great view of his ass and bare back as he walked toward the bathroom. He left the door open and glanced over at me, one eyebrow arched. “Don’t be shy,” he said slyly. “You know it’s better for the environment if we shower together.”

I laughed. “Yeah. I’m sure you’re thinking about the planet right now.”

He smirked, stepping into the shower. “I’m always thinking about the planet. Now get yourself in here. I’m very lonely.”

I was actually glad that Greyson seemed much more energetic than he had last night. I was grateful to see him like this. I’d been so worried about the wound. If he was feeling well enough to tease me, I could breathe again. And of course, I couldn’t resist him.

I walked into the bathroom. “First it was the planet, and now you’re very lonely. So many excuses just to get me all wet.”

“Now you’re getting the idea,” Greyson said, reaching out to gently grip my wrist. He pulled me into the shower, under the hot water, and leaned down to give me a kiss. His tongue brushed over my lips, and I parted them, my skin heating up.

He deepened the kiss instantly, his arms wrapping around my waist, his hard body flush against mine. I rubbed his shoulders, his arms, reaching down his abs to touch more of him, but then he pulled back and spun me swiftly around, pressing my back to his chest. It was a little startling, but it sure got me going.

But still, I had to comment on his vibe. “It’s like that, huh? I mean I’m ready, but—”

He let me go, and his quiet laughter made me look over my shoulder. Greyson picked up the shampoo and squeezed some into his palm. “I said we’d shower, didn’t I?”

Here I was, expecting some animalistic sex of the standing variety, and he was being all… *normal*. Apart from his erection. I stared at it, unashamed at this point, and raised an eyebrow. “Right. You’re so innocent.”

Snorting, he made me turn away from him. He started washing my hair, his fingers massaging my scalp. It felt so good that I let out a little moan.

“You like that?” he said in my ear, kissing my shoulder, then the corner of my jaw. I could feel the heat of him behind me. There was something so erotic about not being able to see him that every inch of me was trembling.

“Uh huh,” I whispered, and when I looked over my shoulder, I found him smiling.

“Look away, love. I don’t want soap to get in your eyes,” he said gently.

I smirked, looking at the tiles as he rinsed off my hair. When I turned to face him again, he picked up the shower gel. I swallowed roughly as he stared at me up and down, his perfect body decorated with droplets of water. There was something gentle but heated in his gaze, and I loved it. I loved this moment so much.

“I thought I told you to turn around,” he said in a low voice, and I did what I was told.

His soapy hands started at my shoulders, then moved over my back and lower, squeezing lightly over my hips and ass before coming right up my back again. It felt like a massage, but a million times dirtier, because he would reach forward too, over my collarbones, down my breasts, caressing and stroking and making me quiver.

After rinsing the soap from my body, he moved closer once more, wrapping his arms around my waist. I could feel him, hot and relentless behind me. I had to rest my hands against the tile to keep myself from falling over.

“How did that feel?” he asked in my ear, his hot breath making me shiver.

“Good,” I choked out as his large palms moved down my stomach and between my legs. I arched my back, rubbing up against him. “Are you gonna keep teasing?”

He chuckled, the sound vibrating against the skin of my neck. A second later, I felt his teeth there, his one hand gripping my hip tightly, the other gently moving at the apex of my thighs to toy with me.

“Just wanted to see how wet you could get,” he murmured.

When he slid inside me, I had to bite the inside of my arm to stifle the obscene sound that escaped my lips. We were both so worked up that it was hard and fast, his hips slamming against mine, me muffling my moans in my arm, him mouthing at my neck. My orgasm felt like a crash, hot and quick after being denied for so long. I was shaking hard enough that my knees buckled, but he pulled me up, turning me around to face him.

His gaze was dark and gorgeous as he picked me up, pushing me up against the wall. With a smirk, he whispered, “I’m not done with you yet.”

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Being with Greyson was incredible as ever, but I was nervous in the aftermath. I made him promise to wait a full fifteen minutes before coming downstairs. We didn’t need to advertise our whole situation to the entire pack. The drama was enough as it was.

Starving, I got to the kitchen to get some breakfast and found my parents, my sister, and a few others gathered around the table.

“Good morning, sweetheart!” Mom hugged me after I greeted them. It was a beautiful moment, actually. The entire family was together, and everyone seemed calm, the atmosphere domestic. For once, nobody was dying or in danger.

*I could get used to this*, I thought.

Just then, Xavier walked in. He flashed me a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Good morning.”

“Hi,” I said. I reached out to hold his hand, because it felt like it was something both of us needed right then.

He wrapped his arm around my shoulders and led me out into the hall.

“What’s up?” I asked. I’d barely finished my sentence before he kissed me.

It was a hard, quick kiss, startling in its intensity.

It felt amazing, and my guilt returned full force. I wondered if I should tell him anything about last night, about me spending it with Greyson.

*No, Cali. You all agreed it’s best not to make a big deal out of this!* I reminded myself. I wasn’t doing anything wrong, not when everybody had agreed to the arrangement. But still, my chest hurt at the sight of Xavier right now.

How could something so wonderful make me feel so conflicted all the time?

“I’m going to be heading out with Ravi this morning,” Xavier said, pulling me out of my thoughts. “He said he had something to show me.”

That distracted me all right. “What’s that?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m also going to go by and check on the other house. Probably call Phil and see if he can fix it or recommend someone else.”

“That’s a good idea. Please remember to be nice to Phil,” I said seriously.

Xavier snorted before looking like he remembered something. “I also want to get another look at the mark on the house. The one you found.”

“Do you think that mark and what happened to Greyson could be connected?” I asked.

Xavier shook his head. “I’m not sure. But Kira said that the mark looks ancient. I have no idea if it’s related to the Orb or if someone out there is practicing some other kind of old magic.”

“Right,” I said dryly. “I forgot that we also had the wonderful Orb of Letifer to worry about.”

Xavier raised an eyebrow at my sarcasm. “What is Letifer, anyway? Has anyone ever explained that?”

I paused, realizing that my mate was right. *Duh!* Why did nobody know what a “Letifer” was?

“I have no idea,” I said, frowning. “But I’m definitely going to find out.”

**Episode 1592**

GREYSON

I got out of the shower and wiped myself down before looking at the mark on my leg. The wound was almost gone—so why wasn’t the mark going away with it?

I didn’t like this at all.

And if that wasn’t enough, I also had the nightmare to consider, in which that mysterious woman had referred to me as *her Dark Prince*. I was not a Dark Prince—if anything, I was a Knight in Shining Armor, and I had the hair to prove it too. But that wasn’t the point here. The point was that I had been marked—that much I was certain about. But had I been marked by Letifer? Who the hell was Letifer, anyway? And why did they want me to be their prince? Because that would be a hard pass for me.

I hadn’t signed up for any of this. In general.

I recalled that the mark had appeared after I’d been attacked by Lester. Was his name a corruption of Letifer? No, that would’ve been too weird. Too preposterous. Even more preposterous and ridiculous than everything was already. And the timing was very troubling—I get marked, and we find a similar mark on the old house right afterward. Were the two events connected?

Could this whole thing have something to do with the witches?

Or was it about Silas?

If I had to choose, I would have picked the witches. Sure, they were annoying and cryptic, as most witches were—with Kira being the most cryptic ever, for literally no reason—but at least they didn’t *feel* murderous. Silas and the Orb, on the other hand, were obviously really bad news.

I was pretty sure it was Silas and the Orb. It would be just my luck, wouldn’t it? It just matched my vibe of never catching a break. It was a way of living by now for me. Other people were super into fitness, while I was super into getting into deeper shit day in and out. It was almost inspiring, really.

With my internal sarcasm reaching its boiling point, I glanced at the time. It was close enough to fifteen minutes. I doubted that making a late entrance was going to fool anyone, least of all my brother. Of course he would know that Cali and I had been together. Just like I would have known if Cali and Xavier had been together. It had to do with werewolves and our sense of scent and territorial instincts, but I wasn’t going to think about that, because I didn’t like torturing myself. Much.

Interestingly enough, though, when I reached the kitchen, neither Cali nor Xavier were there. I forced myself not to think about that or hypothesize about their whereabouts, and took a seat at the table.

“Here you go,” Tom said, placing a cup of coffee in front of me. “I’m glad you seem to be walking better.”

“I’m not really a coffee drinker, but thank you,” I said, pushing the cup away. “I know the others love your coffee, though. Along with everything you make.”

Tom seemed pleased by my compliment. “So, now that I’m pretty sure I’m going to become a werewolf, maybe I could pick your brain sometime about being an Alpha?”

Well, then. Tom wanted to be my friend. I didn’t need any more friends, but he was Cali’s father. Did I even have any friends, or just a pack I babysat and a mate?

I would deal with that kind of existential crisis another time.

“Yeah, we can do that when things settle down,” I said. Of course, with my luck, that probably wouldn’t happen anytime soon.

“Great!” Tom beamed at me happily.

As he started going through the fridge, probably figuring out what to make for lunch, I stood up and picked up the pot to make my tea. I was probably going to need some caffeine to make it through this. Right then, Artemis walked in.

“Good morning.” She smiled up at me and then glanced down at the mark on my leg.

For some reason, it made me wince.

Inexplicably, I was suddenly hit by a flash of the nightmare, when I’d kissed my mysterious, creepy bride.

“Are you okay?” Artemis asked. The smile had faded from her lips.

“I’ll be fine once I have my tea,” I said, shrugging it off. I had the water boiling and picked my favorite mug, which nobody was allowed to touch, and opened up a packet of Earl Grey.

Just then, Cali entered the kitchen. She smiled briskly at me. Either she was doing her best to pretend that I hadn’t been rubbing her all over just moments ago, or she was up to something. I suspected it was the latter. I knew that look.

“What’s going on with you?” I asked, arching an eyebrow.

“I have an idea,” she said, fiddling with her hands.

She seemed a little nervous, so I tucked her hair behind her ear to hopefully make her feel a little more comfortable. “What kind of idea?”

“I think I should do some research on Letifer,” she said.

“I was actually just thinking about that,” I admitted. “We don’t know much about him.”

She grinned, and this one was blinding instead of cautious. “Oh my god, we’re so in sync!”

*Ha. Don’t let Xavier hear that.*

“What are you planning?” I asked, taking her hand in mine.

“Nobody seems to know a lot about Letifer. Not even if he was a real person,” Cali said. “I’m going to try out the library card that Steinar gave me. It *is* supposed to be for life. If he doesn’t hold good on that, I’ll be pissed.”

I shook my head. “You shouldn’t travel right now, it’s too risky.”

Cali glared at me and rolled her eyes. “First of all, I wasn’t asking for your permission. Second, I’m not going to go anywhere. I just have to figure out how this library card works. Doesn’t every library have an online catalogue or something?”

“Sure, but does the Obaltarion have something like that? Do they even use the internet?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I have no idea. That’s what I’m going to find out,” she said, before smirking and walking away. I loved her determination.

With my tea finally ready, I picked it up and went out to find Big Mac. I had some questions, and she had a lot of answers—most of the time. I found her in her bedroom with my mother and Marta. The door was ajar, and when I knocked, their conversation stopped. All three of them looked up at me with wide eyes.

“We’re not doing anything!” Marta exclaimed.

Not at all suspicious.

I sighed. “If this has anything to do with Silas, the Orb, or witch marks, I need to know.” I stared at Big Mac. “No more secrets. I don’t have time to uncover them.”

Sabine came up to me and pulled me into the room, closing the door. “There’s no need to alarm the others, though.”

Oh, great. “And *what* aren’t we alarming them about, exactly?”

Big Mac took a deep breath. “There are a lot of things we don’t know about Silas.”

I took a sip of my tea. “Like how to kill him? I don’t care that he’s a ghost, I want him gone.”

The three women remained serious, and I continued.

“Last night you said that Marta is a bridge, Big Mac.” I turned to the young woman. “Can I hear more about that?”

Big Mac shook her head. “I don’t think that’s something we should discuss right now, not with—”

“No,” Marta said, cutting her off. “I think I have the right to know more about what I am as well.”

Big Mac seemed to consider that.

“Is it really possible for a bridge medium to bring someone back in a physical form?” I asked.

Big Mac rubbed her forehead. “Yes, it’s possible. A bridge medium is closer to necromancy, but the magic of necromancy is highly unpredictable.”

I loved unpredictability. It was my favorite thing ever. It didn’t make me want to stab my eyes out at all.

“Is that why you want me to meet this Rain person?” Marta asked Big Mac.

Big Mac nodded. “Exactly.”

Another thing that I loved was chasing down random guys with weird hippie names like *Rain*. Who even named their child Rain? Pretentious douchebags, that was who.

I cleared my throat. “If we’re supposed to cut off the ‘living head’ of the Orb in order to stop it, then we should do that first and focus on Silas. We can’t kill a ghost, and if we can’t banish it to the spirit world because the portals are shut, then we have to figure out another solution. And fast.”

“What kind of solution?” Big Mac asked slowly.

I stared at Marta. She swallowed visibly.

“Big Mac said that, in theory, you can bring someone back from the dead,” I told her. “Would you do that with my father? Would you summon Silas so we can kill him for good?”

**Episode 1593**

I was feeling pretty happy with myself as I headed upstairs to my room. I was glad to have something I could work toward with all of this revenant craziness going on. I always enjoyed having a goal, figuring out ways to make myself useful. My plan wasn’t very dangerous, either, so that would make both my mates happy, seeing as I wouldn’t be running off into the woods to fight a vampire hippopotamus or a deadly toad or something.

Anyway, I was hopeful about what I would find, and I was pretty eager to dive into my research about Letifer. Humming to myself, I started to look through my stuff, searching for the magic library card. Where the hell had I put it? I wished I was as organized as my mother, but that had never been one of my strengths. My strengths were stubbornness—a key characteristic of my personality throughout my entire life—and also being adorable when the situation called for it.

Or at least Xavier and Greyson thought I was adorable, which worked just fine for me.

I continued to feel pretty happy with myself, but as the moments went by and I couldn’t find the library card, I started to get frustrated. I went through all my bags and jeans pockets, and then decided to go look in my dresser.

I finally found the card in my sock drawer, because why not.

*Seriously, why did I think that this was a good place to put a library card?* I wondered, genuinely surprised by the randomness.

Ignoring the thought, because trying to make sense of certain things was fruitless, I studied the card. It looked like… an ordinary library card. How disappointing. But then I noticed some unusual symbols on the back. How did it even work, though?

Maybe I could go online and find the Obaltarion’s website, like Greyson had said. Did they even have a website?

Determined to figure that out, I plopped down onto my bed and opened up my laptop. I pulled up the Google search bar and typed in “Obaltarion,” but no relevant results came up. How annoying. Huffing, I tried to google “magic library,” and “Hypatia the mean librarian,” and “where do I find spells?” There were some results in that last one, but none of them seemed legit. Also, I randomly found a spell for penis enlargement, which was not something I’d ever needed to know existed.

Staring at the search bar, I scowled. What happened now? Was I meant to be searching the dark web, or whatever? Did I need a hacker to do this? Hackers were way too complicated for me. Also, I had no idea how to find them. Annoyed, I picked up the card and started shaking it before yelling, “How do I use you?”

Suddenly, there was a buzzing sound.

And a voice, seemingly coming from the card, spoke up, making me jump.

“Place your eye in front of the circle.”

Um, excuse me? Eyes were precious things. I did not want to end up like Jay. He was still hot, but he didn’t have an eye, and I was pretty attached to mine. As one could be, really.

“Place your eye in front of the circle,” the voice repeated.

*Oh my god, so pushy!* I thought, huffing. Then, taking a deep breath, I brought my eyes within a few inches of the card.

“Closer!”

I swallowed nervously and brought it closer, until it was nearly touching my nose. The buzzing suddenly stopped, and I wasn't sure if that was a good or a bad thing. But then, the voice spoke in a milder tone. It was smooth and unassuming.

“Hello, Caliana Hart, and welcome to the Obaltarion.”

I gaped and dropped the card in shock.

At the same time, my phone rang. I squeaked before reaching for it, not taking my eyes off the card that was lying innocently on my bed*. Innocent, my ass!*

“Hello, Cali. I’m very happy to hear from you,” said Steinar, when I answered the phone. I exhaled in relief. Steinar was my friend, so the card wasn’t going to explode on me, and I would get to keep my eye.

“Hi! How are you? How’d you get this number?” I asked. “I found the library card you gave me, and—”

“I know what you’re about to say, Caliana. You have come to me with a quest. You are reaching out to the wisdom of the ages, and I am the perfect person to help you with that, because I love spreading knowledge like creamed honey on a biscuit.”

“Right. I wouldn’t have phrased it exactly like that, but okay,” I said sheepishly.

“Speaking of honey, how is that sister of yours?” he asked.

Steinar sure loved to talk. I suspected it was because he was stuck in a library with a very stern witch who didn’t enjoy having friends. I would have probably lost my mind, in his position.

“Artemis is fine,” I said. “I’m the one who needs help.”

“Of course! I would love to help you!”

Oh, wow. I rarely got that kind of enthusiastic response from anyone about anything. Unless it was from Greyson or Xavier and the subject was sex and/or cuddling.

The Alphas really liked a good cuddle.

Focusing on the matter at hand, I told Steinar, “I’m looking for information on the Orb of Letifer, actually.”

There was a pause before the gargoyle spoke up again. “You sure you want to go there?”

“I just need to know whatever I can find out,” I said. “Can you help me?”

He scoffed. “I’m assistant head librarian, of course I can help you! Consider me your light in the dark world of ignorance.”

“Wait, you got promoted?” I grinned. “That’s great, congratulations!”

Steinar sounded very pleased with himself. “Thank you. Hypatia was so pleased with how I helped save the library, and she said—”

I cleared my throat. “Um, could I call you another day to hear that story, which I’m sure is thrilling? It’s just that I’m kind of in a hurry right now. There’s a lot going on here.”

Steinar snorted good-naturedly. “Of course, no worries. I’m here to help.”

“Thanks so much! So, is there a way to access the catalog?” I asked.

“Of course! We may have a lot of history, but we are a modern library,” Steinar said. “You just need to enter the code HOCUSBOOFUS into obaltarion dot org slash research underscore catalog, and you’ll have access to almost everything.”

I scrambled for a pen. “But wait, I did search for it, and—”

“Sorry, Cali, I gotta go. A real customer just came in!” He sounded almost ecstatic—probably because he hadn’t seen another person other than Hypatia in at least a month—and ended the call.

I stared at the phone, blinking in disbelief.

*obaltarion.org? Why didn’t I find that earlier?*

I went back to my laptop and typed in the name. To my surprise, a welcome screen appeared.

“I'll be damned,” I muttered, typing in the password. After I pressed enter, a search bar appeared.

*Oh my god, this is so cool! I feel like a secret agent!*

Grinning to myself, I typed in “Orb of Letifer.”

As I pressed enter, there was a knock on the door.

“Come in!” I called, glancing up from the screen.

Torin and Astrid barreled in, grinning from ear to ear.

“Cali!” Torin exclaimed. “We’re gonna go tobogganing, and you should come with us! I don’t even know what it is, but it sounds like fun!”

Astrid nodded enthusiastically, looking excited.

I was about the gently let my friends down when Torin’s eyes widened, falling onto my screen. “What are you watching?” he asked.

“Yeah what’s that?” Astrid asked as both of them walked over to me. The computer dinged, and a list of search results appeared on the screen.

“I’m doing some research on the Orb,” I said, and clicked on the first link. I noticed that it was just a reference to Letifer in an unrelated article. “Well, no luck there,” I murmured, scrolling down. “I guess I’ll try a few more. You’re both welcome to stay with me if you’d like.”

Both Torin and Astrid were eerily quiet as they sat down next to me. I clicked through the next couple of results, but again, they were all references, nothing substantial. Like mentioning the goddess Athena in a text without explaining who Athena was.

“This is going to be a lot harder than I thought,” I muttered, frowning.

“Hey, try that one,” Astrid said, pointing at a result at the bottom of the list.

“Why?” I asked.

“It’s a different color,” Astrid said while Torin nodded.

I shrugged. At this point, why not? I clicked on the result, and immediately, the screen was filled with the image of an ancient scroll. I swallowed roughly when a warning popped up with a little skull and crossbones. The note was pretty straightforward, written in bold italic letters.

***Warning: This material contains and/or references dark magic.***

***Are you sure you want to proceed?***

**Episode 1594**

XAVIER

Ravi and I were racing through the woods, and we shifted into wolves. I was always up for a run, but this was more than that, and I was getting impatient. How much longer was this going to take? When I’d agreed to let Ravi to show me something, I should have asked how far away it was.

Before I could get too antsy, though, Ravi slowed down and shifted back to human.

“So?” I asked, after shifting back myself. “What are we doing here?”

“Let’s get dressed first before we start with the chit-chat. I’m freezing my ass off here,” Ravi said, and threw a set of clothes at me.

We both started to get dressed. It was actually a little too cold to walk around naked, even for a werewolf. After we were done, Ravi spoke up again after taking a deep breath.

“Okay, you want the truth here?”

“Obviously,” I deadpanned.

“I would have told you earlier, but I was worried that you wouldn’t believe me.”

“That doesn’t sound very promising,” I said seriously.

Ravi snorted. “I swear, I questioned my own sanity when I found it.”

“Well? What is it?” I asked, tapping my foot impatiently on the snowy ground.

“It’s over there,” Ravi said, pointing at a gnarly tree.

He started toward it, and I followed, grumbling, “What’s so special about it?”

Before Ravi could say another word, I noticed a large, dark pool that radiated from the tree’s bark, near the ground. I scowled. This was really fucking weird.

“Shit,” I said under my breath, looking around. There was snow on the ground, and I could see my exhales. Why wasn’t this swampy pool frozen? What fresh—hopefully not literal—hell was this?

“Odd, right?” Ravi said, as if reading my thoughts.

I nodded. “Very. But why did you bring me to this mosquito-breeding pool in the middle of the woods? What can I do about it?”

Ravi took a deep breath. “This is where I saw a group of those revenants, actually. They were gathered by the pool.”

I paused, taking in the news. It wasn’t what I was expecting, and it wasn’t good either.

Ravi glanced at me. “You can probably still see their footprints.”

I examined the ground, and sure enough, there were footprints. But they could’ve belonged to anyone. Why anyone would’ve been out here in the middle of the woods other than us was beyond me. I turned Ravi, making sure to keep my tone even. Composure was key in situations like these.

“Start from the beginning, would you?” I asked. “What were you doing out here in the first place?”

“After I was banished from the pack house, I didn’t know where to go, what to do,” Ravi said quietly. “I was heartbroken over Joss’s death. I still am.”

I felt for the guy. I doubted he would ever really get over Joss. The circumstances of her death had been too tragic—even I had been sad about it. Joss and I had had many differences, but it had been devastating to see a great leader like her go. The woman had been effective and dignified in more ways than one, and nobody could take that away from her.

“Anyway,” Ravi continued in that same quiet voice, “the only comfort I could find was being in wolf form. So I spent all my time in the woods, roaming without purpose.”

If that didn’t reach a new level of depressing, I didn’t know what would.

“One day, I picked up the scent of something that was unlike anything I’d ever encountered,” Ravi went on. “I followed this figure, and when it turned around, I noticed its orange eyes. Flaming, glowing, terrifying eyes.”

That sounded like a revenant all right.

“I kept my distance but followed the thing here. To this tree.” Ravi pointed at the spot. “Two more of those things were hanging around here, like they were waiting for him.”

I felt both intrigue and dread. This news was pretty fucking massive. “What did you do then?”

Ravi shook his head. “I tried to get closer, but they heard me and attacked. That’s how I wound up at the pack house.”

I stared at my reflection in the swampy water. Why would revenants gather around here? Could this be another ghost pond?

“What do you think? Do you believe me?” Ravi asked. There was some nervousness to his tone.

I nodded. “I don’t have a reason not to believe you. I’ve seen revenants. I know how they fight. You’re lucky you escaped, especially if three of them attacked you at the same time.” Ravi remained silent as I bent down and looked closer at the footprints. “How did they get here?”

Ravi frowned in confusion. “What do you mean?”

I pointed out the footprints. “There should be more prints leading to this spot, and then leading away. But there’s nothing.”

Ravi looked alarmed. “I’m not lying.”

I shook my head. “It’s not that. I believe you. There’s just something wrong here.”

We both fell silent, and I stared at the pool. I didn’t like the water connection. There’d been a lot of bad shit happening that involved water lately, going all the way back to Haystack Rock.

I leaned closer, sniffing. There was no odor to the pond, and that was eerie in and of itself. “How deep do you think it is?” I asked.

Ravi shrugged. “There’s one way to find out, I guess.” He took a step closer to the pond, but I grabbed his arm to stop him.

“I think we should try the easier way first,” I said, grabbing a broken branch and sticking it into the pond.

The water started to swallow up the piece of wood, and both Ravi and I watched as it sank below the surface. I recalled how Cali had almost drowned in the ghost pond, and a shiver ran down my spine.

“I’m still trying to catch up on all this stuff that’s been happening, but I just thought you should know about this,” Ravi said quietly.

I nodded. “I’m glad you showed me.” *And not Greyson*, I added in my head.

Perhaps Ravi could be one more ally when the time came to win over the pack—when the time came for me to be Alpha.

I looked around, taking in the rest of the scene. “There doesn’t seem to be much else here,” I said. “We should probably head back.”

Ravi agreed. “We should shift. I can carry our clothes.”

As I was about to turn around, I saw movement under the water.

At the same time, Ravi let out a yelp of fear.

“Did you see that?” I rasped.

This was really, *really* fucking bad.

“Yeah, I did!” Ravi huffed, shaking his head at me like I was trying to joke here. “What the fuck was that?”

“I have no idea. Probably a revenant,” I muttered, staring at the pond.

Ravi swallowed thickly. “We should go.”

I couldn’t just *go*.

I was an Alpha. I didn’t run away.

I had the suspicion that this pond could be bad news, and I needed to prove to myself—to my mate, to the pack, and of course to Greyson—that I would one day be worthy of my title. I couldn’t just back off. And it would be amazing if I were the one to provide a solution for all the problems we’d been having with these fucking revenants.

“No. We have to see this through right now. There’s two of us, anyway,” I told Ravi.

“Didn’t you just say that revenants are really hard to fight?” Ravi asked me nervously.

“What’s your point?” I asked.

Ravi blinked at me. “Dude, there’s a *thing* in the pond, and it might be a revenant. We should go and get back-up.”

Back-up would mean Greyson. Greyson, who Cali had spent the entire night with. Greyson, who was the oldest brother, and the leader, and someone I no longer wanted to fucking murder, but *still*. I couldn’t let him be the solution to something that I, with Ravi’s help, had happened upon. Maybe this was destiny or whatever, but the point was that I couldn’t let Greyson steal my thunder.

He’d already taken my girl in his bed last night.

It was really fucking hard to deal with that, no matter what I told myself and Cali. It was really hard to accept that I had to compete for her every second of every day, when I’d been there first.

My jaw clenching, I moved closer to the pond. “It’s going to be fine,” I told Ravi with as much conviction as I could, taking a step closer to the body of water. I was leaning over it to get a better look, when suddenly an arm shot out of the water.

A bony hand reached out, sharp, bony fingers wrapping around my ankle.

And before I could even make a sound, before I could even think, I was yanked with shocking force straight into the water.

**Episode 1595**

I stared at the warning and realized that maybe, *just maybe*, this wasn’t a good idea. Could it be a virus that would wipe out my computer and hold it for ransom? Because that did sound like something that could happen to me.

“Oh, that skull looks so good!” Torin said happily, because he could not for the life of him read social cues. “It reminds me of a friend from back in the Fae world.”

“You mean Fifi, the inside-out gnome?” Astrid asked Torin.

“No, Magnolia, the giant octopus, with her—”

As Torin kept talking about his deadly, slimy friend, I tuned him out. I realized that if Steinar had helped me get this far, it should be okay to keep going. Skull or no skull. Besides, it was just a warning. Who even cared about warnings? It wasn’t like I was going to do anything with dark magic. I was just going to read about it. What harm could there be in that? No harm at all!

I felt kind of lucky that my mates weren’t here to judge my choices.

“Guys,” I told the two Fae, “please keep it down, I’m trying to concentrate here.”

Both Astrid and Torin fell silent as I stared at the screen.

“I acknowledge the warning,” I said out loud, closing my eyes.

I hoped this wouldn’t blow up my computer or unleash deadly dark magic into the world. Which was something that I should have considered before continuing, but it was too late now. *Oh, well.*

When I opened my eyes, though, there was no explosion. Just an ancient scroll on the screen.

Astrid frowned. “What do all those symbols mean?”

“No idea. Ancient languages aren’t exactly my strength,” I said.

*Stay in school, kids!*

“Maybe we can ask Big Mac about it. She seems kind of old,” Torin said helpfully.

Astrid snorted. “She’s not ancient, though!”

I shook my head. “I don’t want to bring Big Mac in on this. I’m pretty sure she’d just get annoyed and issue all kinds of warnings. And also, I don’t think it’s a good idea to tell her she looks old. What I can actually do is find a dictionary or something.”

Suddenly, that same eerie voice from earlier spoke up. “You seem to be having a difficult time reading. Would you like this translated?”

I gasped and looked at my two friends, who seemed equally stunned. And then, all three of us shouted at the screen, “Yes!”

“Very well. Translating into modern English.”

Within seconds, the symbols started to turn into words I recognized. My jaw dropped. There was so much information in here. It could take me days to read it all. It would be like trying to read the Bible in one sitting.

“This looks like a lot of work. I wish there was a summary,” I said.

“Yeah, I don’t know much about this stuff, but is there an index or something?” Astrid asked.

“That’s a great point!” I said, and scrolled down. “Here we go,” I said, and began to read.

But after just a few minutes, my vision became blurry and my head started aching. I hadn’t found anything useful, and both my friends were frowning at the screen too.

“This is taking a really long time,” Torin commented.

I huffed in frustration, my head pounding. “Ugh, there has to be an easier way!” I shouted at the screen, “Isn’t there anything here about Letifer?”

The voice spoke up instantly. “Searching for Letifer… Here’s what I found.”

Torin and Astrid grinned at me, looking between my face and the results on the screen.

“That was really cool,” Torin exclaimed.

“I think the key here is to treat this system like a magical mystic Siri,” I said.

Torin clapped his hands excitedly. “Great! Who’s Siri?”

I waved him off. Siri was the last thing Torin needed to know about. I started to read the first result.

“What’s it saying?” Astrid asked after a moment.

I spoke slowly, still reading. “It seems like when magic was still new, Letifer was an ancient warlock who was so grief-stricken over the death of his lover, Deidamia, that he used that magic to gain dominion over the dead, hoping to bring his lover back.”

“That’s deep,” Torin said, blinking rapidly. “And pretty sad.”

I cleared my throat and continued. “But Letifer then became so corrupt and powerful that he needed to be stopped. Other ancient beings tricked him and trapped him in a mystical vessel, known as the Orb, where they had hoped he would remain for eternity, powerless to continue his evil ways.”

“That’s good, then!” Astrid said happily.

But I shook my head and kept reading. “However, they underestimated Letifer’s power. Using the Orb, Letifer was still able to reach out and corrupt others. In a final attempt to control Letifer, his captors hid the Orb, using various wards to prevent further harm.”

Astrid was frowning. “Well, seems to me that those other ancient beings didn’t do a very good job at hiding the Orb, did they?”

“Amateurs, for sure,” Torin commented. “Sometimes I hide things so well I can’t even remember where they are.”

“Same,” I agreed. “I wonder how Silas got hold of it the first time, though. You know, before Big Mac’s mother did and had Xavier and Colton hide it… Has this game of hide and seek been going on for thousands of years?”

“Perhaps. It definitely sounds like a game that the Orb would be very good at,” Torin said while Astrid sighed dreamily, looking up at the ceiling.

“What is it?” I asked her.

She sighed again. “I think there’s something *so* romantic about this story.”

I blinked in shock. “Sorry, what now?”

Astrid said, “Letifer was so heartbroken that he did everything he could to bring his love back to him.”

I scoffed. “But he brought her back from the dead, as a living corpse, and then he got greedy for more power. That’s not romantic, that’s evil.”

Astrid looked annoyed. “Well, when you say it that way, of course it sounds evil!”

As Astrid and I argued, Torin pulled the screen toward him and began to read. “I’d like to know more about the magic stuff, but you two can continue fighting, don’t mind me.”

I ignored him. “Letifer might have thought he was being romantic,” I told Astrid, “but I can’t think of anything less romantic that being power hungry and trying to take over the living and the dead.”

“In the beginning he was just someone in love. Then things got out of control. So his original intentions weren’t that bad—they were sweet,” Astrid said stubbornly.

“Astrid,” I said. “Don’t fall for the bad boys. I’ve done it before, and they usually end up either never changing or becoming worse.”

Astrid huffed. “Xavier got a lot better, though! He’s grown a lot as a person since I met him.”

“And he’s easy on the eyes,” Torin added.

I shook my head. “That’s because he’s a werewolf, and werewolves don’t really exist in real life. In real human life, bad boys stay bad or get worse.”

“But Letifer was a warlock,” Astrid said. “He didn’t exist in real human life, either! Hell, none of us exist in real human life! So maybe that sweet mean warlock just needed the right person to help him grow—”

“Guys,” Torin started, but we both ignored him.

“I feel like Letifer kind of crossed the line when he started killing people left and right, just to bring them back with his powers in order to figure out how they work. That’s *really* evil,” I said.

“Hey, guys, I found something—”

“It might be evil,” Astrid said, cutting off Torin, “but it is still very romantic! It can be two things at the same time—both good and bad.”

I huffed. “I sure wouldn’t want to be his lover, though. Just think of it—you die, then you’re brought back to hook up with your man, only to realize that the sweet guy you used to know has now become an unhinged evil asshole! I’d rather stay dead.”

Torin cleared his throat. “Guys, I said—”

Astrid shook her head. “But Cali, don’t you think—”

“*GUYS!*” Torin shouted, and both of us jumped.

“Oh my god, *what*?” I asked.

“We’re having a very serious conversation here, and you interrupted us,” Astrid told Torin, looking strict.

“Stop talking about problematic boyfriends; I think I have something here,” he said, pointing at the screen. “‘*If Letifer rises, the living and the dead will swim in darkness.*’”

As Torin uttered the words, the images of ghosts and revenants played in my head, sending a chill down my spine. *Swim* meant water, and water seemed to be a key feature of the magic we were up against.

“The living and the dead will swim in darkness?” Torin repeated, frowning. “What does that even mean?”

He’d barely finished his sentence when my computer went dark… and suddenly all the lights in my room went out.

**Episode 1596**

CHARLIE

When I woke up the next morning, my head was pounding. Not because I had a concussion, but because I’d had nightmares of Violet in danger the whole night. I’d been excused from morning training because I’d hit my head, though, so at least there was one positive note.

They hadn’t been able to confirm that I had a concussion, of course, but I’d been left in the hospital wing under the nurse’s watch until I could be released. I felt the bump on my forehead. Damn, why hadn’t I hit myself where nobody could see? Not that I was vain, but I wouldn’t exactly love it if Violet saw me like this.

I hoped my werewolf healing powers would kick in soon. I was itching to check on my mate. I’d only just gotten her back with me. I wasn’t about to lose her. I knew that she’d gotten away, but what if she’d been hurt? Kate and Seth had silver weapons. What if one of them had managed to hit Violet? I was worried sick, but I didn’t have my phone with me. They hadn’t let me keep it, claiming that a concussion would be made worse by looking at a screen. But I wondered if Violet had texted me. If she’d called me.

The questions were twisting inside my head when my mother came through the door.

“Oh, Charlie! You’re awake. I’m so glad,” she said, rushing to me. She gave me a huge hug, and I missed the days when her touch had made me feel comforted instead of wary. “Are you okay? What happened last night?”

I took a deep breath. I wasn’t sure what to say. My mother wasn’t exactly Violet’s biggest fan. “It’s all a bit fuzzy… By the way, did you know that concussions can cause amnesia? I mean, I’m lucky I know you’re my mom, right?” I let out an awkward chuckle, and my mother raised an eyebrow at me.

I felt bad for lying, but I needed to protect Violet. I’d always need to protect my mate. It was something I knew deep down to my bones.

“But you’re a… werewolf,” Mom whispered, looking around to make sure nobody was listening. She gestured at me up and down, her nose wrinkled. “Shouldn’t you recover quickly?”

I shook my head. “I’m sure I will. Don’t worry.” Though I doubted she was really worried—more preoccupied with the details of my “condition.” “Well, anyway, how’s Dad?” I asked, trying to change the subject.

“Seriously, Charlie?” Mom said, her eyes narrowed. “Why are you being evasive?”

“I’m not being evasive,” I said. *Shit*.

“You are. Why won’t you tell me what happened last night?” she pressed.

“Mom, nothing happened, and like I said, things are fuzzy, so—”

“You got amnesia?” She arched an eyebrow.

“Yes! I mean, no, I—”

“What aren’t you telling me, Charlie?”

“*Nothing*,” I said quickly. “I told you everything; I’m just still shaken up after everything that happened.”

My mother still looked suspicious, and for the first time ever, I was grateful to see Chad barge into the room. He was surrounded by his buddies, and his arm was in a sling.

“I took on that werewolf like it was nothing!” he exclaimed. “I almost died, but that werewolf is probably wishing he never messed with the Chadster.”

*Gag me.*

I didn’t have a concussion, but I was definitely getting a headache listening to this douchebag. Had he ever told the truth in his entire life?

“How’s the newbie doing?” Chad said then, looking between my mother and me. “Heard you got beaned by a wolf.”

I should’ve scared him more last night.

I rolled my eyes but before I could answer, Sophie came in, looking like she’d walked straight out of an Instagram influencer feed.

My mother’s expression brightened. “Hi, Sophie! Charlie, look, it’s Sophie! She came to see how you’re doing—isn’t that so sweet?”

Sophie blinked, looking between Chad, his friends, my mother, and me. “Is this a bad time?”

“Not at all,” my mother said, beckoning her closer.

Sophie came up to me and gave me a hug. Somehow, I managed to turn that into an awkward kiss on the cheek, all under the approving eye of my mom—and to Chad’s obvious disdain.

Meanwhile, all I could think about was how much I missed Violet.

“How are you doing, Mrs. Kim?” Sophie asked my mother politely.

“Oh just great, honey!” she said, simpering. “Even better now that you’re here to look over my Charlie.” She looked between us. “I’m going to go talk to the doctor now, okay? I’ll leave you two to talk.”

My mother walked out, finally, so at least I had one less thing to worry about.

Now, I needed to deal with Chad, who turned to his buddies and said, “Go get me some hash browns, okay? They’re supposed to be the best, here in the hospital wing.”

His two friends followed his orders like puppies, strutting out of the room.

And then it was just Chad, Sophie, and me. All alone.

Great.

There was an awkward, heavy pause before Sophie cleared her throat. “So, how are the two of you doing?” she asked, glancing between me and the douchebag.

“I just have a headache. I should be good to go soon,” I said.

Chad scoffed. “While your man over there was lying on his back, seeing stars, I was fighting for my life.”

*Good lord.*

Sophie, whose patience had to be running thin, rolled her eyes. Chad didn’t notice, because he was too busy glaring at me. “Do you think we came across the same wolf?”

I shrugged. “I have no idea. I didn’t really get a good look. Not like you.”

“Yeah,” Chad said gruffly, plopping down in a chair. “Because I fought with the werewolf, and you just fell back like a dead chicken.”

I wasn’t going to comment on that. But of course, Chad continued.

“You’re no longer the only one who can claim to have fought a werewolf,” he said smugly.

“Welcome to the club,” I muttered, feeling a little heavy. This whole thing was exhausting, with all the lying and pretending. And I’d dragged Sophie right into it, too. She didn’t deserve this.

Chad suddenly went silent. When he next spoke, his voice came out low and hesitant for once. “The funny thing is, though…”

“What?” Sophie asked.

“I can’t shake the feeling that the wolf wanted to help me.” Chad seemed genuinely confused.

I held my breath. Was there a chance that Chad could figure out what happened?

But then he shook his head. “Of course that can’t be true. It would be too weird. The wolf was probably trying to drag me to its den to feast on me for a midnight snack. We all know werewolves are ruthless, vicious beasts, right?”

I had to restrain myself from socking Chad right in his bandaged arm. Not only had I risked my own life to save this absolute dick, but Violet was as far from ruthless and vicious as anyone could be.

Chad was waiting for a response, but thankfully we were interrupted by a nurse, who showed up with a wheelchair and all my stuff. “Good morning, kids. Charlie, your mother wanted me to get you ready so you can go back to your dorm,” she said. “And Mr. Bowman, shouldn’t you be in your bed?”

I sat up, feeling pretty embarrassed, but I liked the red color Chad’s face turned. I tried to argue that I could get on the chair on my own, that I didn’t even need it, but the nurse was having none of it. She reminded me of my implacable grandmother.

“Every patient must be escorted out,” she said. “Don’t you bring any problems, now.” Her strict tone made me realize that this was a lost battle.

“Fine,” I grumbled.

She helped me onto the chair and started wheeling me out, with Sophie on my left and Chad on my right, still going on about battling a werewolf. Sophie was looking at him with mild interest, so I assumed that was all the encouragement he needed to keep on rambling.

“Oh, and it was huge! You know? Its teeth were so sharp that I…”

I tuned him out as I looked through my stuff. I found my phone, expecting to see tons of messages and missed calls from Violet. But my stomach dropped when I saw that there was nothing from her. Not even a message. My heart started to pound, and the anxiety was making me feel little queasy.

I couldn’t go to the dorm like this.

I needed to find a way to get out of here and find Violet, to make sure that she was okay, that she was safe and uninjured. I needed to make sure that she was on her way back to the pack house, where Xavier and Greyson and Cali and everyone else could protect her.

I had to leave this camp undetected and find Violet. Find my mate.

And I needed to do it right the hell now.

**Episode 1597**

GREYSON

“*No*,” Big Mac said, planting herself between me and Marta. “You don’t get to ask her that.”

I scoffed. “I can ask anyone whatever the hell I please,” I said. “I’m the Alpha, and this is my pack.”

Sabine placed a hand on my shoulder to calm me. “I don’t think anyone in this room appreciates that kind of phrasing, Greyson. You’re the Alpha, but you’re not a dictator.”

I huffed. “I understand that you’re protective over Big Mac, but when it comes to pack stuff, there’s no room for personal feelings.”

Big Mac’s eyebrows rose so far up her forehead that I thought they were going to vanish into her hairline. “Right. Because you know all about being professional and focusing on the pack. Let me ask you something—if this were Cali, would you tell her to put her feelings aside? Have you *ever* put your feelings aside when it comes to your mate?”

I was busted, but I’d never admit it. It was a matter of principle. This wasn’t about Cali, anyway. And even if it were, Cali would just do whatever she wanted anyway.

“Why don’t we let Marta decide?” I said, and both the witch and I turned to Marta. The medium stared at us like a deer caught in headlights.

“Uh…” Marta swallowed audibly, blinking fast.

“How about it?” I said, stepping up to her. “Are you willing to summon that bastard father of mine?”

Marta started fumbling. “I’m—I’m sorry, but I was really hoping to talk to that Rain guy before I do anything else. I have a few questions about being a bridge.”

“But what about Silas?” I asked.

Marta took a deep breath. “Silas seems like one of the most powerful werewolves who’s ever lived. I don’t feel ready to take on something like him. What if I screw up? I don’t want to ruin anything for you guys, and I definitely don’t want to make anything worse. I’m really sorry.”

“No need to apologize,” Big Mac said. “You’re not obligated to help anyone here, especially if you don’t feel ready and don’t trust your powers. That would do more harm than good.” She looked at me as if she’d uttered every word for me personally. I got the message, but that didn’t mean I liked it.

“*Seriously*? Don’t you see that if we can get Silas to show up, we could put an end to all this?” I said. “Think of how many people we could save. This is a time for action, not standing by until it’s too late.”

“Number one, you keep talking about destroying Silas, but what you’re not saying is *how*. We don’t know what kind of magic he has,” Big Mac said. “Second, Marta is a guest. She is not a pack member. You can’t just order her around. And I think you should be grateful to her just for sticking around, even though her life has been put in danger multiple times.”

Nobody spoke for a moment.

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I turned to Marta. “That’s true. I’m glad you are okay, Marta.”

The medium was looking at me like I was some sort of god that she had no idea how to deal with. “Right,” she squeaked. “I guess… thank you?”

I’d realized that neither of them were going to help me, and Big Mac was definitely not going to budge, so I grumbled, “You go see your Rain man. I’ll figure out something else, since you’re both set on not helping me.”

Marta flinched at my tone. Big Mac gave me an arrogant look, glaring at me before I left the room. I headed out to the porch, my fists clenched. The air was cold, and I took a deep, calming breath.

I felt my mother’s hand on my shoulder a moment later. “You went pretty hard at MacKenzie and Marta. I’m sure you didn’t mean to—”

I scoffed. “I’m not going to apologize. I’m only trying to do what’s best.”

“I get that, but you’re expecting a lot from Marta. She’s young. She’s new to a lot of this. You should show a little more patience.”

“I don’t have the time, don’t you see?” I snapped. I immediately wished I could take back the tone of my voice—I hated myself for speaking that way to my mother. But the reappearance of Silas, and the mark on my leg, and the revenants were all taking a toll. No amount of sarcasm and denial could erase the fact that we were in the deepest shit we’d ever encountered.

“I understand you’re under a lot of pressure, but that doesn’t give you the right to speak to anyone as if they don’t matter,” my mother said in a firm tone, her eyes flashing with hurt.

I let out a long breath, shaking my head. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have spoken to you like that. I know how much you care about Big Mac. I didn’t mean to come down so hard on her and Marta, but I’m really worried about the pack.”

“And Cali?” Sabine asked softly.

I let out a bitter chuckle. “Always. But I’m worried about everyone at this point.”

Sabine shook her head. “You’ve done all this before, Greyson. You’ve destroyed Silas before. We all have. Maybe the circumstances are somewhat different now, but we can all do it again, together.” She reached out and took my hand. I felt comforted by the warmth of her touch.

I knew that she was trying to reach out to me, not just as a concerned member of the pack, but as my mother. The connection felt so good that I was… soothed. It wasn’t a feeling I’d ever felt before, not with her at least. But how could I find a balance between all the roles I had as a person? I was an Alpha, I was Cali’s mate, I was Xavier’s brother, I was Sabine’s son, and I was the entire pack’s fucking babysitter and leader, all at the same time.

But in the end, under these circumstances, the pack had to come first. I had no choice in the matter. I needed to figure out a way to protect everyone. My mate, my mother, my annoying fucking brother, and all the rest.

“Sometimes I feel exhausted,” I whispered, squeezing her hand.

Sabine reached up and stroked my cheek. Her touch felt tender. “I need you to remember that no matter what, I believe in you, Greyson.”

A lump formed in my throat. “You do?”

She gave me a soft smile. “Of course.”

Before I could bask in it, though, I heard a loud noise from inside the house. I flinched away, turning back to look through the window. Under my breath, I huffed, “What the hell is it this time?”

I stomped inside, only to find Sage pointing at the TV. “It’s out! I can’t watch my shows now!”

I sighed very deeply. What the fuck was I supposed to do with that? Did I have to add “electrician” to my list of roles?

“I’m not sure how this is my problem, exactly,” I told her, but the moment I said the words, I noticed that the clock on the microwave had gone out, and the refrigerator had stopped buzzing.

“Hey! The power’s out!” someone shouted.

“See?” Sage told me stubbornly. Apparently, she was only nice until someone took away her TV shows.

“I’ll check the circuit breaker in the basement,” Zainab told me.

“No, that’s not it. It can’t be just a tripped circuit. That wouldn’t affect everything in the house. This is some kind of rolling blackout,” I told her, the pieces falling into place inside my head as I spoke.

Could this have anything to do with Silas? I was paranoid at this point. My stomach dropped, dread settling in, when I looked around and didn’t see my mate.

“Where’s Cali?” I asked.

Nobody answered my question. The pack had gathered in the living room and had started shouting at each other, blaming each other—and then Mace walked in.

“Hey! What the hell is going on?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Everyone, shut up and stay alert!” I ordered. “We don’t know what could be causing this. It could be magic, so I need everybody to stay calm.”

Their somber faces told me that they finally got the hint. I was looking around for Cali, still feeling pretty fucking anxious, and then—

There was a scream from upstairs. A lot of screams, but I instantly recognized one of the voices as Cali’s.

Without thinking, without saying another word, I ran toward the stairs. But when I reached the first step, I saw Cali, Astrid, and Torin running downstairs, barreling toward me, wide-eyed and terrified.

“Go back, go back!” Cali shouted at me frantically.

I scowled, confused. “What the hell is going on?”

My answer came when I saw a thick black fog, rolling down the stairs behind them.

**Episode 1598**

LOLA

I woke slowly and rolled over, snuggling into Jay, who was next to me in my tiny bed. I’d wanted a queen-sized mattress, but the apartment was just too small, and Cali and I were lucky to have found a two-bedroom at all.

Still drowsy, I frowned as the fragments of a dream flitted across my memory. No, not a dream—a nightmare. Something about being trapped in a mad scientist’s lab. I shook my head and snuggled deeper into Jay, and the blankets. We were going to have stop watching those low-budget horror movies right before bed.

“Good morning,” his voice rumbled.

I looked up to see him smiling sleepily down at me. “Good morning,” I murmured back.

“Are you sorry you let me sneak in last night?” he asked.

“Shh,” I said, putting a finger over his lips. “Keep your voice down. No, I’m not sorry. I’m glad you came. I don’t want to go through mate withdrawal again—ever—if I can help it.” I smiled up at his face, which was bathed in golden morning light. “I wish you could stay, but I don’t think Cali’s ready to meet you just yet.”

Jay’s handsome face darkened. “I wonder…”

“What?”

“I wonder if you’re making an excuse,” he said, his expression troubled. “Maybe you’re embarrassed to be with me—”

“Jay Taylor!” I smacked his arm and sat up. “That’s not it at all. Don’t you ever say that.”

His expression cleared, and a slow smile grew on his face. He tugged me down and kissed me. “I won’t say it again,” he said, his lips moving against mine. “I never want to make my mate unhappy.”

He leaned over me, pushing me into the mattress and deepening the kiss in a way that made it clear that he was about to make me *very* happy indeed—and then a loud, blaring shriek jolted through my brain.

Reality came crashing into me as I jolted from my bed.

The facts hit me all at once: I was *not* in my apartment in Minnesota. I was in my dorm room at Tottenville. Alone.

I dropped my head into my hands as the rest of it came back—I had been with Jay last night, but it had been in Emmett’s lab. My face flushed as I remembered being interrupted by Emmett before fleeing the room. Oh god, that was going on my Top Ten Embarrassing Moments in my entire life list.

I looked up at the ceiling, confused. Was that why I’d had that dream about Jay? It was a strange dream. Very… *familiar*. And it had just felt so real. Almost as though it wasn’t a dream at all, but a memory. Maybe it was. My memory was all messed up, and maybe things were starting to come back just like Jay had said they would eventually. I knew we were supposed to be mates, but up until quite recently, I really hadn’t felt anything special. Except… that dream had been something else. That dream had made Jay feel more than special. That dream had made me feel like he and I were meant to be.

The shrill sound of the alarm continued, and I shook myself out of my reverie. What the hell was I doing? I didn’t have time to dwell on dreams or Jay or anything else right now. If my alarm was going off, that meant I had class!

I fought my way out of the tangled sheets and yanked off my pajamas as I hurried to the bathroom.

I hurried through my shower, trying very hard *not* to think of what might have happened between Jay and me if Emmett hadn’t crashed in and interrupted our lab hookup.

I threw on clothes and yanked open the door—and nearly screamed at the sight of Winifred just standing there in the doorway.

She looked bored, while my heart slammed in my chest in a panic. “Jesus, a little warning next time?” I gasped.

I stared at her, not seeing her annoyed expression, but the image of her in full vampire attack mode from last night. But—as terrifying as that would have been all on its own—she’d also had those terrible orange eyes burning in her face. I backed up against my door, wishing with my whole heart that Jay would magically appear at my side.

“What do you want?” I demanded, when she didn’t respond to me the first time.

Winifred rolled her eyes. “I’m escorting you to your classes. Did you forget, or are you actually brain dead?”

My heart was pounding hard, and I watched her, waiting for an attack. But none came. She looked… normal. And the other Tottenville students were streaming through the hall, on their way to class. The total normality of that made me feel slightly calmer.

I swallowed hard. “And what about last night?”

“What about it?”

“What did you do last night?” I ventured.

Winifred shrugged, and her face twisted as she yawned. “Nothing. Almost fell asleep guarding you.”

Was she being sarcastic? Was she trying to trick me? Or did she really not remember chasing me down, trying to kill me? Something was going on here, but I didn’t know what it could be.

Confused and worried, I darted a glance down the hall—where the students heading to class were starting to thin out—then at Winifred, who was glaring at me, looking annoyed. It was hard to tell because her eyes had narrowed, but… was there an orange glow to them? Or was that just a reflection from the window?

“Alright, weirdo,” I said slowly. “Let’s go.”

“Fantastic,” Winifred muttered as she fell into step beside me.

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Half an hour later, I looked around the huge biology classroom at the other Tottenville students, idly wondering if any of them thought that learning about vampire frog anatomy was as weird as I thought it was. I hadn’t even known vampire frogs existed. But then again, I hadn’t known vampire rats existed either, so…

I rested my chin in my hands as the professor—a small man with a long grey beard—droned on. I wondered what other vampire creatures there were. Vampire dolphins? Vampire eagles? Had there been vampire dinosaurs? I didn’t know, and on reflection, I didn’t *want* to know.

“—and here is where you would find the fangs on a vampire frog,” Professor Windgate wheezed, using his laser pointer to circle the mouth of the frog on the PowerPoint presentation. “Small, but highly venomous.”

“*Did you hear?*”

I straightened up. The whisperer hadn’t been speaking to me—they were leaning in to talk to the person sitting just behind me—but I knew the sound of gossip when I heard it.

“*Hear what?*”

“*About Professor Laurence?*”

My ears pricked up.

“*No! What?*”

“*He was caught banging a student in the Observatory!*”

“*What?*”

“*Yeah!*” The whisperer started to giggle. “*Under the Milky Way.*”

I cringed and sank down into my seat. Holy shit. If they were talking about Emmett… I thought about how Jacqueline had been implying there was something going on between the two of us. So, if they were talking about him, did that mean students were spreading rumors about me, too? I shot a nervous glance around the class. Professor Windgate hadn’t strayed from his lecture on the many ways the vampire frog could kill you, but no one in class seemed to be paying any attention. The story about Emmett was spreading fast, and whispers were moving through the large room like wind through a clearing.

Most students looked shocked to hear the story, but there were a fair few who laughed in response, and the sound of the hushed giggles grated on my raw nerves.

My heart was pounding, and my mouth felt dry as the Sahara. Did they suspect me? Were people looking at me?

I twisted in my seat to look at the whisperer behind me—a tall girl, with short dark hair.

“Do they know who the student is?” I asked, gripping the edge of my desk so hard my knuckles had turned white.

Another student—a guy to my right with a small, pointed face—leaned in. “I heard it was one of the new students.”

My heart hammered painfully. I was one of those new students. There’s no way the other vampires in the class didn’t know that. I wish they’d come out and say it…

The dark haired girl’s face twisted into a mean smile. “I heard it was more than one.”

My throat constricted. I couldn’t breathe. I was going to pass out right in the middle of the vampire frog lab.

“Miss… Spillane,” Professor Windgate called out, looking down at his roll. “Please come to the front and point out the liver.”

I had no idea what he was talking about, but I got to my feet. I didn’t feel in control of my body as it moved me to the front of the classroom. I was in full panic mode, my thoughts nothing but dull white noise as I walked toward the dissected frog on Professor Windgate’s lab table.

Professor Windgate looked at me expectantly, and just as I opened my mouth to tell him I had no idea where the hell the liver was—or maybe to throw up, I wasn’t sure which—the classroom door opened and a stern woman with a shining black bob walked in.

“Yes?” Professor Windgate asked, looking over at her.

“Lola Spillane is needed in Professor Laurence’s office. *Immediately*.”

**Episode 1599**

XAVIER

Gasping, I was pulled deeper into the strange, dark pool. The hand holding onto my wrist was terrifyingly strong, and even matching it with my own strength, I couldn’t wrench free.

“Xavier! Get away from there!” Ravi screamed at me. I couldn’t see him, but his voice sounded frantic. “Don’t let it drag you under! You’ll drown!”

*No shit, and here I was thinking I’d float.*

My heart was thudding hard—hard enough I could feel it in my throat. My thoughts went—as they always did—to Cali. This must have been how she’d felt when she’d been pulled under the water in the ghost pond. She must have been so scared. I had to get out of this. I had to get back to her.

As if suddenly electrified, my werewolf instincts roared to life. I pulled harder, fighting to escape the grasp of the bony hand before I was pulled all the way into this haunted death pool. Ravi was right—I couldn’t let this thing pull me under. Chest deep, it occurred to me that Ravi was still yelling, but I couldn’t make out what he was saying. A thought struck me in the midst of my struggle. Could Ravi have had something to do with this? Had he tricked me?

But there was no time to answer these questions, because—despite my best efforts—my head slipped below the surface of the water.

Instinctively, I held my breath, closed my eyes, and waited for the freezing water to rush into my nose and ears. But… nothing happened. I opened my eyes and looked around, baffled. This wasn’t water? Whatever the hell was surrounding me felt like a cold, thick mist, and it swirled before my eyes, blocking my view of the surface. I could hear whispers all around me, and whatever had a hold on my wrist hadn’t loosened its grip.

Angry now, I kicked out—hard—and connected with something. I had kicked the body of the underwater—underfog?—revenant, and it growled in pain. I kicked again, then, inspired, went in. I wasn’t dying, so I went full attack mode on the revenant—feeling brittle bones snap like twigs as I rained down blows—until it released its hold on me.

I shook my newly freed wrist. I could kick a revenant’s ass in *any* dimension.

But my celebration was short-lived, for, just as I thought this, dozens of pairs of orange eyes lit the mist around me.

My blood seemed to freeze in my veins as I circled in the mist. Each pair of orange eyes burned like a tiny hell. I looked up, above me, trying to determine where I’d come from. Where the fuck was the surface of the pool? I turned in every direction, but there was nothing but darkness.

*Fuck.*

This wasn’t good.

“Xavier!”

I spun around. Ravi was suddenly beside me. He had a rope tied around his waist, and it trailed off into the darkness from which he had emerged.

He looked all around, his eyes wide with shock and terror. “What the hell is this place? I came down here thinking I was going to fish you out of a pond?” He turned and saw the orange eyes peering at us from the darkness. “Oh shit. What now?”

The answer suddenly became crystal clear. “Shift now, we can take ‘em together.”

Ravi still looked freaked out, but he nodded and we both shifted. We backed up against each other, ringed by the circle of glowing revenant eyes.

I was tense, my jaws snapping at the slightest movement, my hackles raised. I was angry as fuck, and ready for this fight to start. Ravi was pawing at the misty ground next to me, and I could sense he was feeling the same.

*At your signal.*

I nodded, grateful to have Ravi back.

The revenants were closing in, and it was suddenly clear that it was now or never.

*Now!*

We lunged.

The fighting was hard as hell. We were in some kind of netherworld, and it was impossible to perceive depth or space. The revenants seemed to understand it better than us, and they would disappear and reappear without any understandable logic. I was nearly cut by one of them as it appeared out of nowhere. I was going to have to watch out for that. I didn’t want to end up like Pip—or Greyson.

Could I even kill one of these things?

I spun around, just as Ravi dug his claws into one and ripped its head clean off. The thing spewed a bright orange gas that looked like toxic fumes. Ravi turned his head quickly away, coughing, and I watched as the revenant’s body floated gently away, disappearing up into the fog.

What the hell was this place? It was like we were in outer space. There were no rules here—no gravity, no light, no matter.

My thoughts were interrupted as a revenant lashed out at me, drawing me back into the fight. I ducked and punched back, but I was struggling. I was starting to feel winded. I just couldn’t seem to catch my breath. I needed to get out of here—I needed air.

I struck the revenant and sent rushing it backward. I pushed myself upward toward the end of Ravi’s rope, fighting to get to the surface, but… where *was* the surface? All I could see was darkness. My lungs were burning like fire, and I was starting to see black spots in the corners of my vision. I knew this feeling—I was about to lose consciousness. I shook my head, pushing hard. I had to get to the surface. I looked up, and there was a light. It was Cali! She was calling for me, and I had to get to her. I reached up to touch her… and the ground fell out from underneath me. I was falling, all the way back down, away from her. And then the darkness was complete.

My head slammed onto a hard surface, and I winced. I choked and gasped, coughing up watery liquid as I turned onto my side. My lungs burned as I sucked in greedy gasps of air and, slowly, my vision began to clear.

I opened my eyes and looked down. I had shifted back to my human form, but—weirdly—I wasn’t naked. I was dressed in a black suit. What the hell? This place was getting stranger and stranger… I didn’t like getting jerked around. My body was still geared up for a fight, but the revenants were nowhere to be seen.

I was in a dining room, but not one that I had any familiarity with. It sure as hell wasn’t the pack house. *That* dining room was used infrequently for actual dining. I was pretty sure there was a trio of Blue Bloods asleep under my dining table at home. *This* dining room was formal, with long windows hung with velvet, and filled with the blackness of night. The table was set with delicate china and decorated with giant bowls overflowing with fruit and golden candlesticks. There was a fire crackling in the hearth at the end of the room, and I frowned into it. Where the hell was I? How did I get here? Where was Ravi?

“Welcome, son.”

That voice sent a shiver down my spine. I twisted around and saw Silas sitting at the shadowy end of the table, in the seat farthest away from the cheerfully dancing flames. He smiled at me and gestured for me to join him.

I got to my feet, too baffled to do anything but obey. “Where am I?”

He gave me a slow, satisfied smile. “You’re right where you’re supposed to be, son. With your father.”

I stared at him. He might as well have been speaking a different language, as much as I understood what he’d just said to me.

He didn’t seem concerned by my reaction. “I hope my favorite son is hungry. I had something special prepared just for you.”

My gut told me to shift again. To attack. But something deep within me told me I wouldn’t be able to.

Something of my thoughts seemed to show in my face—or Silas had developed the ability to read minds—because he smiled. “You want to kill me, don’t you?” He chuckled. “Surely that can wait until after we eat.”

My eyes went to the table, and to the utensils at each plate. The plates and bowls were fine china—bone, most likely. What were the chances that the forks and knives were made of silver? If they were, maybe I could stab Silas with a knife? I could end this, right now.

Before I could make a decision, Silas got to his feet. He reached for a large carving knife, and as he raised it, the blade glinted dangerously in the candlelight.

He looked over at me, and a smile twisted his face. “But perhaps you would like to do the honors, Xavier?”

He held the knife out to me.

Without taking my eyes from him, I moved forward. Every muscle in my body was tensed, ready to attack if he so much as breathed aggressively, but he simply handed me the knife.

I flipped it in my hand and gripped it. I was getting ready to drive it into the bastard’s heart when Silas lifted the domed lid of a large silver serving platter with a flourish.

“For you, son!”

What he’d revealed made me stop cold.

It was Greyson’s severed head. His skin was waxy, and his eyes stared up at me.

A wave of freezing shock washed over me, and the knife slipped from my hand, clattering to the floor.

“Isn’t this what you’ve always wanted?” Silas asked. He took a step closer, and his eyes flashed. “I can show you how to make it happen, son.”

**Episode 1600**

“*Run!*” I screamed as I hurried down the stairs. “Everyone! *Run!*”

But Greyson wasn’t heading away from the immediate danger, he was running toward *me*. He wrapped his massive arms around me, lifted me off my feet, and carried me swiftly down the rest of the stairs.

“Are you okay? Cali?” he demanded. “Are you all right? What happened?”

I didn’t answer. I looked over his shoulder at the black fog that was pouring down the stairs like water through a broken dam, engulfing everything it touched. I couldn’t even see the stairs anymore, and the entire upstairs hallway was obscured. I squeezed my eyes shut. “Oh god, this is all my fault.”

“Cali, what the hell is going on?”

I could hear my pulse beating wildly in my ears. I should never have let Torin read from the online scan of that ancient scroll. Now we were going to have to move—again. Where the hell were we going to go? It wasn’t like there was *another* empty pack house out there for us to move into—

“Cali!” Greyson gave me a gentle shake, like he was trying to wake me up. “It’s okay,” he said, like he could somehow hear all the worries cycling through my mind. “Just tell me what happened so I can deal with this.”

I took a shuddering breath, trying to get my jumbled thoughts in order. “Well, it all started when I contacted Steinar about getting some information from the Obaltarion.” Greyson’s face darkened, but he didn’t interrupt. “And I then I logged onto the website—”

“What website?” Big Mac demanded, charging over, her eyes flashing angrily. Kira was running in her wake, looking around at the spreading fog. “Cali, what did you do?” The last thing I needed was one of Big Mac’s angered “I told you so” rants.

“She was just trying to tell me,” Greyson said evenly.

“So, like I was saying, I had logged onto the website, and I was just doing some research, but then I…” I trailed off, my heart pounding hard. “Then I…”

“Then you *what*?” Kira burst out. “Did you do this?”

“Stop trying to blame her,” Greyson snapped. He looked around at the black fog. “Can you just stop this, whatever it is?”

“They’re right!” I burst out, putting my hands over my face and burying it in Greyson’s shoulder. “I should have stopped reading from that thing. But we didn’t know what was happening, I swear. We didn’t mean to do it!”

Big Mac’s eyes flashed dangerously. “Exactly what kind of research were you doing, Cali?”

“She can tell us while we get the hell out of here,” Greyson muttered, casting a dark look around.

The forward progress of the fog had slowed slightly, but it seemed to be heavier than air, and it was sinking and settling on the ground, spreading quickly across the floor.

“I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!” Torin was screaming. He was perched on a couch in the living room, like he was hiding from a scurrying mouse. “I didn’t mean it! I swear!”

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “Nothing but trouble, the whole lot of you.”

“Can you stop it?” Greyson said coldly.

Big Mac glowered at him and pushed past him, muttering, “What would any of you idiots do without me?” She gestured impatiently to Kira, and the two of them stood before the spreading fog.

I strained to hear them as they began to chant, but the words were too low and too fast. It was clearly a spell of some kind, though, because the floor beneath our feet began to vibrate, and after a moment the fog stopped moving. It began to solidify before our eyes, crystallizing into thousands of tiny spheres, like tiny black marbles. They hung—suspended—for a moment, then fell all at once onto the hard, wooden floor. The sound was cacophonous, and I put my hands to my ears. But instead of rolling every which way, as soon as the spheres hit the floor, they dissolved into tiny puffs of smoke.

It was perfectly quiet for a moment, and everyone waited, breathless.

“The lights are back on!” came a shout from the kitchen.

“I can see my room!” someone else called from upstairs.

Big Mac and Kira pushed past Greyson and me to walk upstairs. They stopped at the head of the stairs and peered down the hall, checking to see that everything was at it should be. Then Big Mac turned the full force of her anger on me.

“Start talking,” she snapped.

Greyson set me back down on my feet. I swallowed hard, and he caught my hand, giving it a little squeeze. It was a small gesture, but I appreciated it. It was a signal that he was here with me.

I shrugged, trying to appear casual, and looked around. “You know, maybe we’re making too big of a deal about this. Nobody got hurt, right? I mean, we’ve been in worse situations.”

The way Big Mac was glaring at me made me choke on the remainder of my excuses. Damn, that woman could be scarier than an entire horde of revenants.

My mom walked over. She’d been cowering near the living room, and when she looked at me, her expression was one of deepest concern. “We just need to understand what happened, Caliana.”

“What’s left to understand?” Big Mac bellowed, hitting the banister with her fist. “Your daughter played with dark magic, and she’s damn lucky that nobody died!”

My heart pounded. Torin was actually the one who’d done the scroll reading, but I wasn’t about to point that out. He’d caused the fog, but I wasn’t going to throw him under the bus.

“MacKenzie,” my mom said, clearly trying to be reasonable, “I’m sure Cali didn’t mean to—”

“I did it.”

Everyone looked over at Torin, who had squeaked out the words.

I felt terrible for the guy. He looked terrified.

“He didn’t mean to. It was just an accident!” I explained.

“Playing with dark magic is never an accident,” Big Mac snapped. “It’s foolish.”

“Stop!” Greyson boomed. He shook his head. “Throwing blame around isn’t helping anything.”

“Greyson is right,” Mrs. Smith said. “What’s important is what we can learn from this. And since we’re fighting dark magic, we can use all the insight we can get. Why don’t we all go into the living room and discuss this? Calmly,” she added, with a pointed look at Big Mac.

I took a breath, relieved that I wasn’t about to be eaten alive by Big Mac, and nodded. “Sounds good to me.” As everyone began to move to the living room, I sidled up to Greyson. “I really am sorry,” I murmured. “I was only trying to help.”

He smiled and gave my hand another squeeze. “I know. Don’t worry, love.”

In the living room, all eyes on me, I sat next to Greyson and took another deep breath. “Well, the good news is that I know who’s hiding in the Orb.”

“*What?*” Big Mac gasped out.

Without any more interruptions or accusations, I told everyone about the library and the scroll and everything we’d learned about Letifer—how he’d lost his beloved, Deidamia, and tried to use magic to get her back.

“Anyway,” I said, spreading my hands in front of me, “he was locked in the Orb, and that’s where he still is. And will be. For eternity, apparently. And that’s who we’ve been dealing with.”

I’d been so nervous about getting everything out that I hadn’t noticed that the room had gone dead quiet. When I looked up, everyone was staring at me, wide-eyed with shock.

“I-I can’t believe you had access to that kind of knowledge, Cali,” Kira stammered. “It shouldn’t have been so easy as reading a page off the internet. Ritual magic like that has untold power. I’d like to meet the idiot who thought it’d make for good clickbait and turn him into a toad.”

“Well… there was a warning,” I admitted.

“It had a skull,” Torin added, not helpfully.

Greyson raised a brow. “Is that really relevant, Torin?”

“It was a really scary skull,” Torin muttered petulantly.

Big Mac rounded on me. “Didn’t I warn you about meddling in witchcraft, girl? When will you ever learn?’

“MacKenzie,” Mrs. Smith said, her tone admonishing.

“I wasn’t meddling,” I exclaimed. “I was *researching*.”

But I could feel my cheeks heating with a flush. I felt foolish, like I’d let everyone down. I had hoped that my research would lead to something useful. Instead, I’d just scared the crap out of everyone in the pack house and lost whatever small amount of trust I’d been able to earn with Big Mac. *And* I was going to have to go around resetting all the clocks tonight. All around, it had *not* been a great day.

“Well, we know more than we did before,” Greyson said stoutly, supportive as always.

I gave him a weak smile. It felt good to know that I could count on having him in my corner.

Big Mac did not look pleased. “Yes, but *what* exactly are we supposed to do with this newfound knowledge?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but then I closed it again. The truth was, I didn’t know.

There was a moment of awkward silence.

Greyson broke it, standing and turning to Torin. “Go find Marta. We need to talk to her.”

“Um, not to interrupt, but I’ve been here the whole time,” Marta said from the corner of the room. She raised a hand and waved at Greyson.

Greyson turned to her. “I know you said summoning Silas sounded too daunting for you, but would you be willing to try summoning Deidamia?”

**Episode 1601**

MARTA

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Greyson wanted me to summon some sort of evil demon’s lover? Was he serious? And his reasoning was incredible—I was too nervous to summon Silas, so maybe I’d feel that Deidamia was a safer choice?

I didn’t see either option as anything I wanted to get involved in. Just the opposite. I wanted to stay as far from both as humanly possible. But everyone was looking at me. I had to say *something*. I swallowed hard—my throat had suddenly gone very dry. I tried to get my mouth to work, but I think all I succeeded in doing was looking like a fish out of water.

“If we can summon Deidamia,” Greyson began, cutting the silence, “we might be able to learn more about Letifer as a being, and also what led to his capture, from someone who actually knew him.”

“Greyson is right,” Cali said. “If we know what stopped Letifer before, we might be able to do it again.”

I had to admit that it made sense. We could learn from history. But I still wasn’t sure.

“Maybe Marta should take a minute to think about it,” Big Mac said loudly, standing. She looked over at me. “I don’t think you realize how much you’re asking of her, Greyson.”

“Yes, a moment to think would be good, thanks,” I muttered as I stood and stumbled out of the room. I hustled into the foyer and out the front door, pulling it closed behind me. I leaned against it and drew in a deep breath of cold, autumn air.

“You know you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to.”

I jumped in surprise. Despite knowing that Lilac was attached to me, that didn’t seem to tamper down my shock that he could just pop up anywhere at any time. Especially times when I didn’t want anyone to see me.

“I know,” I said irritably. “Nobody is forcing me to do anything, but… I don’t know.” I sighed, shaking my head.

“But what?” Lilac asked softly. “What don’t you know?”

“I feel like I should do something to help the pack. They took me in when I had nowhere else to go.”

“But you’re not a member of the pack,” Lilac pointed out, “and this is a pack problem. There’s no reason for you to get involved, Marta.”

“I’m *already* involved, Lilac. Look around. And why are you so concerned with me, anyway?” I asked irritably. I moved a few steps away, trying put some distance between us.

Lilac looked a little flustered. “What? I’m not! I-I just don’t like anyone feeling like they have to do something that they don’t want to do, is all,” he spluttered.

I narrowed my eyes. I didn’t buy this excuse, but I didn’t push the issue. “The Redwoods might not be my pack, but they *are* yours. And Violet’s. I would have thought you’d want me to help for your sister’s sake, at least.”

Lilac leaned back against the side of the house. “I do. I’m worried about the pack, of course, but this seems like a such a shot in the dark. Like this weirdo’s girlfriend is going to tell us anything useful. Or even be around. And it sounds dangerous.” He looked over at me. “Crazy dangerous.”

“I know that,” I snapped. “That’s why I had a minor panic attack in there, okay? I don’t need to be reminded that it sounds risky.”

I bit my lip, thinking hard. How many dangerous things had I seen pack members do for each other—and for me? I thought about how Charlie and Violet had both risked their lives to help me escape from Bert and the vampires, and how everyone here had made me feel welcome when I’d felt so lost afterward. I looked up at the pack house, which loomed up against the fall sky. There had to be a reason why I was here. There had to be a reason why I’d outlived my lifetime, survived a crazy poltergeist, and was a medium—here, at this place, in this moment.

And Lilac was wrong about one thing—this wasn’t just a pack problem. Whatever was going on here, it was affecting me, too. And I couldn’t just sit back and expect everyone else to solve it for me. I didn’t punch and bite people, but that didn’t mean I was useless. I was a medium, and they needed a medium’s help. Maybe it was time to accept that and *do* something. Maybe this was what I was meant to do.

I wouldn’t have called myself a brave woman by any means, but I felt a raw determination fill me up from inside. A sense of purpose I hadn’t felt in a long time, if ever.

“Wait,” Lilac said, putting a cool hand on my arm. “What are you going to tell them?”

“I’m going to tell that that I’ll summon whoever and whatever they want,” I said firmly, and yanked open the door.

“Marta!”

Ignoring Lilac’s objections, I strode back into the living room, where everyone was still gathered. They looked up expectantly when I entered.

“Let’s do it,” I said, balling my sweaty hands into fists at my sides.

“Now, hold on,” Big Mac said, getting to her feet. “Marta, we need to talk about this—”

“You heard her,” Greyson interrupted. “She said yes. She wants to do this.”

Big Mac shot a glare at Greyson and turned back to me. “Marta, are you sure you’ve really thought this through? Have you really thought about what could happen here? This isn’t like summoning someone’s dead uncle at a Halloween party. This is drawing someone from the clutches of dark magic—*ancient* magic. We don’t know what could happen. Or who else it might attract to you.”

The concern flashing through her dark eyes was clear as day, and the sight of it made my throat feel tight. Despite her gruff exterior, the witch seemed to really care about me. She looked out for me. It was a nice feeling—if a little strange. It had been a long time since I had someone in my corner. I certainly hadn’t had that with Bert, nor while growing up in the foster home. It was nice to feel like someone was watching my back.

I nodded. “I know it’s a risk,” I told her, “but I have thought about it, and I think it’s best that I at least try to help.”

“Great,” Greyson said, slapping his hands together. “Then it’s all settled.”

“Just a second,” Big Mac snapped. She grabbed my arm and pulled me back into the hallway. “Why are you agreeing to this, Marta?” she demanded, emotion making her voice thick.

I was startled by the sound of it, and the strange shine to her eyes. “Isn’t it enough that I just want to help?” I ventured quietly.

Big Mac’s expression softened. “Are you doing this because you *want* to help, or because you feel like you *have* to?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You’re living here,” Big Mac said, gesturing around. “Eating, sleeping, and being protected. It’s understandable. But I don’t want you doing this because you feel like you don’t have a choice.”

I took a deep breath. “You’ve all done so much for me, this is the least I can do as thanks. I want to do this.”

Big Mac’s eyes didn’t leave mine. They bored into me. “Don’t ever use your magic against your will, Marta. *Never*. Do you hear me?”

“Y-Yes,” I stammered.

“That’s something you can never undo. You have to live with it, forever.” Her eyes went distant, like they were looking at something miles and miles away. “I wouldn’t want anyone to live with that.”

There was so much pain in her eyes, and I knew she was speaking from experience. “I understand. And that’s not what I’m doing, I swear it. I’m offering this because I want to do this. I want to help. Isn’t that why you’re here?”

Big Mac looked at me, her eyes snapping into focus again. “What?”

“Don’t you want to help Mrs. Smith, and the others?”

Big Mac studied me through narrowed eyes. “I suppose you’re right.” Her mouth quirked up, and before I could process it, she had pulled me into a hug.

I was so surprised that I went stiff as a wooden doll.

“I’m going to do everything I can to protect you,” Big Mac said, holding me tight.

I let her words wash over me, and after a moment they loosened my spine. I leaned in, letting myself be supported by Big Mac, for just a moment. “Thank you,” I murmured.

After a moment, Big Mac let go and we headed back into the living room. The murmur of conversation died away as soon as we entered and—again—I felt every eye turn to me.

“Well?” Greyson asked.

I nodded. “I’m going to do it.”

“Wonderful,” Mrs. Smith said, beaming at me. “I knew you would, Marta.”

“Thanks,” Cali said, smiling.

“This is going to be wild!” Torin said, pumping a fist in the air.

“That’s great, Marta. Thank you,” Greyson said, a look of genuine gratitude and relief on his handsome face.

I had never before had the opportunity to do something so meaningful for so many people, and I could feel a flush rushing into my cheeks. I was feeling better and better by the second. I should have done this a long time ago.

“So, what we’re going to want to do is—” Greyson started, but he was interrupted by Big Mac, who stepped into the center of the room and stared around beadily.

“Before we begin,” she announced, “I have a few conditions.”

**Episode 1602**

XAVIER

I reeled back, stumbling, horrified at the sight of Greyson’s still, lifeless head staring up at me. His eyes were glassy and vacant but seemed to be fixed directly on me.

Silas smiled, looking amused. “What’s got you so upset, son? This is exactly what you wanted. And here I’ve done all the work for you—I’ve cut off the living head.” He leaned toward me, his eyes flashing in the candlelight. “Don’t be afraid to embrace your future, Xavier.”

My eyes went to the carving knife, which I’d dropped on the floor. Silas looked down at it as well. He raised his hand upward, and the knife rose up off the floor and hovered in midair, just in front of my face.

“Take it,” he hissed. “Feel the power it contains, and then *use* it. Use it to become Alpha of your pack. Use it to make the girl yours at last.”

I backed away from the knife—and from Silas’s voice, which seemed to be boring into my brain. This wasn’t how it was supposed to be. This wasn’t how I’d planned it. I wanted those things—*both* those things—but I didn’t want to get them by working with Silas.

Greyson’s lifeless eyes shifted in their sockets. “*This is exactly what will happen*,” he said, speaking with a ghost of his natural voice. The sound was horrible—reedy and brittle—and it made me feel like I was going to be sick. “*Have Cali choose you. Then you can get everything you’ve ever wanted. Cali, the pack—and I’ll be there to help you*.”

I stared in horror as the severed head spoke, trying desperately to make sense of what was happening. What the hell did this mean? Could it be that Greyson really *wanted* me to do this? My mind swam as I struggled to piece together a thought.

“No,” I muttered to myself, shaking my head hard. “No, it’s not possible.”

This wasn’t Greyson speaking. This wasn’t what he would want. This was all Silas, trying to turn me into a monster, just like he was. But I wouldn’t do it.

I grabbed the knife from before my face and—gripping the hilt—hurled it at Silas.

Moving as fast as thought, Silas reached out and plucked the knife out of thin air, stopping it just before it reached his face. He held the blade between his clasped hands and looked over at me, the smile fading from his face. “You have made a fatal mistake, son.”

He released his hold on the knife, but it didn’t drop. It continued to hover, then pivoted in midair until the tip of the lethally sharp blade was pointed directly at me.

“But it’s not too late,” Silas continued. His eyes grew intense, and he took a step toward me. “It’s not too late—”

Before I could move or speak, I was grabbed from behind and dragged back, away from Silas. Struggling to draw breath, I fought back, twisting and punching, trying to break away from the arm encircling me and hauling me from the strange room.

“Xavier! What are you doing, man? I’m trying to help you! Chill out!” Ravi shouted as he struggled to keep his hold on me.

The dining room dissolved around me, and Silas faded to black. I blinked, finding myself back in the dark, empty void of the pool. The anger in my chest was replaced by a feeling of frantic panic. My lungs were burning like fire, and those orange eyes were everywhere I looked. There were revenants everywhere, charging toward us.

The nearest one reached out and grabbed my throat, squeezing with its bony hand.

*Fuck.*

I kicked and connected, driving it back. I wriggled free of Ravi’s hold as the revenant reared back for another strike. The revenants were relentless. They didn’t seem to feel any fear, and they didn’t seem to learn. They just kept attacking. Another one appeared, pulling hard at my leg, trying to wrap its sinewy arms around me, keeping me from kicking. Not that it stopped me. I used what little air I had left in my lungs. Shit. This wasn’t good. I didn’t have much time left. I could feel it. Ravi grabbed a hold of my arm and pulled so hard I thought he was trying to rip it from its socket. I didn’t have enough energy to get him to stop so we could fight the revenants. Darkness was crowding in, I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think, couldn’t…

Then, suddenly, I broke the surface of the pond. Next to me, Ravi splashed through, gasping for air. I spat out the dank, dark, foul-tasting water and sucked in huge lungfuls of freezing November air.

We struggled toward the edge of the pond, still feeling the hands clawing at us, trying to pull us back down. I lost my momentum, and Ravi grabbed me by the arm and pulled me the rest of the way, dragging me onto the rocky ledge of the shore. Bony hands reached out, continuing to claw at our feet.

I kicked out with the only strength I had left, and it must have somehow been enough, because the hands drew back, disappearing into the fetid pool.

I fell back, looking up at the heavy grey sky, motionless with absolute exhaustion. The air around us was dead quiet, broken only by the sound of our ragged breathing.

After a long, long time, Ravi spoke. “What the hell happened down there?”

I summoned the energy to turn my head to look at him. “I have no idea,” I admitted. “But I’m pretty sure of one thing.”

“What’s that?” Ravi asked.

“Fuck revenants,” I said, shaking my head.

Ravi nodded with a dark chuckle. “Dead right.” He was quiet for a moment, and when he spoke again, his voice was low and tight. “It was like being in hell, down there.”

I looked at him quickly. “What do you mean?”

He frowned. “You didn’t feel it?”

After everything that had just happened, my mind was working with a lag, so I gave it a second to catch up. “Did you see Silas down there, too?” I asked, managing to sit up.

Ravi’s eyes went wide, and he sat up as well. “You saw Silas? Fuck. That’s messed up.”

“So, what? It’s just your own personal hell down there?”

Ravi shook his head. “I don’t know, man. I didn’t see your father. I saw Joss.” His face went slack, and I could see he was really shaken. “We were just sitting there together, swinging on a porch swing—you know the kind?”

I nodded.

“For a minute there, I was so happy—like, so fucking *happy* to see her…” Ravi looked down, clearly struggling to go on. “But something was off. It wasn’t right. It wasn’t her. It looked like her and almost even sounded like her, but it wasn’t her. Whatever it was, it was just trying to make me think it was her, to keep me down there.” He looked up at me. “That’s what it seemed like it was trying to do, right? Keep us down there? Forever?”

I pushed my wet hair off my face. “Hell if I know. I’m just glad we’re out of there.” I glanced over at the pond and felt a shiver run down my spine, but it didn’t have anything to do with the water or the cold wind blowing through the clearing. It had everything to do with the image of Greyson’s lifeless eyes, staring at me. That shit was going to haunt me for a long time. I shook my head and looked over at Ravi. “Thanks, man. For all your help in there.”

I didn’t mention that I had wondered if he’d planned the whole thing. I felt guilty enough about that without bringing it up.

Ravi nodded. “Sure, man. Any time.” He gave me a grim smile. “But hopefully we won’t ever see those things again.”

“Yeah, well, I wouldn’t count on that.” I looked around. “We should get going.”

Ravi nodded, and we got to our feet, shaking off the water and brushing off the rocks and sand.

“We need to tell the rest of the pack about this. We’re going to need to figure out what to do.” Ravi was nodding when I saw something at his feet that caught my eye. “What the hell is that?”  
 Ravi stepped back, and we both bent to get a closer look. “Are those footprints?” he asked.

I frowned. “How, though? I looked around when we got here—there were no tracks leading to or coming from the pool.”

“So where did these come from?” Ravi asked.

I shook my head. “No idea. They’re not ours.” I could tell that from the strong, pungent smell—sour and acidic. They belonged to a stranger.

Ravi blew out a breath. “I’m guessing we’re going to follow them.”

“You’re guessing right,” I muttered, my eyes on the tracks.

We followed them through to the path, and then as they veered off into the trees.

“Wait,” Ravi said. “Have the footprints turned into—”

“Wolf tracks. Yeah, they have,” I said grimly. I looked up, realizing in a moment that the tracks were headed straight for the pack house.

Without another moment’s hesitation, I shifted to my wolf and broke into a full sprint. I only had one thought in my head: *I have to protect Cali.*

**Episode 1603**

CHARLIE

I paused at the doorway to the gym and felt the dread filling my soul. I was about to walk in and hear a lecture given by none other than my own *mother*. This was possibly going to be the most awkward few hours of my entire life. Could anything be worse?

Short of standing on stage completely naked, I doubted it.

“Hey, Charlie, are you heading in?” Zachery asked, stepping next to me, his face alight with excitement. Next to him, Reggie and Aisha looked over. “It’s so cool that your mom is doing this.”

“Yeah, I can’t wait to hear what she’s got to say,” Aisha added, grinning.

“I doubt you’d feel the same way if it was your mom,” I muttered as I let their momentum carry me forward to find seats in the rows of folding chairs. I dropped heavily into my seat and looked down, staring at my muddy shoes.

“This seat taken?”  
 I looked up to see Sophie taking the empty seat next to mine. “It’s all yours.”

“How are you feeling?” she asked quietly as she settled in.

I looked quickly at her. “My head’s okay, but I don’t want to be here.”

She glanced to the front of the gym. “I guess I can understand that.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s not that—well, it’s not *just* that. I’m worried about…” I lowered my voice another octave. “About Violet.”

Sophie reached over to grab my hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “Think of it like this: if anyone around here had found her, the whole camp would know about it.”

She was probably right, but somehow her words didn’t make me feel any better. I couldn’t shake the memory of seeing Violet covered with all that blood. And the thought of her running through the woods, alone and hurt… It was just too much to bear.

The ancient sound system gave an ear-splitting crackle, and everyone’s attention went to the front of the gym. Sergeant Pepperdine stood on the stage at the rickety lectern, glaring at all of us.

“We’re here to welcome a special guest speaker. And you’re all going to listen hard, you hear me?” No one responded, which seemed to please him. “Join me in welcoming the acclaimed hunter, Iris Kim!”

Applause filled the gym as Sergeant Pepperdine took a step back. As my mom walked toward the lectern, I sank lower into my chair. This was a nightmare. I wanted to get out of here. I wanted to go look for Violet, but instead I had to sit here and listen to my mom—which I guess wouldn’t have been so bad, except that everyone here *knew* she was my mom. What was that thing Romilly had told me about *not* attracting unwanted attention?

I sank an inch lower in my seat as I felt some of the other students shift their gazes to me for only a moment. *Yeah, no extra-special attention on me now, that was for sure.*

“Thanks for having me, Sergeant,” my mom said, giving Sergeant Pepperdine a gracious smile. He flushed a little and gave her an awkward salute, then took his own seat. She turned back to the audience. “I want to tell you a little bit about myself before I start. I attended this camp when I was your age, and it was here that I learned everything that has made me a successful hunter. I now operate as a hunter in Minnesota, where I live with my family. I want you to know how much I believe in the work of the Land O’Lakes organization. The faculty here have dedicated their lives to teaching generations of diverse hunter families, and we are lucky to have them.”

There was another round of applause, and Sergeant Pepperdine actually smiled, though it looked like it hurt him to do it.

“I originally intended to speak to you about the methodology of tracking vampires, but—given the recent situation that has arisen here at camp—I’m going to focus instead on *werewolves*.”

My heart gave a painful thump. *Seriously, Mom?*

I shot a nervous glance around me at the faces of my fellow campers, all turned toward my mom with expressions of deep interest. I thought of how each and every one of them would turn on me in an instant if they knew what I was. Well, maybe with the exception of Sophie. I looked up at my mom, who looked cool and collected as she spoke. *Why* would she do this? Was this some sort of punishment?

A tension headache was starting at my temples, and I looked down at the bracelet encircling my wrist. It made me think of Violet. Hell, *everything* made me think of Violet. But at least I’d managed to get one of these protection charms onto her before she’d run off. If she’d managed to survive the attack by Seth and Kate, she was probably safe. The thought of how many variables there were in that statement made me feel slightly sick, but I tried to breathe through it. I hated everything about this. I didn’t know when I was going to see her, or hold her again—

My thoughts were interrupted by a hard poke in my back. I turned around to see Chad sitting behind me, the collar of his salmon-pink polo shirt popped up.

“What do you want?” I snapped.

He tipped his chin toward the front of the gym. “Is that really your mom?”

I narrowed my eyes, looking for the trap. “You like asking questions you know the answers to?”

Chad looked impressed rather than annoyed at my jab. “Wow. Hard to believe.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I mean, she’s really hot.”

Something inside me snapped, and I shot to my feet and grabbed Chad by his upturned collar. “*Shut the fuck up.*”

“Hey, it was a compliment, asshole. She’s a MILF—”

I tightened my grip, cutting off his airway.

Chad squirmed. “Hey, relax, man,” he squealed. “Don’t hurt my arm—”

I didn’t wait to hear anymore. I cocked back my fist and punched him in the throat.

The campers around us freaked out. They ran, screaming and yelling—knocking over chairs and yelling, “FIGHT!”

All I could hear was the blood pounding in my ears until my mother’s calm, yet firm voice spoke over the speakers. “We could do without the little distraction from the back. Sit. Down.”

Without waiting for anyone to fill her in, I shoved the gasping Chad to the ground and sprinted out of the gym. I burst into the cold air outside and bent over, hands on my knees, trying to catch my breath.

I shouldn’t have punched him. I knew I’d gone too far—but that fucking Chad. That was supposed to be a compliment? To call my mom a *MILF*?

My hands balled into tight fists, and I had to stop myself from turning around to find Chad and do more than just punch him in the throat. I had to do *something*. I had to get away. My muscles felt tight, and my head felt like it was about to explode. I just felt… *constrained*—so I started running. Which was what I did whenever I was stressed out. I ran.

And it worked, for a minute. The pressure in my head started to lessen, and I managed to take a deep breath. I dropped my head and lengthened my stride, really finding my rhythm. But as I did, I started to think about Violet. I reached into my back pocket and pulled out my phone. Still nothing.

I picked up my pace even more and, as I looked around, I realized that I was heading for the border fence at the back of the camp. When I reached it, I ran along the perimeter for a while, wondering—not for the first time—if it was there to keep creatures out, or the campers in.

Whatever it had been built to do, it sure as hell wasn’t going to stop me. I *had* to find Violet. I looked back in the direction I’d come—and everyone was still in the gym. I glanced around, taking in my surroundings. Now was as good a time as any, so I leapt up, finding a toehold in the wooden fence, and scaled it quickly. I cleared the top and landed on the hard-packed ground on the other side.

I was about to shift but stopped myself just in time. I stripped off my clothes—the cold air felt good on my skin—and bundled them up, using my belt as a handle, then slid them over my shoulder and shifted.

Seconds later, I was sprinting through the woods. I hadn’t gone half a mile before I picked up Violet’s scent in the dense trees. My instinct was to speed up, but I forced myself to slow down and really think—which direction would Violet have gone?

I’d slowed almost to a stop, looking around, thinking about my next move, when I heard something stirring in the brush behind me. I froze.

Someone was following me.

**Episode 1604**

The emergency meeting had broken up, but I was still on the couch. I was feeling torn about Marta agreeing to summon Deidamia. If it actually worked, it could be invaluable. It could help the pack defeat the Orb, and Silas, and all the gross revenants—all of which would be great. No one would be happier than me to close out this creepy-ass chapter of our lives.

But I knew summoning the dead was always a risk, and summoning this kind of dead could be the craziest thing we’d ever attempted, which was saying something. I would hate to see Marta get hurt. I wasn’t a witch, but I’d seen how things could go very, *very* wrong when dealing with magic.

With a sigh, I got to my feet. Xavier should’ve been back by now, so I went to find him. I walked upstairs and down the hall toward his room, but I slowed when I heard what sounded like a sob from behind a door.

Frowning, I knocked softly, then pushed the door open.

Torin was sitting on the floor in the corner of his room, and his eyes were red from crying.

“Oh my god, are you okay? What’s wrong?” I asked, rushing toward him.

“It’s all my fault,” he wailed. “I should never have read that spell out loud, Cali.”

“Oh, Torin.” I put my arm around him, and he leaned against me, sobbing into my shoulder. “I know that was scary, but you didn’t hurt anyone. I know you didn’t mean to invoke that spell. It’s okay. No one in the pack blames you, either.”

He leaned back with a shaky sigh. “Sometimes I don’t know if I should even be in the human world.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I’ve just tried so hard to fit in, but after this…” He shrugged. “I’m not so sure.” A fresh wave of tears washed over him. “But I can’t even go home. Not now, with the portal closed.”

My heart ached for him, and I hugged him tight. “You do fit in, Torin. Think of all the good you’ve done while you’ve been here. All the people you’ve been able to heal. Some of them wouldn’t have gotten better without you. You’re invaluable, and not just as a bartender.” Torin took a ragged breath. “I just wish *I* could heal *you*. You deserve to be happy.”

He leaned back to look at me. “Do you think so?”

“Oh, Torin, I know so. But you have to believe it, too.”

“Thank you,” he said, smiling at me, though tears were still streaming down his face. Then he frowned, looking suddenly worried. “Do you think Marta’s going to be okay?”

A chill shivered down my spine. “I don’t know for sure. I’m worried, too. But I know Big Mac is looking out for her. She said she’d do everything she could to protect Marta, and if someone as powerful as Big Mac is looking out for her, then she’s going to be fine.”

Torin’s smile came back. “That’s good. Because I like Marta. She’s not like the people from back home.”

There was a knock on the open door, and Greyson leaned into the room. “Everything okay in here?”

I stood and reached out a hand, helping Torin to his feet. “It is now. Right?”

Torin nodded and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. “Right.”

When I looked back at Greyson, I could see that there was something on his mind, so I thought fast. “Hey, Torin, has my dad shown you how to make his famous pumpkin pie yet?”

Torin’s eyes went wide. “You can make *pie* from *pumpkins*?” Without waiting for an answer, he raced from the room. “*Tom!*”

Greyson looked after him, shaking his head. “Interesting guy.”

I grinned. “Admit it, you like him. How can you not?”

“He’s annoying as hell.” Greyson smiled. “But yeah, I like him.”

“You didn’t find me to talk about Torin, did you?”

“I did not.” Greyson leaned against the doorframe—his wide shoulders spanning practically the entire width—and crossed his arms. “Big Mac was pretty hard on you down there. I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“I’m fine,” I said, waving my hand dismissively. “That’s just how she is. How are *you* doing?”

I watched him, wondering if he was going to answer my question honestly—if he was going to open up, even a little. I knew all of this had to be hard on him—all the stress—not that he ever showed it. I wondered if he was going to trust me to share the burden of it.

He shrugged. “I’ll feel better once we know more about what we’re dealing with.”

Once we’d summoned Deidamia, he meant. I thought of Marta, and my stomach twisted nervously. “What do you plan on doing if Marta *is* able to summon Deidamia? Have you thought about what you’re going to ask her?”

“Well, I figure since she was close to Letifer, and was the reason he even made this stupid Orb in the first place, she probably has some first-hand knowledge on what his weaknesses are. Maybe she can even help us destroy the Orb for good.”

“Oh… okay,” I said, frowning. “But what if she’s still in love with him? Would she even help us?”

“I don’t know. I admit it’s kind of a long shot,” he said, “but I feel like it’s one worth taking.”

He looked tense, so I walked forward and into his arms.

“I hope so,” I said, wrapping my arms around his neck for a hug.

His arms slid around me and—for a long moment—we just held each other in peaceful silence. We didn’t speak, just stood there, taking comfort from each other. I wished I could do something to ease his mind. I could see the stress on his face, could feel it in his body.

Maybe he could feel it in mine, too, because he reached down and gently lifted my chin. “It’s okay, love. I can handle whatever Silas and the Orb throw at us. But you have to promise me that you’ll be careful.”

I stood high on tiptoe and pressed a kiss to his lips. “I’ll do my best.”

He smiled. “That’s not a promise.”

I grinned back. “Hey, we’re a pack. So, we’re in this together. I can’t keep myself safe without keeping all of us safe. Those are the rules.”

“Oh, are they?” Greyson laughed, his breath curling at the nape of my neck before he pressed a kiss there.

“Yup, sure are.”

He nodded, then, with one last squeeze, he turned to leave.

I lingered for a moment in Torin’s empty room. I wished Greyson and I could have more moments like that. Quiet, just the two of us.

Then I remembered. *Xavier*.

I had come up to look for him. Where was he? Shouldn’t he and Ravi have gotten back by now? I went back into the hallway.

I knocked on Artemis’s door. “Have either of you seen Xavier or Ravi?” I asked, leaning my head in.

Artemis and Rishika were sitting on the bed, looking at a magazine. They both shook their heads.

“Not for a while,” Rishika said. “Why? Is something wrong?”

“No. I mean—I don’t know. I hope not. But they should be back, and I’m getting a little worried.”

Rishika shut the magazine. “Do you want us to help you look for them?”

“No, that’s okay. I’ve got it. But thanks.”

I headed downstairs, anxiety blooming in my chest. But I was glad to find Torin in the kitchen with my dad, who was explaining advanced pumpkin pie theory. They both looked overjoyed.

I smiled to myself, glad to see that Torin was feeling better about life. I looked through the dining room and the living room, though I knew Xavier wasn’t there. I stepped outside and scanned the wide lawns.

“Where are you?” I murmured. Where had they gone?

Behind me, the door opened and closed, and my mom appeared beside me.

She wrapped a coat around my shoulders. “It’s November, sweetheart. Remember? Not that it’s easy to forget when Dad’s going on and on about pumpkin pie.”

I laughed and drew my arms through the sleeves of the coat.

My mom peered at me. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I said. “Why?”

She frowned. “I didn’t like the way Big Mac was treating you—”

I shook my head. “That’s just the way Big Mac is.”

“I know she means well,” my mom said, “and she obviously cares about Sabine and the rest of the pack, but still. Must she snap at everyone all the time?”

“I’ve been dealing with Big Mac for a long time. I’m used to her.”

My mom didn’t look convinced, and she opened her mouth to say something else, but then she stopped, and her eyes went wide with horror.

“Mom? What is it?”

She was staring at a spot over my shoulder. “Who is that?”

I spun around and froze with terror. There, standing in the middle of the yard, was a man. He was dripping wet, and his head was bent down, his dark, wet hair hanging over so I couldn’t see his face. My jaw felt as though it had been locked into place, but I managed to wrench it open. “Who are you?” I called out in what I hoped was my most intimidating voice. “Don’t… don’t come any closer.”

The man slowly raised his head, and his wet hair fell back from his face, revealing orange eyes that glowed like hellfire.

Immediately, all my attempts at intimidation flew out the window as the breath in my lungs disappeared. “*Ryker?*”

**Episode 1605**

VIOLET

My head was pounding as I opened my eyes. For a long moment, I was so disoriented that all I could do was look blearily around at the garish, blue-flowered wallpaper. The pattern made the headache worse, but it also confused and scared me—where the hell was I?

My heart beat fast as my mind spun, but I felt relief flood through me as it came back to me: I was at the bed and breakfast.

I sat up slowly, carefully, checking in with my body as I moved, but everything felt fine. I was fully healed, although—as I moved my shoulders and rolled my neck—I realized that I was stiff from an over-long sleep on an over-soft mattress. I looked down at the blankets—I was naked beneath them. Okay, now that I knew where I was, I had to deal with the next question: how had I gotten here last night? I frowned, trying to piece everything back together. I remembered realizing I’d left the clothes and going back out to look for them, and then running into those two hunters. They’d wounded me. I had a quick flash of the two of them surprising me in the woods. It had been a shock, and I felt a wave of shame wash over me at the memory of it. I was a werewolf—and a damn strong one at that—but I’d been off my game. I hadn’t been paying attention. I’d been so focused on finding the clothes and so worried about Charlie—

Oh my god—*Charlie!*

I tumbled out of the bed and onto the hardwood floor. My phone was across the room, and I scuttled toward it. I tapped it to wake it up, but it was dead.

“*Shit*,” I muttered, jiggling the charger. The outlet I’d plugged it into must have been a dud. This was so not good. I looked around desperately. I had to call Charlie. I had to let him know that I was all right. I’d seen his wolf—I’d mind linked with him. “Doesn’t this room have another outlet?” I growled, growing frantic.

I looked up quickly when there was a knock at the door. It didn’t take long to see the weirdness of the situation: I was standing in the middle of the room, holding my phone, *naked*. And freezing. Damn Minnesota…

Another knock.

“Um, yes? Who is it?” I asked, my voice still raspy from sleep.

“Miss Blackburn?” It was Mrs. Riggins’s voice, muffled through the door. “Are you in there, dear?”

I dashed over to the chair and grabbed an oversized blue sweatshirt. It was one of Charlie’s lacrosse sweatshirts. He’d loaned it to me when we were first getting to know each other. I slowed my frantic movements just for a moment and pressed the soft fabric to my face. It still smelled like him—like his shampoo and his soap and his cologne—and my heart give a painful throb. I missed him so much. I *had* to get ahold of him.

Another knock.

“Miss Blackburn? Dear? Are you quite all right in there?”

Shaking myself out of my reverie, I yanked the sweatshirt over my head, pulled a couple of stray leaves from my hair, and opened the door.

“Good morning,” I said, trying to sound cheerful as I tugged the sweatshirt down, attempting to cover up more of my bare legs.

Mrs. Riggins looked at me, then over my shoulder, into the room. “Are you alone, dear?”

“Yep.” I nodded. “Is there something I can help you with, Mrs. Riggins?” I asked. I couldn’t imagine why she’d come knocking at my door.

Mrs. Riggins looked back at me. “Well, Miss Blackburn, yes, as a matter of fact. You know that I run a B and B. Do you know what that means?”

I *thought* I did, but given her tone of voice, I started to doubt myself. I opened my mouth to venture an answer, but Mrs. Riggins went on without waiting for my response.

“It means that I run a bed and *breakfast*, dear.” She paused now, waiting.

“Oh,” I said awkwardly. “Right.”

“Well,” she went on briskly. “You missed the proper breakfast I prepared, which is a shame. It was a lovely spread—waffles, two kinds of homemade jam, eggs, sausages, fresh squeezed juice. Just a little something I like to throw together for my guests. I wake up early of course. But that’s no matter. I saved a few things for you. Why don’t you come down and join us?”

I frowned. “*Us?*”

Mrs. Riggins laughed—a high tittering sound. “Well, dear, you’re not my only guest, you know. This isn’t like one of those newfangled Airbnbs,” she added with an irritated sniff. She turned on her heel and headed back downstairs, muttering under her breath. “My mother would roll over in her grave if I ever thought of running something as shameful as that. No proper breakfast buffet? *Never*…”

It was jarring to go from panicking about werewolf affairs to listening to Mrs. Riggins muttering about Airbnb. I fished for something on point to say, but before I could come up with anything, my stomach gave a huge, hungry rumble, reminding me that I’d had no breakfast, and nothing to eat for a long time before that. So I grabbed a pair of sweatpants from the pile, pulled them on, and headed downstairs after the innkeeper.

The kitchen I walked into was large and airy and filled with good smells. It was empty except for Mrs. Riggins, who stood at the large kitchen range, stirring something in a small pot, and a woman with iron-grey hair and a steely look in her eyes.

I smiled at the woman as I walked in, but she didn’t return the smile.

“Violet, this is Mrs. Thorndyke. Marge, this is Violet. She’s staying in the blue room.”

Marge Thorndyke didn’t respond to this, and I slid into a chair at the scrubbed wooden table, feeling very strange and out of place. Part of me wanted to turn right around and escape back upstairs, but I was starving, and there was as warm cinnamon smell coming from whatever Mrs. Riggins had on the stove, and it made my stomach ache with hunger.

So, I gritted my teeth and set about enduring the stony silence. Whatever. It was just one meal. And once I was fueled up, I would head out to search for Charlie.

Mrs. Thorndyke was still watching me, eyeing me warily over the edge of a chipped mug as she sipped her tea. Finally, she set it down. “So, Violet, what brings you out our way?”

I stared at her, confused. “*Our* way? Does that mean you live around here, Mrs. Thorndyke? You’re not staying here as a guest?”

Mrs. Riggins stopped stirring her pot for a moment, and Mrs. Thorndyke shot a glance at her, then back to me.

“I do live around here. I’m having my floors sanded, and RuthAnn here always has a spare bed, so I’m spending a few days here.” She squinted at me. “Now where did you say you were from?”

I shifted in my seat. I *hadn’t* said where I was from, of course, and this woman knew it. “I’m from Minnesota, originally,” I said smoothly.

“Isn’t that lovely, another local. Visiting family… or friends?” Mrs. Riggins asked. She poured something from the pot into a bowl and carried it over to the table, setting it in front of me before I could answer her questions. “Here’s some oatmeal, my special recipe. Lots of cream and sugar and cinnamon.”  
 Mrs. Thorndyke snorted. “More like dessert than breakfast.”

Mrs. Riggins ignored her. “Now you just dig in, Violet.”

I wondered why I was the only one eating, but I picked up my spoon, too hungry to really care. And as I took the first bite, all my concerns went out the window. The oatmeal was so rich and creamy—nothing like any oatmeal I’d ever had before.

“This is amazing, Mrs. R,” I said thickly, through a big bite.

She beamed. “Thank you. It’s a house specialty.”

Mrs. Thorndyke snorted again. She took another sip of tea and looked over at Mrs. Riggins, who had moved to the sink. “RuthAnn, have you decided what you’re going to make for the cookie exchange next month?”

Mrs. Riggins sagged over the soapy dishes. “I haven’t even had a moment to think about it. The holidays just crept up on me. Maybe those soft ginger cookies? The pinwheels? I just don’t know.”

“Well, as long as you don’t bring those godawful slice-and-bake abominations Sue Mortimer tried to pawn off on us last year. Like we weren’t going to notice,” Mrs. Thorndyke said, shaking her head in disgust.

“I know.” Mrs. Riggins shook her head sadly, wiping her soapy hands with a kitchen towel. “There’s nothing worse than cut-rate cookies.” She picked up a large knife from the counter and pointed it at me, her eyes suddenly narrowing. “Except for *werewolves*!”

**Episode 1606**

GREYSON

From this far up in my room the shrill scream that echoed out was nearly imperceptible—but I was on my feet in an instant. It was Cali—I’d have known that sound anywhere—and I was sprinting downstairs before I even had time to think about it. My heart was racing as I plowed into the living room, which was filled with pack members, who all looked up as I careened in.

“Where’s Cali?” I barked, looking around frantically.

No one else seemed nearly as panicked as I was.

“I think I saw her go outside,” Sage ventured tentatively, seeing the stormy look on my face.

I burst outside and found Orla on the porch, holding tight to Cali. Both of them were staring into the distance, looking terrified.

“Cali!” I breathed, following her gaze. “What are you—”

But I didn’t have to finish the question. I could see what they were looking at. I recognized Ryker in an instant, and my stomach dropped like a stone.

“What the *hell*?” I muttered. I took a cautious step forward, squinting into the distance. What the hell was I looking at? It was Ryker, I’d have bet my life on it. The man I’d fought against in the Lupo Finale. The man whose loyal followers had tormented us with the Manus Cruentae. The man who was supposed to be *dead*.

But was he real? Could he be? Was he a ghost?

But then Ryker looked straight at me, and I saw the orange eyes flaming in his head.

*Shit.*

He was a revenant.

This wasn’t good. Was this more of Silas’s doing, or the ghost pond? Was there even a difference anymore? I had a lot of questions, but before I could even start to process them, Cali broke free of her mother’s arms and flew down the porch steps and onto the snow toward Ryker, her face a mask of fury.

“You cheating *bastard*!” she screamed, sprinting straight at him. “You *cheated*! You almost killed my mate!”  
 For a split second, I just stood there, too startled to move. Of course I knew Ryker had almost killed Xavier at the Lupo Finale. He had used silver nail polish, and Xavier had barely lived through it, but it was jarring to see Cali react like this—and to hear her calling Xavier her mate.

But after an instant, I came to my senses and leapt after her, catching her before she got anywhere near Ryker and pulling her back.

“Stop, Cali. *Stop*. That’s not the same Ryker from the Lupo Finale. We don’t even know what he’s capable of. Look at his eyes. He’s a revenant. He was a psychopath when he was alive—I hate to think of what he’s capable of now. Don’t go near him,” I said, because Cali was still fighting to get out of my arms.

Ryker turned his burning orange eyes onto me. “So, we meet again.” His voice was strange. Like a raspy, strained version of the voice I remembered. The revenant speaking through Ryker. “*Alpha*. And you have me to thank for that, don’t you?”

He smiled at me, and I bristled.

“What the hell do you want?” I demanded.

“The same as always.” The orange eyes flamed. “To wipe the Evers brothers from the face of the earth.”

Behind us, the front door burst open.

“*Ryker?* What the fuck is he doing here?” Rishika had come out onto the porch and was staring at Ryker, transfixed. Her eyes narrowed, burning with a desire to fight that I knew I would have a harder time containing than Cali’s. She was barreling toward him in seconds.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me with this.” Putting Cali beneath one arm, I reached for Rishika and managed to catch her before she leapt at Ryker. She was a lot stronger than Cali and was *not* pleased to be held back.

“Let me *go*, Greyson!” Rishika screamed. “Let me go! I’m going to rip that fucking bastard limb from limb! He murdered my family!”

“I know, I know,” I said, speaking loudly so she would hear me. “But he’s not alive, Rishika. Listen to me! Look at him. He’s a revenant.”

“I don’t care!” Rishika was fighting like a wild thing. I was afraid she was going to try to shift in my arms. “I want to crush his skull. I’m going to rip his heart out with my teeth! I can do that to a revenant just as easily!”

I was so focused on restraining Rishika that Cali managed to slip out of my grasp. She charged toward Ryker, and I only just managed to grab her again before she got too close to the creep.

But that was all the chance Rishika needed, and she broke free from me. She shifted in an instant and lunged at Ryker. She hit him with full force, and they crashed to the snowy ground. Within seconds he had shifted beneath her, and the two werewolves were locked into a battle so fast and so intense I could barely see what was happening. But the snarls were earsplitting, and when I turned to Cali my jaw was set. “Stay here. Don’t do *anything*.”

Cali had gone pale as the snow, and her eyes were wide with fear. “Greyson, you have to help her!”

“I will, but I need the pack to back off, okay?” I glanced up at the porch, where the rest of the pack was gathering, their expressions terrified. “Tell the others. I can’t risk anyone else getting wounded by a revenant—the witches aren’t going to show up to save them like they did for me.” I looked over at Rishika and Ryker as Ryker’s wolf gave a scream of pain. “I have to end this now.”

“Greyson—”

But before Cali could say whatever it was she was going to say, I turned—shifting—and leapt into the fight. My vision tunneled down, and I slammed into Ryker. I was hit by a powerful memory of fighting him in just this way at the Lupo Finale. But as Ryker hit back, I realized that revenant Ryker was faster and stronger than mortal Ryker had been, and infinitely more dangerous.

I dodged, avoiding his open jaws and his long, lethal teeth, and angled left, using my own teeth to tear into his flesh.

Ryker snarled and kicked, throwing me off. I bounced on the solid-packed ice, and when I looked up, I saw that he had turned his attention to Rishika. I jumped back up to help, but then I was hit with white-hot pain, so intense it was nearly blinding. My left leg felt like it was on fire, and when it collapsed beneath me and I tumbled to the ground, I felt myself shifting back to my human form.

The snow beneath my back was freezing, and the pain in my leg was blinding. Everything was reminding me that I was human again, completely vulnerable. *What the hell just happened?* What had happened to my leg? It had felt fine before. Why had I shifted back?

I looked over just in time to see Rishika dive for Ryker, snarling and biting. He hit the ground and they rolled, but he delivered a powerful kick and she flew into the air, landing hard eight feet away. She didn’t get up. Ryker turned, snarling, his orange wolf eyes fixed on me. Steam plumed from his snout as he advanced on me.

This was not good. I concentrated, trying to think past the pain throbbing through my leg, trying to shift back, but nothing happened.

*Fuck.*

I was just going to have to fight Ryker in my human form, the best I could. I braced my hands on the snow, preparing to stand.

“Leave them alone!”

I heard her before I saw her. Cali came charging toward me, her eyes alight with fury. She stood in front of me, her small body shielding me from Ryker’s lethal wolf.

“You leave them alone, you bastard!”

“Cali! Are you insane? Get out of here before he rips you apart!” I begged her. She was no match for Ryker. I reached for her hand, trying to drag her away, but the pain in my leg took my breath away.

Cali stepped forward, toward Ryker, who was still advancing menacingly. She raised her hands and sent a blast of her Fae power toward him.

I had to give it to Cali—she caught Ryker completely by surprise. He was stunned, and he tumbled backward with a yelp. Whatever she’d done jarred him so much that he shifted back and lay still, in his human form, in the snow.

Well, I’d take that. I could fight him like that. I started to haul myself toward him. If he was still stunned by the bast, now was as good a time as any.

But then Ryker sat up and looked at Cali. “Thank you,” he said in his strange voice. “I needed that.” He got to his feet.

Cali raised her hands and sent another blast, but Ryker moved quickly, dodging with a speed I wouldn’t have believed if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes. He circled around, and before I could open my mouth to tell Cali to get the hell out of the way, he had reached for her.

He grabbed her, one hand closing around her throat, and lifted her off her feet.

**Episode 1607**

I tried to draw a breath, but I couldn’t do it. I was starting to see stars, and my throat ached where Ryker’s hand was tight against my windpipe.

*I can’t wait to snap that pretty little neck of yours.*

That was what he’d said to me, all that time ago, back at the Lupo Finale. I just hadn’t thought he was actually going to get the chance.

Holy shit, this was terrifying. Darkness was beginning to creep in. Even after all the stuff I’d been through—all the fights, all the battles, almost drowning in a ghost pond, surviving the near-destruction of a supernatural library—having Ryker’s cold, slimy hand tightening around my neck, so close to cutting off my air supply for good, was just a whole other level of terror.

I looked down to where Greyson lay on the ground. His face was white with pain, but he was still struggling to stand up, to get to me, his teeth gritted in agony.

*Don’t worry, love. I’m going to get you out of this.*

Even his voice in my head was racked with pain, and I tried desperately not to cry. I didn’t have the breath for it.

Ryker’s cruel laugh sounded in my ear. “I can’t wait to see the look on Greyson’s face when I kill you—right in front of his eyes.” He leaned closer so I could feel his putrid breath, soft against my skin. “I’m going to be sure to do it nice and slowly, the way I’ve always wanted to.”

I tensed my muscles, trying not to give him the satisfaction of seeing me shake with fear.

“Are you scared?”

I shook my head—or, I tried, anyway. “No,” I rasped, using the last of my breath.

*Hang in there, love. I’ve got you*. Greyson’s grey eyes were steady on me. *I’m going to get you out of this. I swear.*

I tried to cling to this hope. I knew Greyson, and I knew that as long as there was breath in his lungs, he was going to try. He was going to do his absolute best, but right now, the light was starting to fade…

Then, a moment later, I was crashing to the ground.

Ryker had released me.

Above me, there was a chaotic tussle, and I looked up just in time to see Xavier’s wolf fly over my head and sink his teeth into Ryker’s shoulder with a furious snarl.

Ryker threw back his head and gave a piteous howl, then a ripple went through the air as he shifted. Xavier didn’t give him a moment to get his feet beneath him before he attacked again. Fur flew as Xavier attacked—first from one side, then the other.

A moment later, another wolf appeared. It took me a moment, but then I recognized Ravi as he joined the fray.

I clambered to my feet and backed away, watching carefully. I wanted to help, of course, but they were moving so damn fast. First Xavier would be on top, then Ryker would hit and claw and suddenly seem to have an advantage, and then a moment later Ravi would come around and he and Xavier would overpower Ryker again, pinning him to the ground. I just couldn’t see an opening where I could hit Ryker without accidentally striking Xavier.

Another wolf went sprinting past, Rishika, joining the chaotic fight and making it even harder for me to leap in.

I backed further away as the fight grew more chaotic and more intense. Fighting as a revenant, it was clear Ryker was powered with something stronger than any steroid, but Xavier, Ravi, and Rishika together managed to gain control and finally pinned him to the ground.

“Cali,” Greyson called, staggering to his feet, his face pale and sweaty with the effort of it.

I hurried over and slipped my shoulder beneath his arm to support him.

“*Don’t kill him!*” Greyson bellowed.

“*What?*” I gasped, staring up at Greyson. “Why not? I would do it myself if I could. Greyson, he almost choked me to death!”

He looked down at me, his grey eyes soft. He touched his fingers to my throat. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, but what are you doing? Why shouldn’t they kill him?”

Greyson limped over to where Xavier had Ryker pinned to the snowy ground. Ryker had shifted back to his human form but was still struggling like mad to break free. But even as a revenant, he was no match for those three.

With some help from me, Greyson knelt beside Ryker. “What are you?”

Ryker turned his orange eyes to Greyson but didn’t answer.

“How did you get here?” Greyson asked, his voice cold as ice.

When Ryker smiled, the expression chilled me to the bone. “We never left.”

A shiver ran down my spine, and I looked around frantically. “*We?* Are there more of them?”

Ryker turned to me, fixing me with his evil orange stare. “We will *kill* you.”

“You already failed, and we won’t give you a second chance.” Greyson snapped his fingers in front of Ryker’s face, making Ryker look back at him. “Did Silas send you?’

Ryker started to laugh. A deep, hollow, mirthless laugh that made me want to cover my ears and never hear again. It was so incredibly disturbing—I just wanted it to stop.

And then—suddenly—it did. Ryker’s mouth opened and closed, like he was trying to breathe or speak, but no sound came out. For one wild moment, I wondered if my magic had somehow caused this to happen, but no, that couldn’t be. I couldn’t take anyone’s voice. That wasn’t my thing.

I shot a glance down at Greyson. “What’s going on?’

“What’s happening?” Kira shouted as she and Big Mac strode toward us. Big Mac’s eyes were murderous, even more so than they were usually. I could see she was concentrated on something. Was she the one behind the change in Ryker’s demeanor?

Ryker’s body began to tremble. Xavier’s paw was pushing on his chest, holding him down, and it suddenly sank into his flesh as the bone crumbled and the muscle and tissue began to liquify.

I took a step back, horrified. It was like Ryker’s body was collapsing—like a rotting watermelon.

Rishika and Ravi both released their holds on him and took a step back as Big Mac and Kira made their way over to us.

“That’s enough of that,” Big Mac shouted as she drew near. She waved her hand, and Ryker’s body began to bubble and blister.

“Oh my god,” I said, covering my nose and mouth as the air grew thick with the stench of death. I had to fight hard to keep myself from retching.

Xavier shifted back to his human form, his face twisting with revulsion as he looked down at the rotting, putrid Ryker. He looked up at me, and I could see the fear flashing across his face as his eyes went to my neck, which still stung from Ryker’s hold. But he looked okay.

Ravi and Rishika had shifted back and looked unhurt as well, though Ravi was doubled over, throwing up.

This whole thing was absolutely revolting, but I was just so glad that everyone was okay. I was lucky as hell that both my mates had come out of it okay.

I looked up at Xavier and felt tears gathering at the corners of my eyes. I was just so grateful that he’d made it back in time. I put my hand to my throat, which was still burning. I didn’t know what would have happened if he hadn’t shown up when he did.

Xavier glanced down at Ryker, then looked around, addressing all of us. “I think he may have come from a pool of water that Ravi found out in the woods.”

“What kind of a pool?” I asked.

“Like another ghost pond,” Xavier said grimly. “It looks like another portal’s opened up. Ryker might be one of many.”

This information washed over me with a wave of icy water. I looked down at what remained of Ryker, now nothing more than a desiccated corpse. “So, what should we do with… *that*?”

Artemis had hurried down from the porch with a blanket, which she wrapped around Rishika. She glared down at the corpse. “Rip the fucker to shreds and burn each piece, one by one.”

Rishika nodded vehemently.

I thought that was a little extreme, but I wasn’t completely against it. And the faster we got rid of this thing, the better I’d feel.

“Just be careful,” Greyson growled. “I don’t want anyone getting infected. We should burn the body, though. That’s for sure.”

He went to stand, and his face tensed with pain again. He reached down to grasp his leg, and I looked down—I could see the mark, clear as day. Was that what was causing him pain?

I moved to help him stand, but first I cast one last look at Ryker’s body.

Then I froze.

Ryker had a witch mark on his neck. The *exact* same mark that Greyson had on his leg.

**Episode 1608**

XAVIER

Ryker’s rotting flesh felt like a brand against my skin. Repulsed, I shook it off my hand, but then I heard Cali let out a strangled sound. I followed her gaze to Ryker—or what was left of him. She was staring at the side of his neck.

There was a mark there.

A bloodied mark that I recognized right away. It was the witch mark—the same one that we’d seen at the lake house, and on Greyson’s leg.

What could the connection be?

Cali seemed to be wondering the same thing, getting hung up on the Greyson part. She rushed over to my brother. Of course she did. Never mind that I’d just risked my life to stop Ryker.

“Greyson!” she said, sniffling as she stroked his face. “Are you okay?”

Internally huffing, I stood over the two of them. I hated seeing Cali with Greyson, but I also hated the mark on Greyson’s leg. I hated everything.

“There might be others like Ryker out here,” I reminded Greyson, looking around. My senses were on high alert. “We should get back inside, maybe send some patrols out.”

“That’s a good idea,” Cali said, staring at Greyson. “Right?”

The idea that Cali felt the need to double-check with my brother about my suggestion made something acidic rise up inside me. But then Greyson nodded, his face scrunched up in pain, and my jealousy was forgotten.

“Can you make it back to the house? I can help.” Surprisingly, I said that without intending to throw him off a cliff.

“I’m *not* letting you carry me inside like I’m some sort of pet, you dick,” he said, like any prideful Alpha would.

“Don’t bite my head off for trying to be nice, jackass,” I shot back.

Rolling his eyes, my brother tried to stand and grimaced once more. He looked like a grumpy little kid who’d scraped his knee. I fought back a smile—it was wrong for me to be a petty asshole and take pleasure in seeing my brother like this, but I couldn’t help it. And really, I’d never claimed *not* to be a petty asshole.

“Here, I’ve got you,” Cali whispered, full of worry as she put her arm around Greyson’s waist. She helped him stand, and I realized one thing: if *I* had been hurt, I was sure that Cali would do the same thing for me. She loved us both equally, which was the fucking problem, really, but at least it was the truth.

“You good?” I asked my brother.

“Yeah,” Greyson said gruffly.

“That looks bad,” said a voice from right next to me.

I almost jumped, startled. Kira had walked up to us quietly. Her expression was, as ever, severe.

“What are you talking about?” I asked her.

She pointed at Greyson’s leg. “The Alpha’s mark looks inflamed. We need to examine it.”

Cali swallowed audibly. “Is he going to be okay?”

Kira nodded. “Hopefully. But just to be safe, let’s go inside.”

“Don’t worry, love,” Greyson told Cali, tucking her hair behind her ear. “You won’t be getting rid of me just yet.”

*Love*? Gag me. I never liked hearing him call her that.

Cali gave him a small, pained smile. It hurt to look at it, but at the same time, I didn’t want to get rid of Greyson either. He was a massive problem in my life, but I wanted the dickhead to be okay.

“Xavier.” Ravi walked up to me after Cali and Greyson had taken a few steps toward the house. His expression was serious. “What are we going to do about that devil pond we found in the woods? I’m pretty sure Ryker came out of it.”

“Not sure. We should probably discuss this with Big Mac. Kira, too.” I pointed at the witch, who had quickened her pace to catch up with Cali and Greyson. “Maybe even Marta.”

Ravi stared at me, huffing. “Right. The whole witch council. This magic stuff is a mess, man.”

“No shit,” I scoffed.

“Hey!” Artemis called from a few feet away. Her expression was thunderous. She pointed at Ryker’s body. “Any idea why that revenant attacked us?”

“No idea. But it’s clear that the pool is a portal.”

Ravi took a sharp breath. “We have to find a way to close it. Who knows how many more of those things are roaming around in the forest?”

“He’s right,” Rishika muttered, taking Artemis’s hand. “I’ll deal with Ryker’s body, Xavier.”

“I’ll help,” Artemis said.

“Me too,” Ravi offered.

“Be quick about it, and hurry back inside,” I told them. All this revenant talk was making me uneasy. “I don’t want any of you taking walks in the woods right now.”

The three of them hurried away as I stared at the body. Even before he’d turned into a revenant, Ryker had been a bad guy. He’d used silver and nearly killed me at the Lupo Finale. If it hadn’t been for Cali’s blood, I would’ve died. I spat at the ground beside him, thinking of the poetic justice of it all. This man had died as a werewolf, and now as an undead revenant as well. He’d died twice, and that was right for someone as fucking horrible as him.

At this point, if I had to kill him again in the future, I’d be more than ready.

As the others made a fire to get rid of the remains, I looked up at the house.

Cali and Greyson had gone inside together, and I had been left behind.

The thought made my chest ache.

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“Where’s Cali?” I asked Sage, who was cleaning broken glass from the living room.

“She went upstairs with Kira and Big Mac. They were helping Greyson.”

I nodded gruffly and headed upstairs myself. Greyson had said he was fine, but I still needed to know more about the mark. And, of course, I didn’t want to leave Cali to fawn over him any more than necessary. She needed to rein that shit in. For my sake.

Anyway.

I dropped by my room to get dressed, grumbling the entire time. Mostly about older brothers stealing your girl and getting away with it and then pretending to be hurt even though they were Alphas and everyone knew that Alphas didn’t just fucking die.

After that, I headed to His Majesty the King’s room.

I found Cali seated on the bed beside him, holding the fucker’s hand like he was already dying, and he was eating it up. What a jackass. Meanwhile, Kira and Big Mac were examining the mark on Greyson’s leg.

“What a tragedy,” I said sarcastically, interrupting their conversation. “Is my brother going to survive?”

Cali glared up at me. “Xavier, this isn’t funny.”

“I didn’t mean it to be,” I lied. “I’m just concerned about how the pack is going to get through this while the Alpha is incapacitated, with three women fussing over him.”

Greyson scoffed at me. “I’m fine. No need to worry.”

“Do I look worried?” I asked, eyebrows arched.

“No,” Greyson deadpanned. “You look like you always do.”

“Handsome?”

He glared. “Like an asshole.”

“I just don’t think it hurts to be hopeful,” I said, smirking.

Cali, all puffed up like an angry bird, grabbed me by the arm. “Can we talk?”

I stifled a snort as she dragged me out of the room. If nothing else, I was getting her away from Greyson. That was fine by me.

“What the hell is your problem?” she demanded after we got to the hallway. “Why are you being such a jerk?”

“I’m not being a jerk,” I lied. Again. “I’m just concerned about the pack.”

She huffed. “And what about your brother?”

I rolled my eyes. “You heard him, he’s going to be fine. That’s just a scratch for an Alpha, Cali.”

Cali grabbed my shoulders, dragging me down to her eye level. The movement was sudden, almost alarming—just like her urgent expression. “Are you fucking serious? Didn’t you hear what Big Mac and Kira were saying?”

“What?” I asked, confused.

She let me go, and I watched as the annoyance and anger left her face. They were replaced by fear, and the sight of her like this made my stomach clench.

“Cali, what did they say?” I repeated.

She swallowed. Her voice lowered to a whisper. Glancing over her shoulder at Greyson’s door, she said, “They think the mark might have infected him.”

I frowned. “Infected? How?”

“Like it infected the rest of them.”

“But he’s an Alpha, that’s not…” I suddenly started to feel sick to my stomach. I sounded like I was in denial, and that wouldn’t do. “What the fuck does this even mean? Is my brother going to die?” I asked, and even as I said the words, I didn’t accept them.

This couldn’t be true.

“No,” Cali said.

*Hah*. Of course Greyson couldn’t die. Greyson would *never* fucking die. Ever. I wouldn’t allow him to.

But then Cali added, “It’s worse, actually.”

I froze.

Cali looked up at me, fear and apprehension evident on her face. “Greyson could become a revenant, Xavier.”

**Episode 1609**

Xavier narrowed his eyes at me. “Did the witches actually say that Greyson would become a revenant? Or is this you being…” He cleared his throat. “You?”

I gasped.

*Seriously?* I thought. *Here I am, filled with dread, and what my mate decides to do is* doubt *my impeccable judgement?*

It was fair, I hated to admit. But still.

“I know what I’m talking about, Xavier,” I declared, poking him in the shoulder. “I heard Big Mac and Kira discussing Greyson’s condition, while they were looking at the mark on his leg!”

“But did they actually say that?” he asked gently. At least he looked worried now. Alarmed instead of petty and jealous.

“Maybe they didn’t say it directly,” I muttered. “But Greyson becoming a revenant was definitely something they were hinting at. It would make sense, wouldn’t it?”

Xavier took a deep breath. “Let’s just not jump to conclusions, okay?”

“Xavier,” I said, impatient. “It’s happened once already! Remember Pip? She was injured during a fight with a revenant, and then…”

Xavier looked like he was holding his breath. He didn’t say a word, but he still seemed dubious. Or in fucking denial.

“I’m not going to stand here and have a debate over this when I have good reason to believe Greyson’s in real danger. I’m gonna ask the witches,” I told him, making a move to return to the room.

“I’m okay, by the way,” he said pointedly.

I paused, turning to face him. “Huh?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

He took a step closer, his jaw set. “You’d be dead if it weren’t for me. Greyson, too.”

I rubbed my temples. They were thudding. “More jealousy? Of course I’m grateful for what you did! *Of course* I feel lucky that you helped us, but you’re obviously okay, and Greyson’s obviously not. Why are we even having this conversation right now?” I asked, frustrated.

Xavier’s expression was lighter, suddenly. His dark eyes pinned me down, his touch gentle on my chin. “I know you care about me, Cali.” He glanced at my mouth. “It’s just that it’d be nice to hear it, sometimes.”

I jerked away from him, pissed off. “For real? Do you really need to hear that right now? How can you demand my attention when you’ve seen the condition Greyson’s in?”

Xavier looked guilty suddenly, as if something had settled in his head. But then he immediately reverted to denial. “Cali, he’ll be okay—”

“What if he isn’t?” I asked, shaking.

Xavier stopped speaking.

“You should know better, Xavier. I’m sorry, but I can’t do this right now,” I whispered, turning my back on him. I really couldn’t deal with him being possessive and needy at the moment—not while I also had to deal with the revenants, the portals, Greyson’s injury… I felt angry, scared, stressed out, and also…

Guilty.

I didn’t like treating Xavier like this, even when he was being a dick. I knew it was stressful for him—for his wolf—to see me care for Greyson like this, but I was struggling to excuse him.

Couldn’t he see that his brother was in real danger?

When I walked back into the room, Greyson was sitting up.

I gasped. “Why are you doing that? You should lie down!”

“Cali—”

“Shush,” I said, fixing the pillows behind his back. “Try to relax.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Can I speak?”

I squinted. “Not if it drains your energy.” I turned to the witches. “How’s it going?”

Big Mac said nothing, and Kira took the reins. “It looks like the mark is getting better.”

“Is he going to be okay?” I asked, my chest feeling tight as I sat down next to him and clung to his arm like a barnacle.

The witches shot each other a look that I didn’t like at all.

“We think so,” Big Mac said.

*Then what was that look?* I thought, scowling. *Do they REALLY think they can trick me? And since when are witches one hundred percent truthful, anyway?*

“Please, love, stop worrying,” Greyson said. “I’m okay. Everything’s working fine.” He swung his legs down and stood up, towering over me as always, all very naked muscle. *SERIOUSLY?*

“Oh my god, we’re not alone, put some clothes on!” I demanded.

Big Mac scoffed. “I really couldn’t care less.”

“Nothing I haven’t seen before,” Kira said, rolling her eyes.

Greyson grinned, wrapping a sheet around himself. “Better?”

I gaped. “How—What—*How*…” I poked his arm, making him chuckle. “How can you make light of this?”

Here I was, freaking out on Xavier, and Greyson was acting like nothing had happened!

“Can you go see how the rest of the pack is doing?” Greyson asked, leaning down to kiss my forehead, his hands gentle as he cradled my face. “I’m gonna clean up, then I’ll see you downstairs.”

I was ushered out by Big Mac, and I took a moment to pause in the hallway, just to fucking process.

*Greyson is okay! Apparently!* I thought. Then I frowned. *Does that mean I owe Xavier an apology? But Xavier didn’t know Greyson was okay for sure! Right?*

Relieved but conflicted, I headed downstairs and ran into Artemis in the hallway.

“Greyson’s going to be fine,” I told her, mostly for me to hear and marinate over.

She smiled, wrapping me in a hug. “That’s great. I know how worried you were,” she told me.

Artemis was rarely, if ever, tender toward me, so I took the opportunity to hug her back tight.

“I like this,” I told her. “We should hug more often.”

She snorted, breaking the hug. “Don’t get too used to it.”

I rolled my eyes, elbowing her. “At least I know you’re back to being your normal self when you give me shit.”

“Good point,” Artemis said breezily. “Anyway, did the witches say anything about the mark, or about the portal?”

I shook my head. “They didn’t. But I’m going to talk to them after they’re done with Greyson.”

Artemis arched an eyebrow, clearly intrigued. “Oh?”

“I suspect they both know more than they’ve admitted,” I said. “Witches tend to do that.”

“True,” Artemis agreed. “If you hear anything, let me know.” Her expression darkened. “That revenant could have killed Rishika, and I don’t want a repeat of that.”

“Of course.”

“What about you?” Artemis asked. “I saw you use your magic to fight Ryker—how did that go?”

“I’m still pretty hesitant to use it,” I admitted. “I can’t control it fully, so I was worried about hitting Xavier.”

“That sounds like something you’d do,” Artemis said. There was no passion or mockery in her words, just pure statement of fact. “We were trying to work on your magic. Maybe we can work on it some more soon?”

I grinned. “Did you just promise to help me reach my full potential?”

She sighed deeply. “Please don’t make me regret this.”

I squeezed her arm, excited. “But you need to help me, Artemis! In the name of sisterly love, or whatever. Mostly because if my mates tell me I can’t defend myself one more time, I’ll probably explode on them.”

“They just worry,” Artemis said indulgently.

“And I need to train so I can make them stop. And also rub it in their faces,” I declared.

“That’s healthy,” Artemis said, snorting.

I rolled my eyes.

“By the way, speaking of the guys, I saw you talking to Xavier before…” Artemis trailed off. “Did he say where this new pool portal was?”

I gave my sister a curious look. “Why do you want to know?”

She shrugged. “I just think we should check it out.”

I blinked in shock. “Absolutely not! The last time we were at a ghost pond we were nearly killed!”

Artemis snorted. “Since when do you learn from your mistakes? Usually you just do the same thing over and over and expect different results.”

“I’m growing, okay? I am evolving here, and you’d better help me with it,” I said firmly. “Promise me you won’t do anything to do with ghost ponds or pools—absolutely no games with portals!”

“Come on, Cali.” Artemis nudged me. “I know you want to go to that pool. Explore, save the day, piss off your mates… It’s literally your favorite pastime.”

I smacked her arm. “Stop trying to tempt me! We’re not doing this.”

Artemis chuckled. “I’m just joking. I thought we might find something that could help the guys, but I guess we should take a breather right now, after everything that’s happened.” She glanced behind me. “I’ll go check on Rishika, okay? See you later.”

I watched my sister go, anxiety gnawing at me. Why would she even think about going to the pool? Hadn’t she been traumatized enough?

*I hope she doesn’t do anything stupid… Not without me*,I thought.

“How’s Greyson?” Sage asked, once I reached the kitchen.

“He didn’t look so good,” Astrid said. “How’s he feeling?”

“He’s okay,” I told everybody who had gathered to eat. “He should be down soon to answer all your questions.”

“Or we could ask her,” Sage said, raising an eyebrow as she looked over my shoulder.

I turned to see Kira standing by the door, looking like a bored high fashion model.

“Babysitting is the Alpha’s responsibility. All questions should be directed to him,” she told Sage blandly.

As the rest of the pack started grumbling, Kira grabbed me by the arm, yanking me out into the hall.

“Oh my god, what are you doing?” I asked, startled.

Kira stared at me, her expression severe. “I need your blood, Cali.”

**Episode 1610**

LOLA

I stood up, heading out of the classroom. On the one hand, I was glad to get out of there. Frog anatomy was really not my thing—in fact, it was just plain gross. But on the other hand, I was worried. Why was I being summoned to Emmett’s office? And why did my whole class have to hear about it? Especially when there were rumors going around about Emmett hooking up with students! I could see the looks on some of my classmates’ faces. *Do they think that’s why I’m going to his office? For some lame creepy midday booty call?*

I felt sick to my stomach.

“Winifred,” the administrator said, “make sure that Lola goes straight to Professor Laurence’s office.”

I glared at the dude. Did he really think this was a good idea? I sure as hell didn’t want to be left alone with Winifred. The girl had attacked me, orange eyes and all! Could I not catch a break?

“Come on,” Winifred said, grabbing my arm.

“You sure you’re okay?” I asked as we walked outside.

She rolled her eyes. “I would be if I didn't have to escort you everywhere.”

Winifred seemed like her usual horrible self. Why was she acting so normal when I knew for a fact that she was a dangerous creature out to get me?

“Move it,” Winifred said, sniffing, herding me down the hall.

I kept stealing glances at her, almost relieved that she was just being rude instead of murderous.

I swallowed roughly as we approached Emmett’s office—would I be left alone with him? Or would Jay be there too? My mind was invaded by the hot moments Jay and I shared the night before, and I blushed.

“What’s with that face?” Winifred barked, pausing in front of Emmett’s door.

“What face? I’m not making a face,” I blurted, pulled out of my daydream.

“Whatever,” Winifred said with disdain, knocking on the wood. She then opened the door, met Emmett’s icy gaze, and shoved me inside. “She’s all yours!”

Then she slammed the door shut.

“Rude,” I said, huffing as I glared at the closed door. I was gonna smack that girl one day, mark my words.

“Lola,” Emmett said in a patient tone.

I finally turned to face him and realized that he was not alone. In the far end corner, Jay was sitting in a chair, hooked up to some kind of IV and electronic monitor. I yelped in shock, rushing to him. “Oh my god! Are you okay?”

“Don’t touch him,” Emmett warned. “He’s fine. I’m monitoring his reaction to the substance that fell on his arm—just as a precaution.”

Jay smiled at me, looking awkward but earnest. “It’s okay, Lola.”

I relaxed slightly. Turning to Emmett, I asked, “What’s going on here?”

Emmett arched an eyebrow, looking between me and my mate, as if he was still thinking about catching me and Jay half-naked on his lab floor the night before. At the time, Emmett had seemed cool about it, accepting my excuse about being overcome by the vampire heat. But something in his expression right now worried me.

“Why didn’t you tell me about Jay’s arm last night, Lola?” Emmett asked me, his expression serious.

*Um, because you walked in on us hooking up?*

I couldn’t help but think about what could’ve been had Emmett not walked in. I’d been so ready to go there with Jay. Our chemistry was off the charts… Was it the mate bond? Or the heat? Did it matter? I thought of Jay’s bare chest, biting my lip. What I wouldn’t give…

“Well?” Emmett asked, bringing me back to the conversation.

“I guess—I guess it must’ve slipped my mind,” I stammered.

Emmett seemed unimpressed. “We’re supposed to be working together, Lola.” He pointed between me, Jay, and himself. “All three of us. So no more secrets, okay?”

I felt a twinge of guilt right then, but also frustration. What did he want from me? To be perfect? Because he definitely hadn’t been the greatest himself!

“There was a lot going on,” I told him, making sure to keep my voice even.

“I understand,” Emmett said. “Either way, I know the effect that vampire heat can have on someone. But is there anything else I should know about? Anything about Jay? Any other changes your body is going through, or differences in your day-to-day life?”

I glanced at Jay. He nodded at me seriously.

Encouraged, I faced Emmett. “Two of the vampires attacked me.”

Emmett’s eyebrows arched in surprise. “Pardon?”

“They had orange eyes, too,” I added firmly.

Emmett leaned forward, scowling. “Who attacked you besides Jacqueline?”

Emmett had said that he wanted me to be honest, right? *Here goes nothing…*

“It was Winifred,” I admitted. “But they both seem fine now.”

Emmett fell silent. Then slowly, he said, “Have you told Irma?”

I blinked. “No… Should I have?”

“This is her school, Lola. It’s important Irma knows about this,” Emmett said.

I glanced at Jay, who shook his head. “Does Irma have to know everything always?”

“Perhaps not everything,” Emmett said, sitting back in his chair. “For example, learning about you and Jay in the lab last night… That doesn’t seem like a necessity.”

Jay choked, and I blushed profusely. The way Jay had kissed me, his gruff voice, the way he’d rubbed between my legs, how hard his body had felt, it was just—

*No, Lola! Don’t think about that! Push it out of your head!*

“Or maybe it *is* necessary for her to know,” Emmett said, scratching his jaw.

Jay spoke up. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Emmett pointed at him, staring at me. “Perhaps Irma should know, because Jay is having some kind of reaction, and it’s hard to know exactly what it is.”

I blinked, turning to Jay. “What’s he talking about?”

Jay sighed. “I told Emmett that the wound from the vial is still burning. Can you remember which vial it was?”

“I tried to figure it out,” I said, “but all I saw were some numbers on some smashed labels. It could have been any of them.”

Emmett’s brows furrowed. “Well, then.”

“What?” I asked, worried. I sat down next to Jay, reaching out to hold his hand. “What is it?”

“Do you remember the color of the vial?” Emmett asked. “The scent, perhaps?”

“I don’t think it had one…” I trailed off, turning to Jay. “Right?”

“I just smelled burned flesh,” Jay said, shrugging.

“Was it more watery or syrupy? And where did you throw the remains?” Emmett asked.

“I don’t know—it was all a blur,” I said. If I was being honest, I’d been too horny to focus on anything other than Jay’s mouth and hands on me.

Emmett paused.

“What?” I asked, squeezing Jay’s hand. “What happens now?”

Emmett blinked slowly. “I’m afraid I’m not sure.”

I scoffed, “Seriously? What the hell is that even supposed to mean?”

“Give me a second,” Emmett muttered, going through some notes as I turned to Jay.

He looked slightly pale. “Jay?” I said. “How are you feeling?”

My stomach clenched the moment the words were out of my mouth. I knew that I wasn’t supposed to remember the reality of us being mates, but at that moment I could feel it to my core. I’d been able to feel it when he’d kissed me the night before, and now that there was a possibility that he was in danger, all my instincts were on high alert.

*I have to protect him*, I thought, with such certainty that it made me feel queasy, overwhelmed.

“I told you I’m okay,” Jay replied, brushing his thumb over my skin. He stared at our joined hands, a small smile on his mouth. He was devastatingly beautiful.

“This doesn’t sound like ‘okay,’” I said in a louder voice, pointing at Emmett, who was going through his files like a maniacal scientist.

Jay snorted. “It doesn’t hurt much, Lola,” he said.

I stared at his wound. It just looked like a scratch, something mundane, and yet…

“Why isn’t it healing?” I asked in a whisper.

Jay shrugged. “I think it’s better than last night. It’ll probably close up any moment now—I just need to jump-start the healing process.”

“Don’t do that,” Emmett spoke up, and both Jay and I turned to face him. Jay looking severe, and me looking like I was about to freak out. Because I was definitely about to freak out.

“Do what?” Jay asked, almost challenging.

Emmett shook his head. “Don’t make assumptions. We don’t know if it’s going to heal.”

“That’s why you hooked up the IV, though, isn’t it?” Jay asked sharply.

“Yes, but we can’t be sure about anything…” Emmett trailed off. He turned to me, pressing his lips together. His expression was grave. “The truth is, I expected you to be able to shed some light on the potion that fell on Jay. Because without that kind of knowledge…”

“What?” I asked, swallowing nervously.

“We don’t know what happens next,” Emmett said darkly. “I need to know what serum that was, Lola, to figure out all future side effects and how to treat them. Jay’s life may depend on it.”

**Episode 1611**

MARTA

“I don’t think this is a good idea,” Lilac said, plopping down onto the bed next to me.

It was funny how he literally didn’t have any weight to him, but I could feel the mattress shift. Why could I feel it? Why could I feel his proximity? What was this nonsense?

“I didn’t ask for your opinion,” I told him, ignoring my train of thought.

He squinted at me in that way of his that made me want to commit murder. If only he weren’t already dead. “You want to summon the bride of an evil monster, not pick out your outfit for the day,” he said. “And you have no idea what you’re getting into.”

I scoffed. “And you do?”

He gestured at himself. “Let’s just say that I have seen some stuff in my current state.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m not as naïve as you think. I know how this works—it’s probably like when that priest tried to bring his lover Nefertiti back from the dead. I think it was called—”

“Yeah, that was *The Mummy*,” Lilac said officially. “Brendan Fraser kicked some serious ass.”

I frowned. “Brendan who? No, it was with Boris Karloff.”

Lilac looked confused. “Who the hell is that?”

“How can you be a fan of *The Mummy* and not know Boris Karloff?” I demanded.

“How can you be a fan of *The Mummy* and not know Brendan Fraser?” he countered.

“Are you being serious right now? The movie came out in 1932, and it was a phenomenon—”

“Wait, *what*?” Lilac snorted. “The movie I’m talking about came out in like, the late nineties!”

I sighed, realization dawning. “Ugh, they must have remade it. Why remake a classic?”

Lilac shrugged. “To make money?”

“That was a rhetorical question. I know it was about money.”

“Then why did you ask—”

“Oh my good *god*!” I groaned. “The point I am trying to make here is that I am fully aware of what’s at stake here! Give me some credit, why don’t you?”

Lilac raised an eyebrow. “I would if you’d stop being such a fool.”

“*Really*?” I sniped. “Here I am, the key to you talking to your sister, and instead of buttering me up, you’re just sitting there judging me!”

Lilac smirked, tilting his head to the side. “Do you want me to butter you up?”

The way he looked at me made me blush. I scoffed, annoyed. “No, I just wish I’d never been tethered to such a rude ghost! Like, of all the ghosts in the spirit world, why did I get you?”

He laughed. What a brat. “Come on, admit it. You like being tethered to me.”

“No,” I declared, my thoughts rushing back to our kiss (kisses), and my blush getting worse. How inconvenient. “Absolutely not.”

“You’re such a liar,” he said, leaning closer with a smirk. A curl fell over his forehead. I couldn’t believe that a ghost had such great hair. *Why* did a ghost have such great hair? This was an *abomination*.

I leaned back. “Shut up, would you? I have more important things on my mind.” I kept my gaze away from him, pinned to my lap where I fiddled with my hands. But I didn’t need to see Lilac to know that he was smirking. Jerk.

“Fine,” he grumbled. “But I still think it’s a bad idea.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s not like I’ll just do it without any guidance, you know. Big Mac’s conditions will offer some protection.”

Lilac groaned, falling back on the bed. “But can we really trust Big Mac?”

“*We* don’t have to trust her,” I said, pointing between us. “*I* do. And she’s actually been looking out for me since I got here.”

Lilac rose up to his elbows, one eyebrow arched. “Really?”

“Really,” I said decisively. “And she told me that she and Kira are going to create some kind of protective spell, just in case.”

“I hope it works,” Lilac said, scowling, sitting upright again. Then, looking away, he mumbled, “If something happens to you, who knows what will happen to me? I could just disappear.”

Right. Of course. That was why Lilac was being annoying about all this—not because he was worried about me. Because he was worried about himself. Which was fine. Like, I expected that from him.

This was fine.

“I guess we have to keep our fingers crossed that everything goes well,” I said. And then I remembered something else. “What about that storm guy Big Mac was talking about?”

Lilac looked confused. “Who?”

“No, Rain! That was his name,” I said, nodding. “Isn’t that the same guy who had the spell to help you become more corporeal? How do we contact him?”

Lilac seemed thoughtful. “I suppose we could call him, but I have no idea what his number is.”

“Can’t we find it on that little computer?” I asked, pointing at the machine that Big Mac had left on my desk. When I’d been captured by Bert, computers had been huge machines used by engineers to launch rockets to the moon. Who knew they could make them so small?

“It’s called a laptop,” Lilac said, as I made a beeline for it.

“Yes, this thing,” I said, opening it up. I looked at the screen, blinking slowly before I looked up at him. “Okay, what do I do now?”

He snorted, hovering over me. “Click on the round colorful ball.”

I did as I was told, and then a page popped up.

“This is a search engine. Type his name into the bar,” Lilac explained.

Feeling very smart and happy with myself, I followed Lilac’s directions. In the end, we found that Rain man’s website thing. The whole thing was very cool.

“How do we contact him?” I asked.

“Click on that link,” he replied, and a “Contact Me” page came up. “Use the DM feature.”

I frowned. “What’s a DM?”

Lilac shot me a sideways look. “You know, if you don’t even know what a DM is, how are you going to pull off summoning Letifer’s lover?”

I elbowed him, hard, but he couldn’t feel it. Dammit. “Just stop judging and explain what I should do.”

Lilac showed me how to get to a box where I could type out my message. This was really pretty cool. I wasn’t going to tell him that.

“So what do I say?” I asked him.

“Just type, ‘I’m Marta. I need your help.’” He shrugged. “Or whatever.”

I typed it all out—albeit slowly—then pressed the “Enter” button. I grinned to myself, looking up at Lilac. “Now what?”

He arched an eyebrow. “Now, you wait.”

I pouted. “Wait? Isn’t he going to respond immediately?”

Lilac snorted. “He probably has other things to deal with before he focuses on the randos asking him for help.”

“What’s a rando?”

“A random annoying person.”

“Ah. So *you’re* a rando.”

Lilac shook his head at me.

“Well, I don’t want to wait around forever,” I said. “I need to ask Big Mac about the other conditions—she was a little vague about them.”

“Of course she was.” Lilac scoffed. “She’s always vague about everything. All witches are!”

“I’m ignoring you,” I declared, walking out of the room and leaving him behind. Of course, I knew that he could and would pop up whenever he wanted, the nuisance.

I found Big Mac in the living room, talking to Mrs. Smith.

“… Greyson,” Big Mac was saying, and Mrs. Smith was frowning.

“What’s up?” I asked.

They both turned to me, stopping their conversation in an instant.

“Oh, Marta! You’re here.” Big Mac cleared her throat. “Do you still want to go through with the summoning?”

I nodded. “Yes. And I’ve already reached out to Rain.”

“That’s good you’re taking initiative, dear,” Mrs. Smith said appreciatively.

“I like that,” Big Mac said, smiling.

I felt warm all over. Accepted, somehow.

“What did Rain say?” Big Mac asked.

“He hasn’t responded yet. But I wanted to know more about the conditions.”

“The protective spell will be for you, and for the pack as well,” Big Mac said. “Because you’re a bridge, there’s no telling for sure what’s going to happen.”

“See?” Lilac popped up out of nowhere, like he loved to do. “I told you it’s dangerous!”

I ignored him.

“Anything else?” I asked the witch.

“At the first sign of any trouble, if either Kira or I tell you to stop, you stop,” Big Mac said. Mrs. Smith nodded. “Is that understood?”

“Of course,” I said eagerly. “I don’t want any trouble. When can we do this?”

“We’d better talk to Rain first, and then we can proceed if you still want to,” Big Mac said.

I had no choice but to agree. I then realized that the conversation was over, and both the women were staring at me expectantly. “Um. I guess I’ll go upstairs and wait for him to respond.”

I skedaddled, leaving them to their conversation and heading up to my room. *God*, I wished we could just do this already. I was tired of waiting. Huffing, I dropped back down onto my bed.

Suddenly, Lilac’s face appeared over mine. “So. There’s probably gonna be a lot of waiting. Do you wanna make out to kill some time, or…?”

“Seriously?” I deadpanned.

“Yep.”

“If you were alive right now, I would—”

He smirked. “Kiss me? Good thing you can do that while I’m dead, too.”

*Ping!*

A sound from the computer stopped me from replying to the ridiculous ghost.

“Something’s going on!” I rushed to the laptop, looking at the screen. “There’s a response from Rain!” I said, excited, and clicked on the bubble.

The message read:

*Hello Marta, how can I help you?*

**Episode 1612**

GREYSON

The witches were gone, leaving not too long after Cali.

I was glad to be alone. I had, of course, stretched the truth when I’d told Cali I was fine, but I hoped she believed me. I needed to talk to her and the pack as well, to reassure everyone that everything was okay. To make it clear that I was still in charge.

Of course, none of that changed the fact that my leg still hurt, and I had no idea how to fix it. Taking a deep breath, I walked up and down the length of my room, trying to keep a straight face and swallow down the pain. Pain was not a common thing for Alphas, because healing was part of the werewolf experience, especially when you were supposed to be a powerful one.

What the hell was happening to me?

Whatever. It would be okay. It was already getting better, I was sure about that. Kind of. I was convinced that if I could withstand the pain just long enough, I might be able to pull this whole thing off and pretend that I’d never gotten injured in the first place. At least for now. At least until I could talk to everybody and settle them down.

But after that, I had no idea what the hell I would do.

The fight with the revenant Ryker had almost cost me my life. I wasn’t in top form, and it showed. If it hadn’t been for Cali, Rishika, and my brother, I could’ve been having my own funeral today. And if it came to that, in the end, I wasn’t that worried about the pack—dying for them would be a nice way to go.

But the thought of leaving Cali, of not spending any more amazing moments with her, of not getting to experience, in real life, any of the visions I’d been having… That was a whole different ballgame. If I could just get through this, I was certain that things between her and me would work out in the end. Even with my brother around, I’d never felt closer to her. And I was pretty sure that she felt the same way. You couldn’t fake that kind of emotion.

I needed to live for it. To live for her.

The fucking mark on my leg needed to go. I glared at the thing, scowling. Was it getting better? Worse? Would it start tap dancing and challenge me to a duel? I honestly had no fucking clue.

Big Mac and Kira had been evasive and vague and cryptic about the thing. Which was literally the only thing they knew how to do without fail. And the three witch sisters had done something to the mark—god only knew what—but they hadn’t fully explained their actions, either. Their bedside manner was the worst.

I felt the urge to go to them and demand an explanation, but it wasn’t very Alpha-like to expose any weakness and appear distressed. Especially not now, when the pack was under assault. I had to show strength, which entailed pretending to know what the hell the witches had been doing. I got the sense that my pride could actually kill me right now, but there were worse ways to go. Probably.

Grunting, I put my full weight on my leg, and a sharp pain ran through me.

I clenched my jaw. I could do this. I had no choice.

Getting dressed, I thought about other things. Pleasant things. Like Cali’s shocked “This is NOT the time, COVER YOURSELF!” expression when she’d seen me getting turned on when she’d hugged me earlier. I snorted, my mood getting slightly better.

But then the door burst open.

Cali, looking pissed off, was followed into the room by Kira, who looked deadpan as ever.

“Why did you lie to me?” Cali demanded.

She needed to be a lot more specific here.

I cleared my throat. “About what?”

Cali pointed at the witch. “She said she needs my blood! And when I asked why, she said it was to help you.”

I turned to the witch. “Why do you need Cali’s blood? Didn’t you say that I was getting better?”

“I changed my mind,” Kira said with a shrug. “It happens.”

“*Seriously?*” I demanded.

“To be honest, both Big Mac and I were already worried earlier, but we weren’t sure how to broach the subject without creating chaos.”

I blinked at Kira. “So you thought that telling Cali, of all people, would keep things on the DL?”

Cali huffed. “Excuse me? I can keep a secret!”

“The point is that the witch mark isn’t healing properly, and you need to stop pretending that it is,” Kira said seriously.

“You told me you’re fine, Grayson,” Cali said. She sounded annoyed, and also betrayed. *Great*.

“Cali, please don’t freak out,” I murmured, reaching out to squeeze her shoulder. “It might still be a little sore, but I’m really not worried about it.”

Cali scoffed. “Of course you’re not! You never worry about yourself!”

Kira spoke up again. “Just to clarify, the wound might very well heal on its own—”

“See?” I told Cali, pointing at the witch.

“—or it might get worse,” Kira finished.

“*See?*” Cali told me, pointing at the witch in the exact same way I had, only seconds ago.

Kira added, “Bottom line, Cali’s Fae blood might help treat the dark magic wound, maybe even slow down any adverse effects from the witch mark. It’ll also give me and Big Mac time to figure out what this mark may mean for you in the long run.”

This did not sound good. And I certainly didn’t like the idea of Cali giving away any of her blood, even if it was for me. But of course, my mate was already offering up her hand.

“Take as much as you want,” she said.

Kira rolled her eyes. “I’m not a vampire. I just need a few drops.” She reached into her pocket and pulled out an empty vial and a pin—both pretty handy things to carry around. *Not*. Kira made Cali sit down and lay her hand on the desk.

*Are you sure about this?* I asked my mate, through our mind link.

Kira drew a few drops of blood from Cali, making her wince. *You know I would give all my blood if it meant helping you, Greyson.*

*I sure hope it doesn’t come to that*, I said dryly.

Cali looked up at me, her eyebrows furrowed. *I’m still mad at you for playing down your injury. You know better than that.*

My mate was scolding me, and I wondered if this was how she felt when Xavier and I did the same thing to her.

“This should be enough,” Kira said, and capped the vial. “Thank you, Cali.”

I cleared my throat and gave Kira a look. She raised an eyebrow and seemed to be getting my vibe. “Well, now that that’s done, I have to go,” she said. “I have work to do.”

She was gone in seconds, leaving me alone with my mate. I was sitting on the bed, and Cali was leaning against the desk, her eyes burning holes into my face. Frowning, she pointed at my leg. “Walk around the room.”

I snorted. “Is this like a sobriety test?”

Cali did not seem amused. “I want to see how much pain you’re actually in.”

I knew there was no way that Cali would drop this, so I just accepted my fate. I stood up and walked around, doing my best. I managed to perform the action without grimacing, but I got a little too cocky, and when I got closer to Cali, I dropped like a sack of potatoes.

I fell into Cali, who caught me and helped me stand. She was clearly surprised, but her reflexes had been shockingly good. I swallowed the humiliation that I felt and muttered, “I guess it’s your turn to help me when I trip.”

Cali shook her head, clearly not seeing the humor in the role reversal. “You’re not as healed as you think, Greyson.”

I looked down at her, at the worry in her eyes, and the urge to kiss her was so powerful. But I knew that, unfortunately, I couldn’t distract my way out of this. She was *not* going to drop it.

“That doesn’t mean I won’t be fine,” I said.

Cali shook her head. “I know that you’re proud. I know that you’re tough, and you don’t want to scare me, but I’m much more capable of dealing with things than you seem to think.”

I gave her a wry smile. “I know you’re worried about me, love.”

She huffed. “Of course I am. What kind of mate would I be if I weren’t?”

I leaned forward and brushed my lips against her forehead. “You’re the best mate ever. And actually…”

“What?”

“I need you to do me a favor,” I said.

Her eyes narrowed in suspicion. “What kind of favor?”

I couldn’t see a way out of this. My leg was throbbing. I took a deep breath and accepted my fate.

“Can you bring Xavier to me?” I asked Cali. “There’s something I need to talk to him about.”

**Episode 1613**

VIOLET

I gasped, backing up. I was about to get shanked by an old lady! Could this be real life? What the hell was happening right now?

“Tell me the truth!” Mrs. Thorndyke barked, standing up. She was surprisingly quick for an elderly woman, I had to give that to her. She smacked the rolling pin against her palm—up and down, threatening.

I laughed nervously. “You think I’m a werewolf? Is that a joke? Hahaha—”

“Stop lying!” Mrs. Riggins snapped, and that cut my fake laughter short. “I knew you were a wolf the second you walked into the B and B.”

I gasped. “*No!*”

“*Yes!*” Mrs. Riggins declared. “And now you have ten seconds to explain what you want.”

I calculated my odds, looking between them. I could shift and try to take them both on. But there was something in Riggins’s demeanor that made me think that might be a mistake. Despite the charming breakfast spread, she looked pretty menacing. Murderous, almost. Definitely intimidating. It felt like she’d taken on werewolves before and lived to tell the tale.

It would actually really suck if I ended up getting killed here, in a B and B, especially after surviving the attack by the hunters. The thought made me feel horrible—I needed to see Charlie, to make sure he was okay. But could I tell that to Riggins? Just casually mention that I was here to see my mate? Wouldn’t that put Charlie in danger?

“Ten, nine…” Riggins started to count down the seconds, while at the same time, Mrs. Thorndyke smacked the rolling pin against her hand, keeping the tempo.

“Eight, seven, six…”

Was I really going to risk dying here, surrounded by teapots? And for what?

“Five, four, three, two—”

“All right!” I exclaimed.

Mrs. Riggins and Mrs. Thorndyke smiled at each other knowingly. This definitely wasn’t their first rodeo.

“I’m just here to see my boyfriend. I don’t want to hurt anyone,” I said breathlessly.

Riggins scoffed. “You’re lying! All wolves lie.”

Charlie had never lied to me, though. *Charlie*. I’d do anything for him, even deal with a possibly deadly old lady.

“Seriously? How am I the monster here?” I demanded. “You’re the one holding a knife and a rolling pin to a teenage girl’s throat, lady!”

Mrs. Thorndyke gasped, offended, as if I’d just insulted her rolling pin.

“That doesn’t change anything.” Mrs. Riggins brushed me off. “You’re a werewolf.”

“Yeah!” Mrs. Thorndyke added unhelpfully, still pointing at me with her murder weapon, a.k.a. the rolling pin.

“What do either of you even know about werewolves?” I asked.

Mrs. Riggins huffed. “I’ve been around the block more times than I like to admit, so I’ve seen a few things. But I got no beef with supernaturals—not like those hunters at the boot camp down the way—as long as they mind their business and stay out of mine.”

“I promise I have no intention of interfering with your life,” I said truthfully. Besides, why would I be interested in her life? Did this woman think she was some sort of celebrity? Or was she some sort of criminal mastermind? Either way, I didn’t care. So I added, “I honestly just want to find my boyfriend and make sure he’s safe.”

Riggins narrowed her eyes at me. “Is your boyfriend a werewolf too?”

I paused. Lying seemed to enrage the two women above all else, so I decided to stick to the truth, albeit cautiously. “He is.”

Riggins’s expression changed in an instant. It was so sudden that it gave me whiplash. Placing her knife on the table, she sighed. “Nothing like young love—right?”

Mrs. Thorndyke hugged her rolling pin and looked dreamily out the window. “Young love is so special.”

I nodded enthusiastically, piling on. “I love my mate very, very much. He’s the only one for me.”

“I have heard that werewolves can experience a sort of eternal bond with one another…” Riggins trailed off.

“We do have an eternal bond,” I rushed to say. “We’ll stay together forever, and always love each other.”

“Sounds better than my four divorces,” Mrs. Thorndyke added. “Human men are very annoying.”

“And loud,” Riggins said.

“And they never do the dishes!” Thorndyke huffed.

“Charlie does dishes,” I blurted. “Though I feel like there are other werewolves who don’t, and are super messy. But not my mate. He’s very neat and does all the chores without any whining.”

“What a catch! What’s he like?” Riggins asked, leaning against the counter.

“He’s kind and sweet and he always takes care of me,” I said, thinking about the charm bracelet he’d given me. “He’s even gone against his family’s wishes to support me.”

“Oh my goodness, like Romeo and Juliet!” Thorndyke said, her eyes widening.

“That’s us,” I said matter-of-factly. I was pushing it here, but it looked like these two were super into that narrative, and I wasn’t about to ruin things now.

“If everything you just said is true,” Mrs. Riggins told me, “then you have nothing to fear.”

*Could it be so easy?* “For real?” I asked.

Riggins nodded. “I want you to think of my B and B as Switzerland.”

“You have good chocolate and aid rich tax evaders?” I asked, confused.

Riggins snorted. “Consider my B and B a neutral ground for supernaturals and hunters. I will not be taking sides. I’ve gotten the hunters to agree to keep their battles to themselves, to stay away from here, and as long as supernaturals are peaceful, I let them stay.”

I instantly blurted, “I’m very peaceful! I make zero noise. I always mind my own business, I swear I do.”

Riggins nodded. “In that case, I would like you to think of my home as a safe zone—as long as you and your boyfriend keep your wolfy stuff to yourselves.”

“I will, thank you, for sure,” I said all at once, relieved.

I couldn’t believe my luck. Thorndyke took a seat at the table, putting the rolling pin down, and looked up at me. “Here,” she said, sliding me a plate. “Have another biscuit, dearie—you don’t want to start the day on an empty stomach.”

The fact that they’d wanted to kill me a minute earlier and yet now wanted to feed me was beyond bizarre, but I refused to get hung up on it. Their earlier suspicion had seemed genuine, just like their kindness did now, and the two extremes somehow co-existed. They just seemed to roll that way, and I would accept the weirdness as long as it suited me.

“Thanks very much,” I replied, “but I’ve already had enough. I really need to go look for my boyfriend.”

“Ah, indeed,” Riggins said. “Dedication is key in a relationship!”

“So important,” Thorndyke said, nodding for emphasis.

“And trust,” Riggins added.

“And communication,” Thorndyke went on.

“And respect, respect is also crucial,” Riggins continued.

“Having a man who does his own dishes and helps with chores, though? That’s the most important thing of all,” Thorndyke said seriously.

And then, in unison, they both sighed dreamily.

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I hurried upstairs to get my backpack and then headed out, determined to find Charlie. I wished I’d been able to charge my phone—Charlie had to be worried sick about me. I needed to get to him ASAP, and running in human form seemed to take forever.

When I was far away enough from the B and B, I decided to deal with things differently. I stopped running, undressed, packed up my clothes, and shifted, breaking into a sprint that was much, much quicker. I knew this was risky, but anything else would take forever, and I didn’t have the time to spare. There had to be hunters out here, of course, but I was a good hunter myself, and I definitely knew how to stay alert for incoming danger.

Either way, this was a risk I was willing to take for Charlie.

It wasn’t long before I picked up his scent, and my heart pounded in excitement. It was a fresh trail, which meant he was okay! Or at least I hoped he was. I wondered if finding his scent so easily meant that he’d been looking for me in the forest. I smiled at the thought, reminding myself that of course he was. We were mates—always connected.

I splashed through a stream for a speedier route, following Charlie’s scent.

*I’m coming, Charlie! I know you’re close!* I mind linked.

In my excitement and contentment at the thought that I’d found him, though, I didn’t pay much attention to my surroundings when it came to anything other than his scent. My mate’s aroma had overwhelmed by nose, and that made my other senses hazy, careless enough that as I ran, someone jumped in front of me, and I crashed straight into them.

*Shit!*

The person made pained noise, and I growled as we tumbled to the ground, already on alert before I saw a flash of silver.

*Oh my god*… Was this a hunter?

**Episode 1614**

Greyson didn’t explain what he wanted to tell his brother, but he’d assured me that it had nothing to do with our “arrangement.” It was pack business.

*But what* kind *of pack business?* I wondered. *And why won’t Greyson tell me!*

I was suspicious, and not at all happy. If Greyson wanted to talk to Xavier, then he was probably *dying*.

Scowling, I marched into the kitchen and found Torin hovering over Xavier, looking like a delighted butterfly while Xavier was doing his usual stoic and manly routine.

“I don’t have a preference, Torin,” he said patiently.

“But you have to pick one!” Torin exclaimed. “Everybody says they don’t care, but how is that helping me? Baked or mashed potatoes for Thanksgiving—it’s not that hard a question to answer!”

“Make both,” I told him, and both he and Xavier turned to look at me.

Torin’s eyes widened, as if my suggestion had never occurred to him. “Cali, you’re a genius!” He rushed over, planted a kiss on my cheek, and then started scribbling something in his notebook.

“How’s Greyson?” Xavier asked gruffly.

“He wants to talk to you, actually,” I said.

Xavier raised a brow. “Really? Interesting. Did he say why?”

“Pack business,” I grumbled.

Xavier sighed. “Too bad. I was hoping Greyson would just throw in the towel and admit that you and I are meant to be.”

I scoffed, poking his shoulder. “Yeah, right.”

“A man can dream,” Xavier said, smirking.

“I don’t think Greyson is kidding, though,” I said, shaking my head. “I’m pretty sure his wound is hurting much more than he’s letting on.”

I paused, staring at Xavier. I expected him to make a joke, just like earlier, but his expression went blank. “I guess I’d better go see him, then,” he mumbled.

Feeling wary—*if Xavier’s not giving Greyson shit, exactly HOW bad could things get with Greyson’s wound?—*I watched as Xavier stood up from the chair. But before leaving the room, he asked, “Are you okay?”

I shook my head. “I don’t think it’s the right time for me to be thinking about myself.”

Xavier, his gaze soft, pulled me into a hug. “I was really worried about you when Ryker attacked,” he murmured in my ear. “I never want to experience that again.”

My tone was wry. “I promise I’ll try not to let a reincarnated werewolf cult leader get to me a second time.”

“Cali, I’m being serious.”

“Me too,” I deadpanned, and he chuckled.

He gently kissed my cheek, then my mouth. “I love you.”

I nodded, sighing. “Me too. Now, let’s go see your brother.”

“I thought he only wanted to talk to me?” Xavier said as I herded him upstairs.

“Hah, that doesn’t mean I can’t be there,” I said seriously.

Xavier squinted at me. “Why do I get the feeling Greyson wanted to speak to me privately?”

“Well, I’m sure you’re wrong,” I said with faux certainty.

Faux certainty, which was promptly crushed when we got to Greyson’s room and he gave me a narrowed-eyed look. “I thought I told you this was pack business.”

“And I’m part of this pack,” I said, making a “ta-da” gesture. “Me, you, Xavier, all pack, all the time!”

Xavier cleared his throat, placing his hand on my shoulder. “I think what Greyson is saying is that he wants to talk to me alone.”

I scowled. “But we’re all mates here. Literally. There’s no need for secrecy.”

Greyson rubbed his temples, like I was really giving him a hard time. Hah! He thought THIS was a hard time? He should see things from my perspective! My mate and pack Alpha was lying about almost probably dying, the witches were being even vaguer than usual, AND both my mates wanted to keep me in the dark!

*None of this is good!* I thought, my worry multiplying.

“It’s just something I need to discuss with Xavier to ensure the pack’s safety. And yours,” Greyson said seriously.

I turned to Xavier for help. “But…”

Xavier shook his head. “I promise if it’s something you need to know, I’ll tell you.”

I looked between them, my lower lip wobbling. “On a scale from one to ten, how possible is it that you two will cave if I just start crying right now?”

Xavier snorted. Greyson scoffed. “You don’t cry when you don’t get your way, Cali. You just yell at us.”

“See,” I said slyly, “what I’m hearing right now is that I should stay and yell at you both till you tell me all your secrets.”

“I don’t think he’s going to cave, Cali,” Xavier told me, shooting a look at Greyson.

“And since when do you just do whatever Greyson wants?” I demanded.

Who was I looking at right now? Who was I talking to? See they looked like the Evers brothers, but they weren’t talking like the Evers brothers. Had something come and possessed each of their bodies? Wait, scratch that. That was all too real a possibility.

“I thought you wanted us to get along?” Greyson asked.

“Be comrades, or whatever,” Xavier added.

“I did!” I huffed. “I *do*. But not when it comes to both of you keeping me out of the loop.”

“Cali, please.” Greyson’s tone was firm, and I realized that this was a lost battle. For one, both of them were looking at me like disappointed teachers, and everyone knew that that was my weakness. I couldn’t deal with that look.

Annoyed and frustrated, I walked out. “Well, then. Enjoy your bonding and your secrets!” I said pettily, before slamming the door behind me.

Why did it feel like Greyson was keeping me out of that room to protect me? Because that was the vibe I was getting! And I was *beyond* tired of that—hadn’t I shown them that I wasn’t a timid damsel in distress? They both knew I was emotionally strong and capable. I hated it when they did shit like this.

*Ugh.*

I thought back to Ryker’s attack—I’d been trying to help Greyson, and I’d almost succeeded, too! *Will they ever take me seriously?* I glared at the door and contemplated listening in…

*No, Cali! You’re better than that!* I couldn’t treat my mates that way and break their trust. They were super annoying, but still. I had the dignity to realize when I’d been rejected. Still, though, that didn’t mean that I had to accept any of this.

*I should be in that room, dammit! I’m an adult!*

Stomping downstairs, I ran into Torin, who instantly asked, “How do you feel about cranberry sauce?”

“Can’t talk right now, Torin!” I snapped. Then I softened it with, “Thank you for all your efforts, but I’m dealing with a crisis.”

“Good luck!” Torin called, watching as I stormed out of the house. At least he was supportive, my good friend. Unlike my mates, who had obviously forgotten I too was a supernatural being! Half of one, anyway!

I glared up at Greyson’s window, contemplating breaking it with my awesome Fae powers, just for show. I had awesome Fae powers, thank you very much! If only I could control them better—I would show them both. This was no longer about love—this was about pride and respect! How could love ever be enough when they didn’t respect who I was and what I was capable of? Because I saw a lot of potential in myself.

*I killed the Kollector, dammit! Has everybody forgotten about that?*

I needed to do something to take more control, ASAP. I was already being pushed around by the *due destini* curse—it was time for me to do some pushing of my own. And right on cue, I heard a punching sound.

*Aha!*

I looked over and saw Rishika and Artemis sparring in the yard. This was perfect—I’d already told Artemis that I wanted to train more and explore my powers. We had been until shit hit the fan. But when wasn’t it? There was never a really good time to learn. I kept training like I was trying to hold a hot potato.

I watched the two women, feeling a little wistful. Not only were they clearly hot for each other, but they also trained together, trying to hone their warrior skills. Unlike MY boyfriends, who thought it would be best to hide me away in a castle!

“How’s it going?” I asked the girls, after walking over as casually as I could.

Artemis and Rishika turned to me, both looking sweaty and powerful. Artemis was wiry, but her biceps still looked like they could break you, and Rishika was totally ripped. I didn’t need to get to that level of perfection, but at least halfway would be great. Basically, I wanted the “I’m a badass” vibe too. I wanted to work on my Fae powers, and also on how to punch people—I wanted that kind of confidence and effectiveness in battle!

I wanted it ALL.

“How’s Greyson?” Rishika asked.

I waved her off. “Stubborn. He’s got a secret weapon in his hands, and he won’t use it.”

Artemis looked confused. “What kind of weapon?”

“Me.” I pointed at my chest. “I want you both to train me as a warrior.”

**Episode 1615**

XAVIER

I watched silently as Greyson double-checked that Cali wasn’t hovering in the hallway before he shut the door. The mighty Alpha was still favoring his right leg, which was interesting. And worrisome, weirdly.

Why the fuck hadn’t the wound healed yet?

“You managed to get Cali pissed at both of us,” I said, ignoring his leg. Maybe if I just ignored it, it would go away. Because of course it would go away. He was my older brother, and older brothers didn’t just… *die*. No.

*No.*

“I’ll talk to her later and patch things up, don’t worry,” Greyson said.

I shook my head. “Don’t bother. I’ll be happy to speak to her and clean up your mess, as per usual.”

I said the words to irritate him, the urge to piss him off a reflex by now, but Greyson didn’t seem angry. He seemed almost… dejected. I hated seeing that kind of look on his face, actually.

“I didn’t call you here to play tug of war over Cali, Xavier,” he said. “Though what I have to say involves her.”

I took a seat, staring up at him. “I’m all ears.”

Greyson sat across from me on the bed, leveling me with a stare. “For starters, I want to let you know that I know you want to be Alpha. You’ve made that pretty clear.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “I don’t just want to become Alpha. I *will* challenge you, and I *will* become Alpha. In due time.”

Instead of mocking me or talking shit, Greyson remained serious. Good. He should take me seriously. “That’s kind of what I want to talk to you about,” he said, gesturing at his leg. “There’s a possibility that this is worse than we think.”

“Worse, how?” I asked.

“Pip, York, and Arlo all were revenants—and York and Pip got that way after they were attacked,” Greyson said, and I was reminded of Cali. She’d mentioned Pip as well.

But still, that was for other werewolves. Not Greyson.

Greyson wouldn’t die. He just wouldn’t.

“What are you saying?” I scoffed. “Should I be looking for orange eyes on you?”

Greyson’s serious expression held some anger now. “Can you stop with the bullshit? I’m being serious here, and you’re just—”

“What?” I huffed, standing up. Greyson did too, taking one step toward me before he grabbed me by the shoulders.

“You’re fucking around, Xavier! This is exactly why I’m concerned about what happens next, if I’m not the fucking Alpha. If I *die*. Can you take this conversation seriously, or are we going to keep going in circles?”

I pushed him away, irritated. “Are you for real with this high and mighty bullshit? I’m more than capable of stepping into your shoes! I’ve done it time and time again with great results, actually. Or is that a lie?”

“What’s true right now is that you’re being petty because of all our history, and you’re refusing to have a real conversation with me,” Greyson said. “Can you get over yourself for a moment and pay attention to what I’m saying?”

I huffed, crossing my arms over my chest. “Will you tell me where the hell you’re getting at?”

Greyson took a deep breath. “I need you to remember that when you’re the Alpha, there’s not just the pack to think about, there’s Cali too—”

I narrowed my eyes. “What about Cali?”

“I know you can look after Cali, but can you do both?”

I was getting confused, now. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m just saying, it’s not easy,” Greyson said. “Sometimes what the pack needs is the opposite of what Cali needs. That means you’ll have to make some difficult choices.”

“I know that, obviously,” I snapped. “I actually might be better at figuring that out than you are.”

Greyson shook his head. “Good for you. I just wanted to put it out there. Just in case.”

I rolled my eyes. “In case what?”

“In case I turn into a revenant and want to destroy everyone, Xavier.”

I paused. I’d thought that this whole thing was a hypothetical conversation. Why the hell was Greyson talking about it like it was real?

“What are you saying? The witches were just saying that you’d be fine,” I said.

Greyson paused. “The truth is that we don’t know, Xavier. You might need to step up and be the Alpha—not because you challenged me, but just because I won’t be able to do it.”

“Yeah, sure,” I said, rolling my eyes. “You make everything sound so dramatic.”

“I’m being serious, Xavier. We don’t know what the fuck will happen with this witch mark, so I need you to be prepared for every possible outcome.”

Greyson’s expression was severe, and finally, the realization clicked inside my head.

“I need you to promise me one more thing,” he said. “If I become a revenant, I need you to kill me.”

I paused. Greyson stared.

And then I laughed. “What kind of fucked up sense of humor—”

“I’m not laughing, Xavier. Every single thing I’ve just told you is for real.”

I stopped speaking.

If the realization had clicked before, now it fell on my shoulders full force, and it felt heavy.

Suddenly, *I* felt heavy. I felt sick. I felt like—okay, I’d wanted to kill my brother in the past, but not for a while, and I’d always wanted to do it on my own terms. Not because he was a fucking rabid monster that needed to be exterminated.

I would never sign up for that.

“I need you to do this, Xavier. Promise me,” Greyson said quietly. “You’re the only person I can trust with all this. I don’t know what happens next with this wound, so I need to be prepared for every possibility. And that’s why I’m asking for your help.”

My heart was pounding, and I still felt sick to my stomach. What the fuck was this? *Worry?* When the fuck had I started caring about Greyson so much? Of course I wanted to become Alpha, but I didn’t want it to happen at the cost of Greyson’s life. Not after everything we’d been through. Not after we’d killed our father together. Not after I’d learned that he was nothing like Silas.

I didn’t want the asshole to die.

He wasn’t supposed to die. Older brothers just weren’t supposed to die. Greyson was supposed to stay alive and be annoying but let me be Alpha and also let Cali be with me, but just… not fucking die.

What the hell was happening to me?

I swallowed the weird feeling, the worry and the anxiety. “Should I tell Cali about this?”

Greyson arched an eyebrow. “What do you think?”

“Better sit on it for a bit, I guess.”

Greyson shook his head. “Keep it between the two of us, Xavier.”

We stared at each other for a beat, and I had no idea what to do next. Did I tell him I didn’t want to kill him anymore? Did I tell him I was sorry? Did I… hug him?

Did I *want* to hug him?

*Jesus Christ.*

“Uh…” I cleared my throat.

I couldn’t do this. Any of it.

“I should get downstairs. Torin wants to discuss Thanksgiving dishes. Something about potatoes. Seemed important.” I gave Greyson an awkward nod and turned to leave.

Before I could reach the door, though, Greyson said, “Don’t get your hopes up, little brother. I’m not planning on rolling over just yet.”

That made me feel better, weirdly.

Looking over my shoulder, I snorted. “Too bad.”

Greyson’s quiet chuckle followed me as I closed the door behind me. I paused outside and took a deep breath.

I still felt sick to my stomach.

I hadn’t taken two steps when Ava’s door burst open and she popped her head out into the hallway. “Xavier!”

I flinched in surprise.

“I need to talk to you,” she said seriously.

“What about?” I asked in a brisk tone.

“Iñigo.”

I shook my head. “Don’t start acting like we’re buddy-buddy after escaping Iñigo together, Ava. Nothing’s changed between us.”

She frowned. “But I’ve been helping you—I helped when I told you that Greyson isn’t a revenant. I helped the pack. Don’t I deserve a bit of your trust?”

“We’re letting you live with us for free, Ava,” I said gruffly. “I think this is the least you can do for the pack. And you’re still being selfish, thinking that you deserve a reward for offering the bare minimum. You want to have your cake and eat it too.”

“But—”

“Maybe I’ll trust you more after you do something that proves you’re not as selfish as you seem. I want to see you put your life at real risk, to prove your loyalty. Until then, I’ve got your number.”

Ava crossed her arms over her chest. “But what if I *did* risk my life for the pack? What if I did do something that takes more than reading auras or whatever?”

I rolled my eyes. “Like what?”

Ava’s gaze was steely. “Like taking down Iñigo. Tonight.”

**Episode 1616**

CHARLIE

I crashed head-first to the ground.

I knew I was still being followed—I could feel it, my werewolf senses on high alert. I’d broken away to get some distance but then decided to shift back to human so I wouldn’t get caught as a werewolf. I’d been ready to get dressed when I’d heard something, and then the ground had shifted under me after a whole-ass wolf had slammed into me.

The impact had sent me backward, my ears ringing with the force of it, but I couldn’t…

I couldn’t give up now. Snarling, I grabbed my knife and whirled around to attack, ready for battle, when I realized—

*Wait!*

“Violet?” I spluttered, my heart pounding in relief instead of fear. The adrenaline turned sweeter when Violet’s wolf stared at me, blinking rapidly.

*Charlie?* she mind linked.

*Violet?* I mind linked.

And then both of us: *What are you doing here?*

I smiled at her; I could do nothing but smile with both relief and disbelief. I felt so lucky that she was okay.

“I’m being followed,” I whispered.

Violet shifted back to human in an instant. I swallowed roughly, my gaze flicking down her gorgeous naked body. I couldn’t help it, so sue me. The sight of her like that was something that I didn’t think I’d ever get used to. I didn’t think I wanted to, either. I was sure she’d always take my breath away.

She did it for a second time in the same instant when she ran up to me, hugging me.

“You’re safe? You’re okay?” she said in my ear, squeezing me tight. The feeling of her skin against mine—it was… distracting. Very, very distracting. She was warm and hot and perfect and shaking, and I wanted to take her away from this place, to somewhere safe where I could kiss the living daylights out of her.

“It’s fine, we’re fine,” I said, giving her a peck that felt like too little, but it would have to do for now. “We need to get dressed. Someone’s trailing me from the hunter camp, but at least if we’re human, we can talk our way out of most things.”

She nodded sharply. “Okay.”

We quickly got dressed, and I still felt so content to see her, to be with her. I couldn’t help but steal glances at her, at her, uh, *everything* that I wanted to touch and kiss. All of her. Yup.

*Okay, fine! I’m looking at her boobs. And her ass. But I’m looking respectfully!*

“What?” Violet asked with a breathless smirk, and I realized I’d gotten caught staring.

“Nothing!” I blurted, blushing like a goddamn idiot. I also reminded myself that we were in mortal danger, so I should probably stop being a horny asshole and focus. Looking around, I paused to listen.

I couldn’t hear anyone, but the hair on the back of my neck was standing up. That was a bad sign. I also reminded myself that someone was following me, and there was no reason to think they might have given up.

“We have to get going,” I whispered, and grabbed Violet’s hand.

“Where to?” she asked.

“No idea, but we have to keep moving,” I said, being super unhelpful.

“You should come back with me to the B and B,” Violet said seriously.

“Is it far?” I asked.

“If we shift it’s close enough that we can get there, rest, and figure out what to do.”

I frowned. “Maybe not the best idea right now…”

“Fair. We could try to walk, but it might take longer,” she said. “Good thing werewolves run warm?”

“True.” I grinned and was about to start running when Violet gripped my arm. “There’s just one catch.”

Oh, no. I didn’t like catches. “What?”

“Mrs. Riggins,” Violet said sheepishly. “She might be a hunter or something. I’m not sure.”

“Great,” I said wryly. “Can we trust *anyone* when it comes to being a werewolf?”

Violet snorted. “Mrs. Riggins said the same thing. She doesn’t trust anyone. But I convinced her that we’re the good guys. So as long as we’re chill, she said it’s a safe place for us.”

I sighed. “Doesn’t seem we have a lot of choice, do we?”

Violet shook her head, so I agreed to follow her back to Mrs. Riggins’s lair, or whatever. In the end, I was just so relieved that she was here, with me. Whatever danger lay ahead, at least I could help protect her.

We started moving quickly through the woods, more like a power-hike than anything, and I asked, “What happened with your phone, though? How come you didn’t return my calls?”

She sighed. “It died, and I didn’t have a chance to charge it.” She glanced at me, reaching out to take my hand. “I’m sorry if I worried you.”

I pulled her close, unable to resist. “Never apologize for something like that,” I murmured against her mouth, giving her another kiss. I made this one a little harder, indulging myself because I deserved this little bit of good feeling, didn’t I? I had my girl in my arms, and the worst was still lurking out there, but at least we were together.

At least we were together.

We reached a stream, and Violet said, “If we cross here, it’s maybe another twenty minutes to the B and B.”

“You don’t remember?”

“I shifted and ran to get here, so it’s all kind of a blur.”

We both stood by the stream, staring at it apprehensively.

“Well, I think we should do this the old-fashioned way,” I said.

She arched an eyebrow. “We should shift?”

“We’re supposed to be incognito, so no.” I pointed at my back. “Just hop on my back—I’ll carry you across so you don’t get your shoes wet.”

Violet grinned. “Sounds good to me.” She hopped onto my back and leaned forward, whispering in my ear. “My knight in shining armor.”

She wrapped her arms tight around my neck, kissing my cheek, and I just stood there for a moment, basking in pride. God, I was easy.

I got a little too cocky in my determination to impress Violet, though, because my footing was unsure the moment I stepped into the stream. The rocks underneath my feet were slippery, and I realized I should’ve taken my shoes off before stepping in.

“Shit, this isn’t as easy as I thought,” I grumbled, and Violet chuckled.

The light sound tickled the back of my neck, and suddenly I was distracted enough to miss my step.

“Charlie!” Violet squealed, and almost fell, but my wolf reflexes kicked in.

*Thank god!*

I swung Violet around, and then we were face to face, panting together. She was still wrapped around me—arms around my neck, legs around my hips—but now I was holding her by the waist.

“That was close,” I muttered, breathless.

She glanced between my lips and my eyes, smiling teasingly. “My hero.”

Her words were accompanied by a kiss, and this one wasn’t quick like the others. This one had her opening my mouth up for her, her tongue brushing up against mine, making me groan. It felt so good that I almost lost my balance again, but I wasn’t about to let her go now, not when she felt so amazing that I felt it on every inch of my skin, her warmth and taste making me feel whole. I had missed her so much that this moment was just what I needed—I needed her, badly, and I couldn’t wait to get her in a bed to touch her and kiss her, make her feel good, show her how much I loved every second of this.

When she broke the kiss, I groaned in frustration.

“We have to get going,” she whispered.

“Right. I guess we *shouldn’t* make out in the middle of a stream while someone’s hunting us,” I said, and her giggle made me grin.

I finally carried her to the other side, my mouth still burning from the sensation of her. Then I finally set her on solid ground. “There. All good.”

She smiled, reaching out to hold my hand. At the same moment, still thinking about kissing her and how great her boobs were, I lost my footing like a horny jackass.

The cold water sure was a wake-up call.

“Fuck!” I spluttered, landing on my ass. *How humiliating*. Violet seemed to think so as well, but she pressed her lips together to hide her laughter.

“Let me help.” She pulled me up, and I huffed, shaking my head.

“Some hero,” I grumbled.

“No, you did great!”

“I literally almost drowned in ten inches of water,” I told her seriously.

And that was when she burst out laughing. It was silly and awkward, but I followed suit, all the tension evaporating. It just felt good to let go after all this time, to be with Violet and feel normal. Feel good.

But then—

“Did you hear that?” Violet’s laughter vanished. Her eyes were wide as she looked behind me.

I swallowed roughly.

I’d heard it too.

I reached for my knife with one hand and put my other arm around Violet. There was movement from my right, and instinctively I spun around, knife raised. Only to see…

“*Mom?*”

**Episode 1617**

ARTEMIS

“A warrior, huh?” I said, raising my eyebrows. “I mean, we talked about working on your powers, but isn’t that a bit much?”

Rishika chuckled. “No offense, but haven’t we tried this before, Cali?”

My sister huffed. “But this time I really want to learn. I’ll do my best and try really hard!”

Rishika raised an eyebrow. “Will you, though?”

Cali thrust her chin up, crossing her arms. “I’m just tired of feeling like I can’t defend myself, and I’m really tired of everyone feeling like they have to do it for me. I don’t want to be a burden, not anymore.”

Rishika turned to me. “She’s your sister. What do you think?”

And then Cali pinned me with her gaze, full force. “Think of how much safer the pack will be,” she said. “Not only will I be able to fight better, but the other pack members won’t be distracted trying to protect me.”

Rishika snorted. “You mean Greyson and Xavier?”

Cali scowled. “That’s exactly what I mean.”

“They are truly obsessed with you,” Rishika said.

“I love them, but it also needs to stop.” Cali paused. “Like, I want to run off into the woods by myself and not need anyone to save me, damn it!”

“She really does like running off all alone, huh?” Rishika asked me, half-joking.

“It’s her hobby,” I replied.

Cali rolled her eyes and shoved me, and Rishika snickered. I flicked Cali on the shoulder.

“Okay, fine,” I said.

Cali gasped. “YAY!”

“*But.*” I raised an index finger. “I want you to take this really seriously. No more flaking.”

Cali looked serious. “I won’t.”

“Okay. Let’s pick up where we left off when it comes to the fighting stuff, okay?” Rishika asked.

“Right,” Cali said, nodding firmly. “What if I can’t remember where we left off, though?”

Rishika chuckled, shaking her head. “Let’s do a refresh of the basics when it comes to self-defense, then, before going into the offense. Sound good?”

Cali seemed to like that idea a lot better. I stepped back, took a seat on a fallen tree trunk, and watched as Rishika reminded Cali of various defensive moves, like breaking a hold or avoiding a punch. It was truly incredible how good a teacher Rishika was. It was one thing to be a skilled fighter, but not everyone could show others how to do the same.

Rishika was a natural at it—patient, caring, not holding anything back. But Cali was also giving it her best. She didn’t complain once, not even when she hit the ground once, twice, so many times in the next half an hour that I actually lost count. But Rishika pulled her up in every instance, making sure she was okay.

“Does it hurt anywhere?” she would ask.

And Cali would say, “Just my ego. Let’s go again.”

It was easy to tease Cali—there were a million things she did or said that invited people to comment on her attitude. But Rishika never, not once, made Cali feel bad. She wasn’t doing it now, and she’d never done it in the past. It took a particular kind of person to resist the temptation to tease Cali, and I appreciated that.

Rishika was just so *cool*, as Cali would say.

It was hard to believe that I had her as my girlfriend. She was so sweet and fun and charming, and when she kissed me, when we touched, everything seemed to settle inside me. I smiled to myself, and I smiled at her when she glanced my way as she and Cali worked.

But then, beyond the sight of the two of them as they wrestled, something else caught my eye. Something I couldn’t really see, but I could feel it all the same—beyond Rishika, somewhere in the woods.

In the woods, where the ghost pool was.

The portal that called me, somehow.

There was another world out there, ready to break and burst into our own.

What would Cali do if that happened? Would the Alphas die defending her, or would she die too quickly? Would her powers spin out of control again, become impossible and explosive like they had when she’d killed the Kollector? What would Rishika do, if chaos came to this house once more?

Rishika could figure anything out.

*Stop admiring her*, the voice in my head said. *What are you doing? Don’t get distracted, and don’t fool yourself—good things never last.*

My head throbbed. I could feel a headache coming on.

“Hey, Artemis!”

I looked up. Rishika waved me over with a smile. “Come on over and show Cali how to throw a punch. I’ll go grab some water.”

“Okay,” I said, fighting to push the headache away. Fighting to push the voice away as it said, *It won’t last*.

I needed a distraction.

“Come on, show me what you’ve got,” I said, focusing on my sister.

“What? Like, hit you?” Cali asked sheepishly.

I rolled my eyes. “Just throw the punch, and I’ll watch your form.”

Cali took a deep breath, spread her legs slightly, and threw the punch in the air, almost stumbling at the same time.

“First of all, we need a punching bag out here to help you with that,” I said. “Second, you gotta move your right leg a little to the front…” I reached for Cali’s hip, pushing it forward.

The second I touched my sister, my headache got worse.

*Ignore it*, I told myself. *Ignore it!*

“She doesn’t need a punching bag, she’s got us!” Rishika said, walking over to us. “You two should do a bit of sparring and see how it goes.” She winked at me. “Go easy on her.”

I smiled at her playfulness while Cali said, “I’m ready!”

We took our positions, and as we did, I looked at Rishika again. She grinned, and my heart rate spiked, and the voice said, *You’re letting your feelings distract from the goal. Rishika is a distraction.*

The headache sharpened.

“No, she’s not!” I snapped, wincing.

Cali looked at me dubiously. She lowered her fists.

Rishika stared at me. “What? Who are you talking to?”

I’d spoken out loud.

“It’s just a training technique,” I lied. “Helps me get riled up.”

Rishika snorted. “Whatever works for you, honey.”

The headache got even worse.

*Honey?* the voice asked*. Doesn’t she know you’re poison?*

I did feel like poison.

Suddenly, I felt like I was full of anger. Full of rage, and Cali…

Cali was the distraction.

“Ha!” My sister made a move, and I ducked and evaded, shoving her back in an instant.

Cali fell to the ground with a grunt.

She fell as if she were a doll. Not real.

*A distraction.*

“What the *hell*, Artemis?” Rishika was yelling at me, and I snapped back into the moment. I winced, looking down at the ground, at my sister, who was wiping blood from her lip.

“I’m sorry,” I blurted, feeling horrible.

“Okay, that hurt,” Cali grumbled as I helped her up. “But it’s fine—I don’t want either of you to hold back.”

I felt like crying. My head still hurt.

“I think that’s enough training for today,” Rishika said, glancing at me. “You should go ice your lip.”

Cali agreed and headed back to the house, but not before saying, “Thank you both for helping me out.”

Rishika didn’t seem as excited, though. She eyed me the moment we were alone, her expression wary. “What was that all about?”

My head was pounding.

“Cali wanted to learn. That’s how you learn,” I said. “Do you think I had any special treatment when I learned how to fight?”

Rishika frowned. “No. But Cali’s your sister.”

“You think I don’t know that?” I snapped. My eyes were watering, now. The headache was getting worse and worse… It was killing me.

Rishika looked hurt. I couldn’t bear to look at her.

“I need to take a shower,” I muttered, turning away and heading inside.

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The warm water didn’t do me any good. My head was still vibrating, and I still felt queasy. I wasn’t sure what was happening, but when I replayed things in my head, I realized one horrifying thing.

I had wanted to hurt Cali. That was what I’d been trying to do.

The thought made me sick.

The bathroom door opened just then. Rishika’s voice was quiet. “Are you okay?”

I took a deep breath, afraid the voice would speak again. The headache remained. I shut the water off and opened the shower curtain. Rishika was holding out a towel. I took it from her hands, wrapped it tightly around me, and with Rishika’s gaze on me, I couldn’t lie.

“I have a terrible headache.”

Rishika’s expression softened. She sighed, pulling me close, her touch gentle. “I’m sorry about earlier. I just wanted to help.”

She leaned forward and brushed her lips over mine, and the heat of her breath and her taste soothed me.

And all of a sudden, the headache was gone. How was that possible?

Did… Did Rishika’s kiss do that?

**Episode 1618**

XAVIER

“Ava, didn’t you already agree to kill Iñigo?” I asked. “That’s not exactly a big gesture, since it’s kind of part of the price you’re paying for staying here safely. So, you can quit trying to impress me with that one—”

“I know that,” she said quickly. She took a step toward me, her eyes flashing. “But I’m going to do it right now, by myself. *That’s* what I’m saying.”

I laughed, the sound hollow and mean. “You really think you can handle that bloodsucker by yourself?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Of course I can,” Ava said defensively. “Why not?”

Why not indeed? Part of me considered encouraging her to go for it. If she wanted to be a fucking idiot and go after that wily bastard without backup, who was I to stand in her way? Besides, she’d probably end up getting herself killed, and that would certainly make things a hell of a lot easier for me around the pack house.

But… was her getting killed *really* what I wanted?

“What makes you think I can’t handle Iñigo?” Ava demanded, still looking angry. “Are you saying I’m not strong enough to take him on?”  
 I crossed my arms, looking at her closely. “Maybe what I’m saying is that youdon’t really *want* to kill that creepy vamp.” I thought back to the conversation I’d overheard her having with Iñigo. I hadn’t heard everything, but it had sounded like they were making some kind of arrangement. “You two seemed to have an understanding, or did I mishear? What was that deal you made with him?”

Ava’s eyebrows went up. I’d surprised her.

“I guess you thought I wouldn’t find out?” I asked, glad to be able to twist the knife in a little further.

She pressed her lips together, looking tense. “Didn’t you ever wonder why you were able to get away from that place, Xavier? You were weak as fuck, but you made it out. You, me, and Kira together with barely any scratches. You never thought that was strange?”

“What do you mean?” I asked, unsettled by the question. What was she trying to imply? We’d gotten out practically by the skin of our teeth. At least that’s what I remembered.

“Open your eyes,” she snapped. “I made a deal with Iñigo. I offered an exchange. You for me.”

I felt a muscle in my jaw twitching as my teeth clenched. She often had that effect on me. “You don’t really expect me to believe that, do you?” I asked coldly. “I don’t believe a word that comes out of your mouth.”

She leaned closer to me, her dark eyes glittering. “As much as it may kill you to know it, I offered my life for yours. Believe whatever you want, but that’s the truth, and I don’t know of any better proof of my loyalty to you. What more do you want from me?”

I stared at her for a moment, trying to put the pieces together in my head. She looked angry and indignant, but I was pretty sure it was an act. I’d seen her spin lies like this before—even when we were kids, when we got in trouble for swimming in the creek when we weren’t supposed to, or for stealing candy, or for other minor kid infractions, Ava had always smiled and spun a lie that had sounded more true than truth to get us out of trouble. Lies just came easily to her. Her lies were like knots—complicated, but if you kept pulling at them, they gave way.

“But you got away, didn’t you?” I said. “You didn’t have to sacrifice anything after all. How do you explain that?”

Her eyes widened, and she took a deep breath, and I could instantly tell that some long-winded, bullshit explanation was coming.

I held up a hand to stop her. “You know what, Ava, don’t bother. I don’t want to hear any more from you. If you want to go kill Iñigo by yourself, knock yourself out. Just don’t expect any of us to come save your ass when things take a turn for the worse.”

I turned for the door, irritated with myself for even letting her lure me into this conversation. She was always doing this shit—trying to catch my eye or trying to find a way to talk to me. It was fucking annoying. I had to stop letting her do this. It was all lies, and I wanted nothing to do with it—or her.

But—just my luck—Ava followed me to the doorway, and as soon as I stepped into the hallway, I ran into Cali.

Cali stopped, clearly surprised, and took a step back, taking us both in—Ava in the doorway to her room, and me just outside it. I could see her putting things together, and her eyes narrowed on Ava.

“Excuse me,” she said coldly. “Hope I’m not interrupting anything.”

“No, I was just leaving,” I said, with a glance back at Ava.

If Cali looked upset to see Ava, it was nothing compared to how devastated Ava looked to see Cali.

That was just too bad for Ava. She had no reason to be upset, and she was just going to have to get used to it. I took another step into the hall and pushed the door shut, letting it slam in Ava’s shocked face.

When I turned to Cali, she was still looking furious. She was also looking… disheveled. She had dirt streaked across her face, she was sweaty, and her hair was a mess. I gave her a good once-over and raised an eyebrow.

“I like the look,” I said with a grin. Then I noticed she was holding an ice pack to her lip, and my smile slipped away. “What happened to your mouth?”

She took the ice away for a moment so I could see her lip. Cali’s lips always had a just-kissed kind of swell to them, but now her bottom lip looked more swollen than usual.

“What the hell happened?” I demanded, frowning.

“I was training.”

“*Training?*” I reached for her, brushing my fingers lightly across the perfect bow of her lip. “For what?”

She flinched. “Ow. Don’t.”

“Sorry,” I said, dropping my hand.

She put the ice back to her mouth. “It’s not a big deal. I was just on my way to get cleaned up. Excuse me.” She started to push past me.

I wasn’t ready to let her go, so I reached for her wrist, pulling her around. “Are you sure you’re okay? No other injuries?”

“Why?” she snapped, her eyes flashing. “Are you going to tell me I can’t train anymore? That I might get hurt?” She gestured to the ice pack. “Clearly, you’d be right, because I did get hurt. You’re probably happy about that.”

She turned and started away again, but I moved in front of her.

“You’re mad at me.” Her icy glare was my only answer. I glanced up at Ava’s closed door. I didn’t want to get into anything with Cali within hearing distance of Ava, so I pulled her down the hall, toward my room. “Come here.”

“Um, excuse me. I need to take a shower.”

I glanced back at her. “I can’t argue with that, but I want to talk to you.”

Cali yanked her wrist free. “You can talk to me right here.”

With a sigh, I turned to look at her. “I think I owe you an apology.”

She gave a hollow laugh. “You *think*? Either you’re sorry or you’re not, Xavier. You shouldn’t have to *think* about it.”

This was going to be more difficult than I’d thought. I sighed again. “Okay, I’m sorry.”

She raised an eyebrow. “For what?”

“You’re not going to make this easy, are you?” She didn’t answer. I ran a hand through my hair. “I may have… overreacted, before.” I shook my head. “Okay, I definitely overreacted before. About what happened with Ryker.”

“You’ve got that right,” Cali muttered. “You were a dick.”

I groaned. “I *was* a dick. I got jealous.”

“And overprotective.”

I nodded. “Yeah, that too.”

Cali looked at me for a moment, then sighed. “Well, at least you’re becoming more self-aware. At least you know when you’re being a dick. That’s something. So thanks for that, I guess.” She shrugged, then stepped forward, trying to move past me.

I caught her by the shoulders. “I really am sorry, Cali. Honestly, I am.” I looked at her for a moment. “Let me see that lip again.”

Her eyes were on me as she slowly removed the ice pack from her mouth.

“Maybe this will help,” I murmured, leaning in to very gently kiss her mouth, just next to the swelling. “How’s that?”

“I’m not sure,” Cali said, but her breath was coming faster, like she’d been running.

I smiled and kissed her again. “Any better?”

“Maybe…”

I looked up, into her eyes. “Does that mean you’re going to forgive me?”

**Episode 1619**

AVA

The door slammed hard in my face, and I stood still, staring at it. Xavier was with Cali. He was *always* with Cali. No matter what he and I were talking about, or how far it felt like we had come, as soon as he saw Cali, that was it. Our conversation ended.

My chest suddenly felt tight, and I had to fight to take a breath. I looked around the small room, which was starting to feel smaller than ever. It was tiny. I was trapped here. I had to get the hell out.

I jerked open the door and stepped out. Down the hall, I could see Xavier leaning down, *kissing* Cali. My stomach dropped. I wasn’t surprised—not really—but it still sucked. I knew they were together, of course, but that didn’t mean I wanted it rubbed in my face. Especially not when he was being so cold to me.

Gritting my teeth, I headed into the hallway and—forcing myself not to look back—headed downstairs. It was all I could do not to break into a run. But I managed to keep it together. I didn’t want to give Xavier—or Cali, for that matter—the satisfaction of seeing how upset I was.

I hurried through the kitchen, where Cali’s parents and that knot of Fae they were always with were gathered around the table, surrounded by cookbooks and notebooks.

“—and I just think it’s not Thanksgiving if we don’t have *traditional* stuffing!” Cali’s dad was yelling, looking agitated.

Their petty worries about some bullshit dinner were none of my concern, so I ignored them and hurried outside. The late autumn air was so cold it burned my lungs as I sucked it in, but I didn’t care. I liked the way it stung. Everything else hurt—that might as well hurt, too. Tears were streaming down my cheeks, and those burned as the cold wind skimmed across my face.

I gritted my teeth, but I wanted to scream. I wanted to shriek into the howling wind. What the hell was I even doing here? Every day was just another slap in the face, just another reminder of what I’d lost.

I sucked in another breath. Then another. Then another.

My heart was beating fast, but I forced it to slow down to a steady pace once again.

It was hard, but being here was also giving me motivation. It was the best way to keep me focused on my ultimate goal: to get Xavier back.

That was what I wanted—it was *all* I wanted—and I just had to keep my eyes on the prize.

But it was getting more complicated. Iñigo had made things messier. I’d thought I could use him to get Xavier back. Hell, maybe I still could, but… maybe I didn’t need that bloodsucker anymore. Maybe if I just did as Xavier and Greyson wanted and killed the vamp, then I’d finally get Xavier to trust me.

But Xavier was right about one thing: killing Iñigo was *not* going to be easy. He was old and experienced, and he was no fool. I’d already tried to seduce him as a way to manipulate him, and it hadn’t worked at all.

My eyes began to water as the wind grew even colder. It was blowing through the mountains and felt icy cold. I balled my hands into fists and wrapped my arms around myself. I was just going to have to take a more direct approach with Iñigo. Track him down, rely on the element of surprise, and just stake the fucker out of my life. Forever.

I blew out a breath. Tracking him wasn’t going to be easy. He used Kira’s spell to hide his scent, so I wasn’t going to be able to rely on that. Which left… not much.

If Kira had cast the spell, could she reverse it? Or could she use her magic to help me track Iñigo?

I didn’t know the answers to those questions, but it was worth finding out. I turned and headed back inside to find Kira. I found her in the living room, which was good luck. But she was with Big Mac, which was bad luck.

Big Mac glared at me as I walked in. “What do *you* want?”

I ignored her and turned to Kira. “I need to talk to you.”

“Why?” Big Mac snapped.

Why the hell was this old witch all up in my business? I gritted my teeth. “It’s a personal matter.”

“It’s fine,” Kira murmured, getting to her feet. She followed me out of the room and into the hallway. “I have to admit, Ava, I’m a little surprised.”

I glanced over my shoulder at her. “About what?”

She raised her eyebrows. “I didn’t think there was anything *personal* between us.”

I rolled my eyes as I looked forward again. Did every single witch on the planet hate me? I forced a smile. “I’ve got no hard feelings toward you, Kira. Circumstances brought us together.”

She frowned. “By circumstances, do you mean Iñigo?” She reached for my shoulder and stopped me, her eyes narrowing. “Let’s just stop beating around the bush, shall we? What’s this about?”

We’d stopped in a little alcove, just outside the kitchen. It was cramped, but private, and would do for the kind of conversation I wanted to have.

I leaned against the wall. “You realize that Iñigo’s only been able to attack us and get away so easily because of you, right?”

Kira’s eyes went wide. “What?”

“Yeah. It’s that damn spell you gave him. Werewolves use scent for most of our tracking, yeah, but we use it for defense, too. We never know when he’s coming or even when he’s been nearby, because your spell masks his scent.”

“He made me do it,” Kira started defensively. “I—”

“Hey, listen, I’m not here to cast blame,” I said, holding up my hands in mock surrender. “I’m just pointing out the facts.”

Kira folded her arms across her chest, looking miserable. “So?”

“So, can you undo the spell?”

She eyed me warily. “Why?”

I rolled my eyes. “I think I’ve made that obvious. That bloodsucker’s a threat to all of us. And—more importantly—why *not*? Why would you want to keep helping Iñigo at this point?”

Kira shook her head. “It’s more complicated than that. It’s not just words I say. I can only remove that spell in Iñigo’s presence.”

“*Great*,” I muttered in high frustration. “Well that’s not going to happen unless we can track him down, and we can’t track him down if we can’t follow his scent—”

“I didn’t say we couldn’t track him,” Kira said, cutting me off.

“What?” I snapped. “What do you mean? You just said—”

She shrugged one shoulder. “I always put in a fail-safe. You know, just in case.”

“Wait, so does that mean I *can* find him? *How?*” I demanded.

Kira pressed her lips together, clearly thinking hard. After a moment, she shook her head. “I’m not going to tell you.”

“What? *Why?*”

“Not until you stop lying.”

“I’m not lying—”

“Why are you suddenly so interested in finding Iñigo?” Kira demanded, her eyes cold.

I heaved an exasperated sigh. “I told you already—”

“I think you want to find him so you can kill him,” Kira said sharply.

I rolled my eyes. She was right, but why did she have to be so *difficult*? “I’m not even thinking about that right now, Kira. I’m thinking about the pack. Their safety is the highest priority—”

“Give it a rest, Ava.”

“Why do you even care?” I demanded, standing up straight and getting in Kira’s face. “Say I *was* going to kill the vampire who exploited your powers and held us both hostage. Wouldn’t it be to your advantage if I did? He threatened you. He threatened both of us.”

Kira took this in. After a moment she nodded, slowly. “Fine. I’ll help you. But I’m going to come with you. And we should talk to Xavier. Plan it out with him.”

She started out of the alcove and toward the stairs, presumably to get Xavier.

I grabbed her elbow and yanked her back. “Absolutely not.” The image of Xavier and Cali standing close in the shadowy hallway, kissing, flashed into my mind and made my blood run hot as lava.

“Ava,” Kira started. “I really think Xavier should—”

“No,” I said quickly. “He doesn’t need to be involved.”

Kira’s gaze was searching. “You really care about him.”

“*What?*” She’d caught me off-guard.

Her gaze softened. “I mean, in your own weird, twisted way, you really do, don’t you?”

“He’s the only thing in this whole damn world I do care about,” I said, my voice flint hard. I meant every word of it. Xavier meant everything to me. He always would. “Now, will you help me?”

Kira hesitated for just a moment, but then she nodded. “When are we leaving?”

“Right now.”

**Episode 1620**

CALI

As I looked into Xavier’s eyes, it was with a very familiar feeling of completely mixed emotions. I was so torn. He’d been such a jerk to me before—and he was being pretty freaking cocky at the moment, as well. But… that was just how Xavier was, and as a smirk played on his lips, butterflies fluttered in my stomach. That, too, was familiar. I loved that smirk, even though I knew I shouldn’t. There was just something about him—his confidence was intoxicating. It always had been, for me.

“What do you say?” he asked, lifting one eyebrow. “Am I forgiven?”

“No,” I said, frowning. He wouldn’t get away with that so easily. “Not yet. You haven’t exactly apologized fully, have you?”

He rolled his eyes, but a smile was playing around his lips. “Haven’t I?”

When he put a hand around my waist and pulled me in, pressing me against his body, my breath caught. I could never shake the way he made me feel. Like I was made completely of jelly.

He noticed this, and his smile grew. “What if I just showed you instead?” And before I had a chance to answer, he bent and slipped an arm beneath my knees and lifted me into his arms.

Startled, I flung my arms around his neck as he stepped toward my room, shoving the door open with his shoulder.

“Xavier,” I grumbled. I was trying to sound annoyed, but part of me was kind of enjoying it. Especially the part about being held in his arms. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“You said you needed to take a shower, so…” He stepped into the room and kicked the door shut behind him. “I’m taking you to the shower.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m pretty sure I can manage that by myself. I don’t need you to do it for me.”

“All the same.” He grinned as he walked me toward the bathroom.

I wriggled a little—half-heartedly, truth be told—but his grip was strong as he carried me into the shower and flipped on the light with his elbow. But when he set me down in the shower and turned on the water, I screamed.

“Xavier! What are you *doing*?”

The water was freezing and—maybe more importantly—I was still fully dressed!

Xavier laughed as I spluttered into the spray of the water, pushing my sodden hair from my face.

“I cannot believe you just did that!” I gasped. “There’s no way you’re getting away with that.”

Then, without giving him a moment to respond, I reached up and aimed the shower head right at him.

Xavier was caught totally off-guard, and he spluttered into the freezing spray.

Now it was me who was laughing, and I slipped out of the shower and past him, sliding along the wet tile and onto the hardwood floor of my room. Chest heaving, I heard the heavy thud of Xavier’s footfalls behind me. He was coming after me!

Giggling like a maniac, I slipped around the end of my bed, grabbing onto the comforter to keep myself from sliding to the soaking floor.

“Like I’m going to let you get away with that one, Caliana!” he growled, rushing up behind me. He caught me around the waist and spun me around to face him. Water was dripping off him, and he shook himself like a dog, showering me with a spray of freezing water from his hair and making me scream.

I was still laughing hysterically as he pulled me to him, but my giggles died away as I looked up into his blue eyes, which had started to smolder. I watched as his eyes moved to my lips, then further down to where my T-shirt clung tight against my breasts. They moved back upward, and when his eyes met mine again, his pupils were dilated so much that his eyes looked nearly black.

I felt a vibrating thrum of arousal pulse through me, like I was a guitar string he’d just strummed. I breathed out, letting myself melt against him, and he pulled me tight, then bent and pressed his lips to mine.

“Careful of the bruise,” I said, pulling back just a little and pointing to my swollen lip.

His lips curled into a half-smile, and he leaned down, kissing the other—uninjured—corner of my mouth. Then he moved down, kissing his way to my neck and then across to my ear. His tongue flicked lightly against the thin, sensitive skin just below my earlobe, and my whole body shivered. He kissed his way down my neck to my shoulder, where his teeth scraped across my skin.

I moaned and closed my eyes, giving myself over to every sensation he was igniting within me. My clothes and hair were soaking wet and icy cold, but my skin was on fire. I wouldn’t have been surprised if I’d opened my eyes to find myself steaming.

His hands roved upward, beneath my sticking clothing, and I raised my arms, letting him peel off my wet shirt. My own fingers went to the buttons of his shirt as his lips returned to that spot just below my ear, the one that made my thoughts a blur of colors and sounds. I could think of nothing but Xavier. His hands, his lips, his body—just him. Nothing in the world seemed to exist outside of this moment. It was just the two of us, alone in the universe.

“You know,” Xavier murmured, his lips so close to my ear that I could feel his warm breath tickling against my skin, “I’ve been thinking about it…”

“Thinking about what?” I breathed.

“I think you’re right—there really is so much I have to apologize for.” He leaned down and flicked his tongue just under my earlobe, and my knees went weak. “Where to begin?”

“I think I have a few ideas,” I purred, arching back so I was pressed against him. I could feel him hardening against me.

He moaned and clutched me a little tighter. “Fuck, Cali. What are you doing to me?”

I looked up at him, letting my eyes widen innocently. “I’m just getting ready to forgive you, Xavier.”

When he looked down at me, his eyes were dark with lust. He licked his lips, like he was getting ready to eat me up. “Well I hope you *are* ready, because you’re going to be forgiving me over, and over, and over.”

He swept me off my feet once again and tossed me backward, onto the bed. With a growl, he leapt after me and crawled over me, yanking hard on my jeans. He tossed them over his shoulder and covered my stomach with kisses.

It felt like I was about to melt into the duvet, but I kept my head just enough to fumble his belt open and yank at the button of his jeans. He pushed them off as he moved his ministrations down, pulling back the lace of my panties to kiss my hip bones.

“Xavier,” I moaned, dropping my head back onto the pillows. “Please.”

He grinned up at me. “I just really want to show you how very sorry I am, baby.”

“I believe you,” I panted. “I swear, I believe you.” My hands tangled in his dark hair, and as he kissed the inside of my thighs, my fingers tightened in his curls.

Out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw something moving along the dark wood of the floor, but I wasn’t exactly seeing straight at the moment, so I closed my eyes and bit my lip to keep from screaming as Xavier ran his fingers up the length of my inner thighs.

“Fuck, Cali,” he whispered, looking down at my body. “You’re so fucking beautiful. I mean, I know it, but every time I see you, it’s like seeing you for the first time.”

I was ready. I was more than ready. I was past ready. I needed him, so I took my chances and grabbed him, pulling him down on top of me so his body covered mine. He seemed more than ready to oblige, and his weight pushed me down into the mattress, his whole body pressing against me, *every* part of him rock hard. I hooked a leg around his back and forgot all about my bruised lip as his kisses became more and more urgent and demanding.

But we both looked up in surprise as the door burst open.

Greyson stood framed in the doorway, the expression on his face like a thunderstorm.

For one agonizing moment, no one moved. Then I suddenly became aware of the absolute awfulness of the situation. I was practically naked! In bed! With Xavier! In front of Greyson! My face flushed hotter than lava. Xavier reacted first, yanking the duvet up to cover us both, but Greyson was the first to break the silence.

“What the *hell* is going on in here?”

**Episode 1621**

VIOLET

I stared up at Iris, shocked into silence. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. What was she even doing here? How had she found us? Was she… My stomach clenched at the thought—was she *hunting* us?

Iris stared past Charlie and fixed me with an icy glare. “I should have known.”

Charlie moved in front of me, crunching on the snow and blocking me from his mom. “What are you doing here?”

She looked up at him. “I could ask the same thing about her,” she said, jerking her chin in my direction. “You told me that you two had broken up, Charlie. You told me that she would never even think of coming out here. You swore to me you’d never see her again. You *lied* to me!”

The raw anger in Iris’s voice made me flinch. I hated this. I knew how much Charlie’s mom and dad meant to him, and once again, I felt like I was coming between him and his parents, and it made me feel sick to my stomach.

I stepped out from behind Charlie. “This isn’t Charlie’s fault,” I started. “It’s mine. Charlie *did* try to break up with me, Mrs. Kim, but I wouldn’t let him.”

She narrowed her eyes. “You wouldn’t *let* him?”

I shook my head. “No. And I came here to win him back—”

“Violet, what the hell are you doing?” Charlie demanded, whipping around to look at me, clearly shocked.

I ignored him and pushed past him, moving closer to his mother. I knew I was taking a risk—a big one—but there was no way I was going to let Charlie take the blame for this. Hell, we’d already lied about breaking up—what was one more lie?

Iris eyed me warily. “Not that I’d put any of that past you, Violet, but if any of what you say is true, then what’s Charlie doing out here with you?”

I shot Charlie a look, begging him to just shut up and go along with this.

He looked miserable and angry, but gave an infinitesimal nod and turned back to his mom. “I was out looking for her. You know the camp’s on alert—everyone’s looking for a werewolf.”

“But why are *you* out here—” his mom started.

“I don’t want her hunted down. Just because we broke up doesn’t mean I stopped caring about her,” Charlie snapped defensively.

I tensed, wondering if Charlie was sounding too protective. Did Iris believe any of this? I didn’t breathe as she looked back and forth between Charlie and me, like she was weighing the balance.

Finally, her cool gaze rested on me. “I knew she was a bad influence on you, Charlie. I knew it right from the start. And clearly, I was right. Because not only is she lying, but you’re lying as well.”

“Mrs. Kim,” I started. “*Iris*, it’s not—”

“I really don’t want to hear it—”

“You’re right,” Charlie said firmly. He took a step toward me and grabbed my cold hand with his warm one. “I am lying. We didn’t break up. But you’re wrong about Violet. She’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

My breath caught, and I looked up at Charlie, who was glaring at his mom with a kind of fierce determination. I’d never heard him speak like that. My throat felt tight, and there was a strange prickling in my eyes. I knew Charlie loved me, but it felt amazing to have him standing by my side in this moment.

For better or for worse, I knew I could count on him.

His mother, however, did not appear to be similarly moved. Even in the dim light of the woods, I could see her face turning red with fury. She glared at me, then back at her son.

“*She* put you up to this!” she shouted, pointing a shaking finger at me. “My own son is turning against me!”

“I’m not turning against you, Mom!” Charlie shouted back, matching her tone. “I love you, but you’re being insane. *You’re* the one who’s being completely unreasonable. *You’re* the one who’s forced us to hide this from you. I can’t even talk to you!”

“You’re a *hunter*!” Iris shrieked suddenly. “You can’t be involved with someone like *this*!”

Her words hit me like a slap in the face. Charlie’s mother had never been anything less than clear about how she felt about me, but it still hurt to hear it so plainly spoken, and I gritted my teeth against the sting of it.

“And why, exactly, is that?” I asked. “Is it because I’m a werewolf? Or because I’m a bad person? Or is there another reason why you think I’m just not good enough for your son?”

Iris glared at me, breathing hard, but didn’t answer.

Fury was blooming in my chest now. “Well, you’re welcome to think whatever the hell you want about me, Iris Kim, and you know what? Maybe I’m *not* good enough for Charlie, but we’re *mates*. We’re bonded—for life—and nothing you do or say will change that.”

“Don’t bother, Violet,” Charlie said, sounding disgusted. “It’s not worth explaining. She doesn’t listen. She never does. If she did, she would at least understand part of what I’m going through.”

“Charlie—” Iris started.

“No, Mom! *No!* How would you feel if I forbade you from seeing Dad? How would you feel then?”

Iris was seething. “That’s entirely different, and you know it.”

Charlie shook his head. “I don’t think so. One of the things Violet’s taught me is that love can’t be turned on and off like a switch. I’m just not built like that. And don’t forget, Mom, *I’m* a werewolf too—”

“Don’t you *dare* remind me of that,” Iris snapped, looking more furious than ever.

Charlie’s face was set, but he was squeezing my hand tightly, like all his stress was being channeled there. I wanted to wrap my arms around him. I wanted to hug him and tell him that everything was going to be okay. But I was distracted when I heard the low hum of voices approaching. We all looked around, startled.

Listening hard, I realized it was several people, and they were coming closer.

Charlie pulled on my hand. “We’ve got to get out of here.”

“Charlie, stop,” Iris said sharply. “Where do you think you’re going?”

He looked at her like she was crazy. “I’m getting Violet out of here. Don’t try to stop us.”

Iris put a hand on her son’s arm. “Look around,” she said, her voice low and intense. “You’re surrounded by hunters. The woods are crawling with them. They’ll catch the two of you running, and they’ll figure out why, eventually.” She shot a glance at me. “It won’t take much time.”

My heartbeat quickened. I glanced up at Charlie. “Maybe we should just shift. Defend ourselves. We’ve got every right to do it. I’m more than capable of taking on a few hunter campers. And I’ve seen you in action. You’re a natural.”

“Absolutely not,” Iris said sternly.

“We’re not just going to turn ourselves in,” Charlie said, and I could hear a frantic edge to his voice.

The hunters were getting closer. We could all hear it. The leaves were starting to shake in the bushes on the furthest reaches of my vision.

“Listen,” I said urgently, looking up at Charlie. “It’s either run now or stay and fight. We have to decide. Now. What do you want to do?”

Charlie looked around wildly, but before he could answer, Iris spoke.

“You listen to me, both of you. You’re going to do exactly as I tell you. Do you hear me?”

Before either Charlie or I had a chance to answer, three hunters appeared in our clearing at the edge of the trees. I recognized the slim girl. It was Sophie. She was even prettier in person than in the photo I’d seen on Instagram.

*Damn it.*

And I’d already met Chad—though I hadn’t yet been treated to the salmon polo shirt and pleated chino shorts he was currently rocking. What a dork. But I didn’t recognize the other man standing between the two of them. He was tall, with a thin, stern face, and was wearing camo fatigues. He glanced at the three of us, then surveyed our surroundings with a quick, practiced eye.

Something told me this guy was not going to be easy to fool.

Finished with his surveillance, he looked back at us and nodded to Iris and Charlie. Then his gaze came to rest on me. “And who the hell is this?”

Instinct told me to get the hell out of there, and I listened to it. I took a step back, then another, wondering how fast they could run, and if I’d be able to shift before they got their weapons out.

But before I could make any decisions, Iris stepped forward, in front of me.

“She’s with me.”

**Episode 1622**

GREYSON

I couldn’t have felt worse if I had been standing on a train track with the lights of an oncoming freight train bearing down on me. I blinked, but it felt like everything was moving in slow motion. Xavier pulled up the duvet to cover himself and Cali, but I didn’t know why he bothered—I’d already seen it all, and the image was burned into my brain. Cali, in her bra and panties, eyes closed and underneath my brother.

I wasn’t going to forget that picture in a hurry.

It felt like my blood was on fire. I knew I shouldn’t feel like this—I knew this was what we’d all agreed to—but it still fucking sucked. I knew they were mates, and yet there was something different about seeing it that way in front of me. I was pissed off, and I wasn’t going to pretend that I wasn’t.

This would’ve been a great time for one of those black-out dreams I’d been having. Just a perfect moment for complete loss of consciousness. Even better, I’d have killed for a bump on the head and some good, old-fashioned, short-term amnesia. I mean, what the hell did a guy have to do to get a minor concussion around here?

I glanced over at Xavier, who was smirking at me. Of fucking course. He must have been loving this.

“Is there something we can help you with?” he asked.

I balled my hands into fists, using all my strength to resist the urge to smack that smug look off his face. I couldn’t let Cali see how much I hated this—and holy shit did I *hate* this—but I also couldn’t just pretend that it didn’t matter.

Cali was flushed with embarrassment, and she scrambled to pull the comforter over herself. She untangled herself from Xavier and pushed him away, looking genuinely upset. On the verge of tears even.

I tore my eyes from her face. Was she upset because I’d barged in and interrupted them? Or was she upset because… she knew how I felt?

Blowing a frustrated breath out through my nose, I pointed to the floor. “What the hell is going on? There’s water leaking through the ceiling and into the living room downstairs!”

Without waiting for either of them to answer, I sloshed through the water covering the floor and stormed into the bathroom. The ever-present pain in my leg was white-hot, but I gritted my teeth against it and turned off the shower. The shower head was angled so that it had been spraying directly out of the shower, running at full blast and drenching the floor.

When I spun around to face the two of them, Xavier was stretched out on the bed, looking relaxed and unconcerned, but Cali was sitting up, holding a sheet up to cover herself, her eyes wide with worry.

“I’m so sorry, Greyson. I had no idea,” she squeaked. “We must have left the water running.”

*We*. The word made me flinch. They must have left the water running when they’d been showering *together*. This was miserable.

“Call Phil to fix the damage,” I snapped at Xavier, heading for the door.

“You know,” Xavier said, propping himself up on one elbow, “this is *my* house, remember?”

“It’s the pack house now, so fix it,” I growled. I was so desperate to get out of the room that I nearly tripped over something on the ground. I looked down—it was Cali’s T-shirt and Xavier’s jeans, soaking wet and tangled together.

Fuck.

“Greyson!” Cali called after me, but I slammed the door behind me without answering.

Out in the hallway, I stopped for a moment and leaned against the wall, taking a deep breath. I had to calm down. I had to stop letting this get to me. Because if I didn’t, it wasn’t going to be long before Xavier and I found ourselves fighting it out, and that was the last thing this pack house needed. And I didn’t want Cali to get caught up in any of that.

I took another breath and headed to my room. My leg was throbbing, and the pain was getting more intense with every step. I slammed the door and let myself fall back onto my bed. I was exhausted, frustrated, angry, and—if I was being completely honest with myself—disappointed. Not with Cali, not even with Xavier. I was disappointed with myself. This was not the time to let my emotions get the best of me, but that was exactly what had happened.

I looked up when I heard the soft knock on my door.

“Greyson, are you in there? Can I come in?”

It was Cali. I rubbed my eyes and sat up, forcing my face into a smile I was hoping didn’t look like a grimace of pain. “Yeah, come on in.”

She pushed the door open and peered in cautiously. “Hey, can we talk?”

“Yeah, of course.”

She stepped into the room and shut the door behind her. She was wearing a robe, and her hair—still damp—looked like it had been hastily towel-dried. Her cheeks were rosy and her eyes were wide as she looked at me. She looked achingly beautiful as she sat beside me.

“I’m really sorry—”

“You don’t need to apologize,” I interrupted.

“*Greyson*—”

“Okay, maybe for the water, but not for…” I didn’t need to finish. We both knew what she’d actually come to apologize for.

She looked down at her hands in her lap. “I feel awful. If I’d had any idea you were going to walk in and see…” She shook her head, her cheeks flaming again.

As I reached for her hand, it occurred to me that I wished I never had to let it go.

“Hey,” I said softly, “look at me.” When her eyes met mine, my heart swelled in my chest, and I swallowed hard. “I want you to understand, love, that I know you’re not trying to hurt me. I know you’re doing the best you can. We all agreed to this. The adjustment period’s been a bit rough—”

She rolled her eyes, which had filled with tears.

“—but that’s to be expected,” I continued. “I’m just sorry that you feel like you’ve got something to apologize for. That’s not what I want.” I leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her forehead, wishing with all my heart I could just wrap her in my arms. I leaned back to look at her. “I need to go downstairs and check out the water damage. Will you be okay?”

She nodded. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Okay.” I got to my feet, ignoring the lightning bolt of pain that jolted through me from my leg, and headed downstairs.

At the bottom of the stairs, Torin nearly ran into me, holding a bucket of dirty-looking water.

“Whoa,” I said, catching him by the shoulders. “Slow down, man.”

“Sorry, Greyson,” he gasped out. “But the good news is the waterfall from the ceiling has stopped. Now it’s just a gentle dripping.”

“Great,” I muttered. I followed him into the living room, where there were pots and pans all over the floor and perched precariously on the couches and chairs, all catching the water dripping from the ceiling. I didn’t know how it had happened, but the water leaking from the floor of Cali’s bedroom and bathroom had damaged a huge portion of the ceiling of the first floor. I rubbed my forehead. Phil was going to have his hands full with this one.

Tom was standing in the center of the room, looking up at the ceiling, a frown on his face. He glanced over at me as I walked in. “I just can’t figure this out. Busted pipe? Rusted out joint? Do you have any idea, Greyson?”

The image of Xavier and Cali cavorting on the bed, surrounded by an ocean of water, flashed into my mind, but I figured Tom didn’t need to know the part his daughter had played in this, so I bit my tongue and shrugged. “It’s an old house, Tom. Probably just a leaky weld in the shower line. We’re calling someone, so we should be fine.”

Tom looked relieved. “Good. Best to get it checked out.”

I nodded, but all I was *actually* thinking was that I wished this day would just end. But it wasn’t even close. I still needed to check in with Mace to see how he and the Blue Bloods were doing. And there was still the matter of this witch mark to deal with. I was going to have to talk to Big Mac about that, whether I wanted to or not.

With a gusty sigh, I looked around, figuring I’d start with whoever I could find first, but then I saw Cali in the doorway. She was motioning for me and looking slightly red-eyed. I frowned. Was that from the shower, or had she been crying?

“What’s wrong?” I asked, hurrying over, the pain in my leg forgotten for the first time.

Cali took a deep breath and looked up. “I’m not sure I can do this anymore.”

**Episode 1623**

LOLA

My heart was beating a fast tattoo in my chest. “What serum was it?” I repeated.

Emmett nodded. “You have to try to remember, Lola. It’s important if we’re going to help Jay. It’s the only way.”

I thought hard, trying to picture the tidy row of vials Emmett had had lined up in his lab, trying to remember which one had rolled across the counter and smashed as Jay and I had been going at it last night. I felt my face flush hot with the memory of it, but no flash of insight came. I had no idea which serum it had been. I bit my lip and glanced over at Jay, but his expression was unreadable. I looked away and tried to concentrate.

“Was it the blue one?” Emmett asked, urging me on.

I shook my head. “No, it wasn’t blue.”

“Was it the yellow one?”

“No, it wasn’t yellow…” At least I didn’t *think* it had been yellow. *Darn it!* All I could vividly remember was Jay’s abs. Which wouldn’t have been so bad… if we were in different circumstances.

I closed my eyes, trying to retrace my steps, thinking back to what had happened before the serum had spilled on Jay. My thoughts cycled back. I remembered how Jay’s hands had felt on me, slipping beneath my clothes, moving on me like he knew exactly what he was doing. I remembered wrapping my legs around his waist and feeling his body, hard against mine. I remembered him pressing me against the wall and a waterfall of books crashing down… And I remembered not paying attention to any of it because the only thought in my head had been Jay. Just Jay. I’d just wanted *more* of Jay.

I could feel heat rising in my face—and in other parts of my anatomy—so I opened my eyes and shook myself out of my reverie. “I really don’t remember,” I muttered.

“Why does it matter which serum it was in the first place?” Jay demanded, looking warily at Emmett. “I already told you, I feel fine. I mean, other than the burning and—okay, I guess it kind of smoked a little when it first happened. But it was no big deal. See?” He held up his arm, which looked perfectly normal. “It’s fine now.”

But Emmett wasn’t listening. His eyebrows had shot way up. “Wait, it *smoked*? Did you say it smoked?”

I looked at Jay, and my stomach flipped as he looked back at me. Holy shit, were we having a moment of *connection* here?

“Yeah,” Jay said, looking back at Emmett. “When it first spilled on my arm, the skin kind of burned, and it, uh, smoked a little.”

Emmett blanched.

“What?” I demanded. “What’s up with your face? That’s not a good face. What is it?” I could tell it was something bad, just from the look in Emmett’s eyes.

“Well,” Emmett said, clearing his throat uncomfortably, “if Jay’s come into contact with the serum I *think* he’s come into contact with, then you’d both better follow me back into the lab.”

My hands were sweating as I clutched them together, following Emmett down the stairs to his lab. I was so nervous and worried for Jay. Was this what it was like to have a mate? To always be concerned about the well-being of another person? Because it seemed like a lot of responsibility.

Suddenly, a hand slipped into mine. It was Jay’s, and his hand was cool and dry.

I looked up, and he smiled at me and gave my hand a reassuring squeeze.

“Don’t worry,” he said quietly. “Whatever’s wrong, we’ll get through it, okay? Together.”

In an instant, I felt my anxiety lighten. It was like magic, and I looked up at him, all but swooning.

But as we rounded the corner into Emmett’s lab and arrived at the table where he’d discovered Jay and me rolling around, groping and kissing, I felt my embarrassment flare back up and yanked my hand away, unable to meet Jay’s eye.

The memory of that incident seemed to be the furthest thing from Emmett’s mind, however, as he bent over the bench, looking closely at the rows of vials.

“I believe I know which serum it was that hurt Jay,” he muttered, almost as though he was speaking to himself.

“Is that good?” I wondered. “Does that mean we can make sure he’s okay?”

“Let’s hope so,” Emmett said. He picked up a vial about half-full of an iridescent liquid.

It was almost pretty. I looked hard, trying to remember if that was one of the vials that had fallen. I glanced down at the rows. Good thing none of the others had spilled on Jay.

“Given what you just told me, and which vials are missing, I think this is what fell on Jay,” Emmett explained, giving the vial a tiny shake. “This vial contains pure vampire venom.”

“Whose?” I asked, staring at the liquid with new curiosity.

Emmett gave me a strange look. “Mine.” He pulled over a small porcelain dish and poured a small measure of the venom into it. “Vampire venom can be very volatile. I’m able to keep the venom in this vial because I keep it at a very specific temperature—quite cold. If vampire venom comes into contact with a warmer substance, like skin or blood, it will begin to vaporize.”

I watched as the liquid in the dish moved around. It changed color as it moved, like the surface of a pearl. It was memorizing.

“When a vampire bites a human—or even a werewolf—and the venom comes into contact with the bloodstream, it begins to separate—to steam, almost as if to spread itself faster and more easily,” Emmett said.

He took a deep breath, like he was about to go on explaining more about stuff I was barely following along with as it was, so I just cut to the chase. “Hey, Emmett, is Jay going to be okay or what?”

Emmett looked at me, clearly a little surprised. To be honest, I was a little surprised myself. I didn’t know where that had come from, but I was starting to feel really protective of Jay. And when I looked over at him and he gave me a small smile, I found that I really didn’t mind that feeling.

Emmett shrugged. “As to that, I really couldn’t say for certain.”

“What do you mean?” I demanded.

“It’s not as though he received a full dose. I mean, vampire venom isn’t like a normal protein, is it? It’s not going to send a normal signal to the cell receptor. You see, in normal physiology, there’s a chemical signal where a protein-ligand binds a protein receptor, but when we’re dealing with supernatural cells, we have to examine how cell mutations change—”

“Oh my god, just answer the damn question, Emmett!” I said, grabbing handfuls of my hair in frustration.

Emmett stopped speaking abruptly and looked at me, clearly confused. “I thought I was.”

I sighed. “A simple yes or no would be best.”

“Well.” Emmett tilted his head back and forth. “If I had to choose—and mind you, I’d still like to observe him, maybe run some tests—I’d say that I think Jay’s going to be fine.”

It felt like a dam burst, and a river of relief flowed through my chest. “Thank you,” I breathed. “That’s all I wanted to hear.” I looked over at Jay and smiled, and he smiled back.

“But I would like to continue to track your vitals, Jay,” Emmett said quickly. “There’s still so much data to gather.”

“Fine,” Jay said shortly. “But first I’m going to walk Lola back to her room.”

Emmett nodded. “Of course.”

“You’re sure you’re okay?” I asked Jay quietly as we climbed the stairs back to Emmett’s main office.

“I’m fine,” Jay assured me. “Right as rain,” he added as he opened the door leading to the hall.

“Oh, look,” I said, my stomach sinking. “My jailor.”

Winifred was waiting for me at the end of the hall.

“We can handle her,” Jay murmured.

“I guess.”

But, as we got closer, I saw that something was wrong with Winfred. She was leaning against the wall, like she was tired. Her gaze was down, but when I called her name she looked up, and I screamed. Her eyes were flaming orange.

In an instant, Jay had grabbed my wrist and yanked me behind him.

“Shit, Jay! She’s one of those—oh, god, what are those things called again? A revenant!” I hissed. “We have to get back to the lab. Now!”

Jay nodded, but Winifred was coming toward us—and she was coming fast.

“Lola, run,” Jay said. “RUN!”

He crouched, as though he was about to shift. I took a step back—my heart beating hard—but nothing happened.

Winifred was almost on us.

“Jay! What are you waiting for? *Shift!* Hurry!”

But Jay didn’t shift. He spun around and grabbed my arm, hauling me down the hall as we sprinted back toward Emmett’s office.

“What are you doing?” I gasped. “Why aren’t you shifting?”

Jay tossed a look over his shoulder as Winifred bore down on us. “Because I can’t!”

**Episode 1624**

It was stupid to feel self-conscious standing in front of Greyson—he was my mate, after all—but I did. How could I not, after what had happened earlier? I felt so ashamed of what he’d walked in on. I knew I shouldn’t, but it was hard not to. Impossible, really.

I didn’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings—that was the last thing I wanted to do—but I just felt so torn between Xavier and Greyson. Even in spite of the sharing, in spite of the rules. I balled my hands into fists as I looked around at the pots and pans catching the drips of water—as I looked at the mess I’d made. *Nothing* seemed to be going according to plan.

“Cali, love.” Greyson put a gentle finger beneath my chin and lifted it until I was looking up at him. “What do you mean, you can’t do this anymore?”

My throat felt tight, and tears pricked the corners of my eyes. “I just don’t think this sharing thing is working out. For any of us.” I shook my head, trying hard not to cry. “I don’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings, but that’s obviously what’s happening. I just feel like I’m being torn in two, Greyson.”

Greyson’s eyebrows drew down. “I hate that you’re feeling this way—”

“No,” I said, shaking my head hard. “You don’t have to feel sorry. *I’m* the one who should feel sorry!” I looked up at him. “You know that, right?”

He sighed. “I know.” He shook his head. “Or maybe not. I don’t know.”

He looked awkward, like he’d lost the thread of the conversation and wasn’t sure who should be feeling sorry or what they should be feeling sorry for. I closed my eyes, wishing I could just shut up for once in my damn life.

“Cali, listen, maybe we can talk about this a little later. I have a few things I need to take care of, but I have no intention of doing anything that would result in you and me spending less time together, okay? Just know that I’m going to be okay. *We’re* going to be okay. Okay?”

He was waiting for me to respond, so I took a shaky breath and nodded, though I wasn’t sure how much of his reassurance I actually believed.

I couldn’t look at the mess of the living room anymore, so I headed back upstairs to my room. It wasn’t much better up there. The whole place was kind of a splash zone, and I stopped in the doorway, looking at the water all over the floor. I supposed I should get a mop or some towels and start getting things cleaned up.

Heading for the hallway linen closet, I shook my head. I still couldn’t believe I’d let this happen. I grabbed the mop from the hall bathroom along with an armload of towels and headed back to my room. At least getting everything tidied up would give me something to occupy my mind.

I had just reached my door when I heard my name.

My mom was coming out of her room. “What are you up to with all of that?” she asked, eyeing the load in my arms.

“There was a… leak in my room,” I said, skipping over the part with Xavier and the shower and the sexiness. I was firmly convinced there were some things she was better off *not* knowing. I shifted the towels in my arms. “What are you doing?”

“I was just going to go get some tea. But let me help you,” she said, taking half the towels from my arms.

We started out by using the towels to soak up most of the larger puddles on the floor, then we squeezed them out into the shower. The hem of my bathrobe was soaked almost immediately, and it stuck to my ankles as I worked.

“This is terrible,” my mom said, looking around in confusion. “How did it happen? Do you know?”

“Um…”

“I wonder if the pipes froze during that freak snowstorm we just had. That might have caused this. Remember when that happened back at home?”

I nodded vaguely. “I might have been running a bath or something and fallen asleep.”

My mom looked at me, her expression confused. “What?”

I kept my eyes on the damp floor. “I don’t know.”

I was *not* telling my mom that this had happened because I’d been too busy getting busy with one of my mates to notice that the shower was flooding my room. There were certain conversations that just never needed to happen.

But I could feel my mom’s eyes on me as she began to mop up the remaining water. “Is everything okay, Cali?”

“Yeah, of course. Why wouldn’t it be?” I asked casually.

She stopped mopping and crossed her arms. “Caliana.” I looked at her. “I want you to be honest with me.”

I dropped the wet towel I was holding and looked at my mother. My beautiful, breathing, scowling, very alive mother. There had been a time when I hadn’t even thought I’d be able to say goodbye to her before she died. She had been through so much, and now here she was, standing in front of me, checking in with me about my day-to-day life. The enormity of that gift swept over me, and—coupled with everything else I’d been feeling—I felt nearly drowned in the emotion of it and started to sob.

“Oh my goodness! *Cali!*” My mom dropped her mop and rushed to me, throwing her arms around me. “Sweetheart! It’s okay! It’s okay!”

I threw my arms around her and hugged her back, hard, my love for her so fierce that I could barely stand it. Being hugged by my mom opened something in me, and my sobs grew deeper. There had just been so much going on, and I’d been trying to handle it all, and now, just holding onto her, I let it all go. All the stress I’d been feeling about trying to keep Artemis safe, the fear surrounding Silas’s return, the guilt around *due destini*, the terror of the revenants, the grief I felt for Pip, and the sorrow I felt for Mace over the loss of his mate.

“Oh, sweetheart, let it out,” my mom murmured, rubbing my back as I cried into her shoulder. “That’s right. Just let it out. It’s been so hectic around here, and I know you’ve been trying to take on too much. You’re so young, Cali, and this is so much.”

“When will it end, Mom?” I wailed. “When will we go back to being safe?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted.

“I can’t even throw a punch,” I gasped out. “I can’t do anything. How are we going to stop the Orb? It’s so powerful.”

“It’s ancient magic,” my mom admitted. “I don’t know how we’re going to stop it, but I’m doing everything I can. We all are.”

“I know,” I sniffled, my breath coming in gasps.

My mom gave me another squeeze and a soft kiss on my cheek. “You shouldn’t be so hard on yourself, Cali. Who told you that you had to learn to throw a punch? What good is that going to be against the Orb? This is beyond all of us.”

She was right about the Orb, but I wasn’t telling her everything. Greyson’s face swam into my memory, his horrified expression when he’d walked in on Xavier and me. I took a deep breath. “There’s something else, Mom.”

She leaned back so she could see my face. “What is it, sweetheart.”

“It’s the two mates thing.”

Understanding dawned on her face. “Ah. Yes. Boy troubles, too? Or, I guess I should say *mate* troubles.” She shook her head. “That’s going to take some getting used to. It’s still so strange to me to think that my Fae daughter has a werewolf as a mate. *Two* of them!”

That was as good an opening as any. I bit my lip, wondering if I should tell my mom about the arrangement the three of us had made. It had been weighing on me, and it would feel so good to confide in someone—especially my mother. I would love to get her advice on the situation. But… it was a lot, and I just didn’t know if my mom could handle it. Hell, I didn’t know if I could handle my mom knowing about it. There was so much to it all.

But I felt like I had to tell someone. I was about to burst otherwise. I opened my mouth to tell her, but before I could say anything, there was a knock on the door.

“Hello?” came the muffled call. “Can I come in?”

“Y-Yes,” I said, startled.

Big Mac opened the door, poking her head in. She looked around the mess of a room for a moment, then right at me. “Cali, can I talk to you for a moment?”

**Episode 1625**

MARTA

*How can I help you?*

I stared at the short sentence on the computer screen, my heart pounding in my chest. I swallowed hard and hovered my hands over the keyboard of the laptop.

*I was told you could help me with a problem I was having with summoning spirits. Big Mac told me to contact you.*

There was a brief pause as I stared at the screen, waiting for a response. After a moment, one came.

*Call me on my landline.*

“What the hell is a landline?” I murmured, frowning at the computer and the string of numbers.

Lilac snorted. “It’s what’s boomers use to communicate.”

“Boomers? What *language* is everyone speaking?” I rubbed my head. Sometimes I hated this era. I liked the candy and some of the music, but cars went too fast and there was so much stuff that didn’t make any sense.

Lilac laughed at the expression on my face. “It’s just his phone number. He wants you to call him on the regular phone. You know, the one that plugs into the wall?”

With Lilac’s help, I dialed the number on my cell phone, and a cheery voice answered.

“Hello? Is this Marta?”

“Hello, yes. Thanks for taking the time to speak with me,” I said hesitantly.

“No problem,” Rain said cheerfully. “And how *is* MacKenzie these days? I haven’t seen her in ages. I missed her at the last necromancy convention.”

*Necromancy convention?* I shot a startled look at Lilac, who just grinned down at me. Was he joking?

“I like the sound of that,” Lilac murmured, raising his eyebrows suggestively. “You and I should go to the next one.”

Scowling, I looked away. Sometimes I wished it were possible to physically slap the guy, but I did the next best thing and just ignored him. He hated that.

“MacKenzie—Big Mac—is fine,” I said. “Well, she’s a little stumped, actually. We both are. That’s why we’re contacting you. We’re trying to reach someone on the other side—”

“And how long has it been since this person passed through?” Rain asked conversationally.

“Um, like, thousands of years. That’s the problem, actually. We’re just not sure where to start.”

Rain whistled. “No kidding! That’s going to take some powerful magic. We’re talking *big*. Like, star-level magic. Moon-level. *Galaxy*-level, even. I don’t even… *Wow*.”

I was supposed to be ignoring him, but I shot another glance at Lilac, baffled. I was so confused. Who *was* this Rain guy? What was he talking about? Who spoke like this?

“Well, I’m a medium. Does that help?”

“*Oh!*” Rain sounded surprised. “You should have said that in the first place.” He laughed. “Welcome, sister! It’s always great to meet another soul who’s dialed into the spirit realm.”

Lilac rolled his eyes and dropped his head back, looking annoyed. “*Welcome, sister*,” he mimicked, and stuck out his tongue. “Give me a break.”

I glared at him and turned away. Lilac was cute as hell, but he was a real pain in the ass.

“So why, may I ask, are you interested in such an ancient spirit, little sister?” Rain asked.

“Um, this is going to sound kind of crazy, but I think this spirit can help defeat someone who has been terrorizing us and our friends. It’s someone who’s actually affecting the spirit realm, too.”

“Oh, really?” Rain’s voice grew grave. “I have noticed a disturbance with the spirits. I thought maybe it was because of Halloween—sometimes that happens and they get all worked up—but we’re past that now. I’ve been wondering about it.”

“Wait, what have you been feeling?” I asked, a chill running up my spine.

“It’s hard to describe,” Rain said. “It’s like a disturbance in the Force, you know? ‘Do or do not’ and all that.” He started to laugh.

“What?” I asked, baffled.

“Listen, medium girl, if you’re serious about contacting this ancient spirt, you’re going to need to find a way to find her first.”

“*Find* her?” I repeated.

“Hey! You’re a superhero!” Lilac said, grinning at me. “You’re Medium Girl!”

“Shut up!” I hissed, then, turning back to the phone. “How am I supposed to *find* her? Deidamia could be anywhere. Literally anywhere. That’s how the spirit world tends to work. Spirits don’t just hang out in their assigned time periods like they’re in college dorms. They wander.”

“I know,” Rain said. “That’s why you need something that belonged to her. What’d you say her name was? Deidamia?”

“She lived thousands of years ago! I’m not just going to find an old tissue of hers lying around!”

“No, probably not. And anyway, snot’s not great. You need something more potent. Blood would be best,” Rain said casually.

“Thousand-year-old *blood*?” Lilac asked, his eyes going wide. “Where are we supposed to find that?”

I sagged, feeling deflated. I’d thought that Rain might be able to help, but I saw now that he couldn’t. “I don’t think that’s going to be possible. We don’t have anything like that.”

“Well, yeah, that’s going to make it a lot harder, little lady,” Rain admitted.

Lilac nudged me, the pressure of his elbow against my ribs light and wispy. “Tell him you’re a bridge.”

I glared up at him. I was done with this conversation, and I didn’t like when Lilac told me what to do.

Lilac rolled his eyes at the expression on my face. “Just tell him.”

I sighed. “Does me being a bridge mean anything to you?” Rain was silent for a moment. “Rain?”

“*Marta!*” he said, sounding like he was chuckling. “You’re a *bridge*? You have to *lead* with this stuff.”

My spirits rose. “Wait, does that mean that I can find Deidamia?”

“I suppose this could make it easier. But you’re still going to need something to act as an anchor.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“An anchor is something to balance you in the mortal realm. It has to be something that has spiritual energy.”

I frowned. “I don’t know what that means—”

“Just make it something spirit-y! Anyway, gotta run! I’ve got zucchini bread in the oven! Good luck, girl!”

“Wait—”

But Rain was gone.

I looked down at my phone. “That man was very strange.”

“What can we use that has spiritual energy?” Lilac asked, looking as confused as I felt.

“I don’t know. Do you have any ideas?”

Lilac shrugged. “How should I know?’

I gaped at him. “You’re a *spirit*, Lilac!”

He rolled his eyes. “Oh my god, Marta. It’s not like all spirits know each other. Besides, I haven’t even been one that long, and I spent most of that time locked away in Violet’s necklace—*wait a minute!*”

“What?” I asked, surprised by the uplifted look he’d suddenly gotten.

“The necklace! There are two! Maybe we can use mine! It was apparently made by a witch—thanks again, Mom and Dad. Great gift.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” I said slowly. “Do you know where it is?”

Lilac thought for a moment. “Violet took all my stuff after I died. She must have it in her room. Let’s go look.”

It felt strange searching through Violet’s room, but Lilac assured me she would understand. We looked through her dresser—it wasn’t there. It also wasn’t in any of the drawers of her desk.

I leaned against the desk and looked around, thinking about Violet. “I wonder if she put it somewhere really safe. It’s all she had left of you.”

Lilac’s expression softened. “That does sound like her. That would be so sweet.”

I shot him a look. “*Focus!*” I dropped to my hands and knees and started to look under the bed, groping around for anything that might contain a necklace. Maybe a box or something.

“Any luck?” he asked suddenly.

Halfway under the bed, I jumped in surprise and banged my head on the bedframe. “OW!” I flopped onto my stomach and rubbed my throbbing head.

“Sorry,” Lilac said. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. And there’s nothing under here, anyway.” I looked over, and Lilac was suddenly right next to me, his pale face strangely more visible in the dimness beneath the bed.

He smiled and reached out to put his finger lightly on the tip of my nose.

My breath caught in my throat at his touch, which felt cool and feathery.

“There was some dust,” he said, by way of explanation.

“Th-Thanks,” I stammered. Then, feeling deeply discomfited, I backed out from under the bed and sat up. I looked around the room, shaking my head with a defeated sigh. “I don’t know where it could be.”

Lilac was quiet for a moment, then: “It’s exactly where Violet left it.”

I looked at Lilac. “What?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know why I didn’t think of this right away.”

“What are you talking about?”

He stood up. “Come on, let’s go.”

“Where?” I asked, getting to my feet. “Where are we going?”

“To where Violet left the necklace. We’re going back to the other pack house.”

**Episode 1626**

XAVIER

I wiped a clear streak in the steamy mirror and smiled at my reflection as I buttoned my shirt. I knew Greyson had wanted me to call Phil right away about the repairs, but I wasn’t about to be at my brother’s beck and call. I’d call Phil when I was good and ready—and I’d only be ready after a leisurely shower.

My laugh bounced around the small, tiled room. I’d forgotten how easy it was to get Greyson riled up. Colton used to do it all the time when we were kids, just for the fun of it. I sighed and ran a hand through my damp hair. As fun as it was, it probably wasn’t making Cali very happy to see the two of us going at it over her. I knew she didn’t want jealousy to be a part of the relationship between Greyson and me, but… it was just too easy to egg Greyson on.

I buckled my belt and headed downstairs. It was probably time to see the water damage for myself. As I headed down it occurred to me to wonder why Greyson couldn’t pick up the damn phone and call Phil himself. Was that just beneath his Alpha status?

Hell, if anyone had a right to be upset, it was me. Greyson was the one who’d burst in on Cali and me and ruined what had promised to be an *amazing* time. Okay, yeah, leaving the water running may have been my fault, but whatever—it was my damn house. I could cause a massive water leak if I wanted to.

And I deserved to spend time with Cali.

I stopped in the doorway to the living room and looked up the ceiling, which looked like shit. There were massive dark stains spreading across it, and the paint and plaster had bubbled. The floor below was water-stained, and the scattered pans and buckets were filled.

“Fuck,” I muttered, taking in the scene.

Still, even with the mess, I had to admit that seeing the shocked look on Greyson’s face when he’d walked in on Cali and me was worth whatever this was going to cost to fix.

It usually was, anyway. He was making it difficult this time.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and dialed. “Phil, it’s me. I’m going to need you to grab a bucket and a mop and get your sweet ass over here. I’m at my house. My old house.”

“Are you kidding me?” Phil asked, sounding annoyed. “I’m in the middle of dealing with half a dozen subcontractors here. I’m trying to get all the fire damage fixed at the lake house, Xavier!”

“That can wait,” I snapped. “I need this fixed now. *This* is your priority.”

“*This* is my priority, *that’s* my priority. It’s always changing with you guys! How am I supposed to know—”

I hung up before Phil could finish voicing his objections and looked around. Where was Cali? I wondered if she was still in her room.

And where the hell was Greyson?

Had that bastard sent me on this stupid errand so he could be alone with her?

My hands balled into fists at the thought.

I whipped around and headed back toward the stairs, but I ran into Tom before I reached them.

“Hey there,” I said, surprised. Tom looked stressed—more so than usual. “How are things going? How’s the whole turning into a werewolf thing going?” I thought back to Cali’s main objection. “I imagine it’s getting a little chilly to go running around naked.”

“Oh, yeah, I’m not doing that so much these days. And the werewolf thing…” Tom shrugged and said, “I’m just dealing with that day by day. You know.”

“Is anything else wrong?” I asked, looking at his deeply drawn frown.

Tom looked at me. “Well,” he ventured after a minute, “I am a little worried about Orla. Come with me, Xavier,” he said, gesturing for me to follow him.

I wanted to find Cali, or Greyson, but I also wanted to be in Tom’s favor, so I followed as he led me outside. I knew how much he cared about Cali. It must have been amazing, growing up with a father like Tom. Someone who loved you the way he obviously loved Cali. I could see it every time Tom looked at his daughter. I didn’t understand it—not really—but I could see it.

But I didn’t understand what was making Tom so damn secretive.

When he’d shut the door behind us, he looked around, making sure we were truly alone, then stepped closer to me. “Xavier, I feel like I can talk to you about this.”

“Of course,” I said. “What is it?”

Tom took a deep breath. “I think Orla’s having a hard time dealing with Cali and Artemis.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, not following.

“Both girls seem to be struggling right now. It’s with different things, but I think Orla’s stumped. And I don’t know what to do. Do you know anything that might be helpful?”

I hesitated, thinking hard. “I assume you and Orla are both pretty worried about the revenants and the possibility of an immortal portal, right?” I asked carefully, trying to gauge Tom’s level of knowledge about what was going on.

He nodded. “It’s just a lot to take in.”

“Yeah, it is. But know that I’m going to do everything I can to help and protect them, Tom. Cali, Orla, Artemis, you—all of you.”

He nodded. “I know that, Xavier, and I appreciate it.” He gave me a long look. “I wasn’t sure when I first met you, but you’ve really changed over these last few months.”

“Really?” I asked, surprised. I wasn’t sure what that meant.

My confusion must have shown on my face, because Tom smiled and clapped his hand to my shoulder. “That’s a compliment, son. I’m saying that you’ve matured. You’re living up to your potential as an Alpha.”

This hit harder than I would’ve expected. I hadn’t had a lot of experience with anyone telling me that they were proud of me—and especially not father-type figures. I shrugged, feeling strangely emotional. “I’m not the Alpha. Not yet,” I said, standing up straighter.

Tom smiled. “That’s right.”

“Thanks,” I said. I looked down and noticed his apron for the first time. “And I’m really looking forward to having a real Thanksgiving this year. It’ll be nice, having the whole pack together.”

“It will be,” Tom nodded. “And I’d better get back to work.”

As we headed back into the kitchen, Torin rushed over to Tom, his eyes wide and his face flushed with excitement.

“Tom! I just found out something *incredible*!”

“What’s that?”

“I was looking for a recipe for a sweet potato dish like we talked about, and Sage told me to try the world wide web, so I did, and—did you know that there are literally *millions* of recipes on there? For *free*?”

Tom began to laugh, and as Torin dragged him over to a laptop he had open on the kitchen counter, I slipped away. I wanted to find Mace. I wanted to talk to him, see how he was holding up.

I found him sitting in the far corner of the living room, but Greyson was next to him, speaking quietly.

Did Greyson have to be *everywhere*?

I felt a little claustrophobic. I had missed my house and had been excited to come back to it, but for the first time, I was starting to wish we were back at the lake house. That house was bigger—more rooms, more space, and less likelihood of running into my brother around every fucking corner.

I was about to turn around, but Mace spotted me.

“Xavier,” he said, his voice a dry rasp.

It would be awkward as hell to turn around now. Besides, I didn’t want to give Greyson the satisfaction. I wasn’t afraid of him, so I walked over and joined their conversation. It didn’t look like it had been going well.

“—and I keep telling you, Greyson,” Mace was saying as I sat down, “I don’t *want* to wait. I think we should stop listening to those damn witches. We should forget about your medium or bridge or whatever that girl is. We’re *Alphas*, for fuck’s sake,” he said in frustration. “We should be able to lead our packs and take out Silas and the revenants and whatever else, on our *own*.”

Greyson rubbed his head, looking exasperated, but I got what Mace was saying, and part of me agreed with him. Maybe we *were* looking for too much outside help. But before I could weigh in on the subject, Sage and Zainab sprinted into the living room, looking around wildly.

“There you are,” Zainab gasped out, spotting Greyson.

Greyson frowned at her. “What’s going on?”

Zainab shot a look at Sage. Both of them were clearly uncomfortable.

“What?” Greyson growled.

Sage’s eye grew wide. “They’re gone.”

**Episode 1627**

ARTEMIS

I closed my eyes against the spray of the shower and let my thoughts spiral. I was still thinking about earlier, when Rishika had kissed me and my headache had disappeared. It had been the strangest thing. The pain had just vanished in an instant. How had that happened? What *was* that? Had Rishika actually done what I thought she’d done, or was that all in my head?

There was no way to know the answer to that question, and I felt like I was making myself crazy thinking about it, so I rinsed off the last of the soap and turned off the water. I’d just grabbed my towel and wrapped it around myself when there was a knock at the door.

“Who is it?” I asked, rubbing another towel through my hair.

“It’s me.” Rishika’s voice came through the door. “Can I come in?”

“Sure,” I said. “The door’s unlocked.”

She opened the door and peeked her dark head into the steamy bathroom. Her eyes went wide as she caught sight of me wrapped in my towel. “Oh, hey there. Sorry. Don’t let me interrupt.”

I smirked. “That’s cute. You’ve seen what’s under this.”

Rishika grinned back. “And I wouldn’t mind seeing more of it.”

My face flushed, the heat crawling down my neck to my chest. But I thought back to that strange kiss. Had she felt something too? Was it more than a normal kiss? Did it—

“Chocolate or vanilla?”

Jerked roughly out of my thoughts, I stared at Rishika, baffled. “What? Chocolate or—For what?”

Rishika rolled her eyes. “Just answer the question, Artemis.”

“Um.” I thought fast. “Both, I guess.”

Rishika nodded and pulled her head back out of the bathroom. She shut the door, and I stared after her. What the hell was that girl up to?

I turned and looked into the steamy mirror. I could just make out my reflection. My hair was so much longer than I was used to. It kept surprising me when I looked in the mirror. And my cheeks looked fuller, too. I looked stronger, healthier. Even I could see that I’d lost the hunted look I’d always had in the Fae world. My life was so different than it used to be. I felt better, too.

Well, except for the way that I kept blacking out. I bit my lip, and my reflection did the same. I still hadn’t told Rishika about that. I just didn’t want to worry her—and I didn’t know how she’d react.

I jumped when there was another sharp knock on the door.

“Hurry up!”

I pulled on leggings and a T-shirt and finished towel drying my hair. When I pulled open the door, I stopped, amazed. My bedroom had been transformed into… well, I didn’t know exactly what. But it was beautiful. The overhead light was off, and instead there were these tiny yellow lights the size of fireflies strung around the room, giving the space a soft, warm glow. There were pillows from downstairs strewn across the bed, so it looked deep and luxurious.

I looked over at Rishika, who was watching my reactions closely. “Did you do all this?”

She grinned. “I did. And did I also make a milkshake for my girlfriend? I absolutely did.”

From a tray on the dresser, she handed me two frosty glasses—two milkshakes. One chocolate, one vanilla. I looked at them, then around at the room in absolute wonder. The lights and the pillows made it look completely different, and there was a small plate of cookies on one of the bedside tables, and a plate of crackers and cheese on the other.

“What *is* all this?” I asked.

Rishika shrugged. “Haven’t you ever heard of Netflix and chill, Artemis?”

“Uh, no,” I answered honestly. “But if this is what it’s like, I’m into it so far.”

Rishika laughed. “Well, get comfortable.”

I did. Being careful with my milkshakes, I crawled up onto my bed and took a sip of the chocolate shake. The chocolate was deep and rich, and I closed my eyes. “Oh, this is amazing. You made this?”

She chuckled. “You don’t need to sound so surprised. Okay.” She sat down next to me. “So we’ve got snacks, pillows, and blankets. I’ve got *13 Going on 30* cued up. We’ve got everything we need for a chill night in.”

“Why did you go through all this trouble?” I asked, settling back on a pillow.

Rishika looked up from her laptop. “I wanted to do something special for you.”

“Yeah?” I asked quietly, my heart swelling at the thought of her stringing up the lights and carrying up the pillows.

“Yeah. We’ve gone through so much these last few days—I just wanted to spend some special time with you. Like a date night. Just us.”

*Just us*. My whole body felt warm at the thought. It was just us.

Rishika started the movie and settled next to me to watch it. She seemed to be enjoying it, but I’d been in the mortal world long enough to know when I was missing something, and I was clearly missing something with this movie. There was a strangely dressed little girl doing homework for some other little girls and being mean to a boy. It was hard to follow—especially because I was extremely distracted, having Rishika so incredibly close to me. She was snuggled right next to me, and the soft mattress kind of gave a little, pressing us even closer together.

After ten minutes, Rishika glanced over at me. “Are you not liking the movie?’

“Um…” I felt caught, and my face heated. “What *is* the chill part, exactly?”

Next to her I felt anything but relaxed.

To my surprise, Rishika looked embarrassed, flustered even. “Well, *technically*, it’s when you say you’re going to watch a movie, but… um… you don’t actually watch the movie.”

My heart had started to race. “What *do* you do?”

“Other things,” Rishika said slowly, not moving her gaze from mine.

I’d taught myself to read Rishika’s eyes, and what I saw in them told me all I needed to know. I didn’t waste another moment—I leaned in and kissed her, threading my fingers into her dark hair. She kissed me back, her lips soft and warm.

When I pulled back, she looked up at me, her eyes wide with surprise.

Her expression gave me pause. “Was that okay?” I asked breathlessly.

Rishika—still apparently speechless—nodded and pulled me back in, her tongue pushing past my lips as she kissed me again. This kiss had more heat, more urgency, and the movie played on—completely forgotten.

My skin was on fire now, and heat was pooling just below my stomach. Rishika moved so she was on top of me, pressing me into the bed, and slid her body against mine. I slipped my hands beneath her shirt and felt her skin—soft and warm as tropical beach sand. I wanted more of it—I wanted all of it—so I grabbed the hem of her shirt and pulled it off. She broke the kiss just long enough to duck out, and I tossed the shirt aside. The rest of our clothes followed, and together we slid beneath the blankets.

Her hand slipped slowly down, trailing slowly across my hips, her fingers feather-light against my skin.

I dropped my head back. “You’re killing me,” I moaned.

She just laughed, then she dropped a kiss on my lips, then one on my jaw, then my neck, then my collar bone, then down to my breast. I sucked in a breath as her hand moved lower and she ran her fingers lightly over the seam of my sex. I moaned and—just when I couldn’t stand another moment of waiting—she slipped one inside me.

She was my whole world—just Rishika and her hair and her hands and her lips and her warm, beautiful body next to mine. She held me close as I bucked hard against her hand, the intensity of climax overtaking me. Stars exploded, planets crashed, worlds collided, and there was Rishika, holding me tight, whispering my name as the waves of the orgasm continued to lap at my shores.

When I caught my breath again, I dove under the covers. She giggled as I tickled the inside of her thighs, but stopped laughing when I dropped my head and started kissing my way up.

I made her moan my name—twice, because I liked the sound of it—and in the afterglow we lay tangled in the sheets, snuggled tightly against each other, sweaty and happily cocooned together.

“I could fall asleep like this,” I murmured, feeling like I was already halfway there.

Rishika hummed in response, already asleep.

*She makes you weak.*

My eyes snapped open. They went to the computer, but Rishika had shut the laptop.

*Rishika needs to go. She makes you weak. She cannot be your undoing. We have come too far to let your puny Fae emotions ruin everything.*

Wide awake, I sat up straight, my heart pounding hard. I looked over at Rishika, but she only turned slightly, still fast asleep.

“I don’t want to do this,” I whispered desperately. “Please.”

*You have to. Unless you’re already too weakened by love*, the voice sneered.

I pressed my hands to my ears. I hated the voice. I wanted it out of my head, but it wasn’t going anywhere. It lingered, and it filled me with a strange mix of strength and fear.

My mouth was dry, and my pulse was racing, like I’d just sprinted for miles. I turned to look at Rishika. Her face was peaceful in sleep, her dark hair stark against the while pillow. My body—so warm a moment ago—was cold as I leaned over. I kissed her gently on the cheek, then lifted my own pillow with trembling hands.

I held it above Rishika’s sleeping face.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. Hot tears coursed down my cheeks. “I’m so sorry…”

**Episode 1628**

LOLA

I whirled around in shock. “What do you mean you can’t shift?”

He opened his mouth to reply, but there was no time left. Winifred was practically upon us, ready to rip our throats out and probably eat us or something. I didn’t know what the hell these things were capable of. *And with Jay’s werewolf taking a sabbatical…*

A few steps behind us, Winifred snarled and lunged.

I grabbed Jay’s hand. “Run!”

We took off, scrambling at what felt like a painfully slow pace to put some distance between ourselves and the mad revenant-vampire.

“Hurry!” I yelled as I dragged Jay along. Without his wolf, was I actually faster than him now? Or was he just trying to stay behind me to shield me from Winifred in case she did catch up to us?

*Screw that.*

I yanked Jay down a sharp corner into a separate corridor and then shoved him in front of me. If he was the weaker one now since he couldn’t shift, there was no way in hell I was gonna let him take the brunt of Winifred’s attack.

“Lola, what are you—”

“Keep running!” I said. “As fast as you can!”

A loud clanking sound followed by shattering glass echoed down the corridor—Winifred was still following, but the sudden turn had made it hard for her to follow seamlessly, and it sounded like she’d crashed into one of the many display cases flanking the hallway.

“We need to get to Emmett’s lab!” I whisper-yelled to Jay. “We’ll be safe there!”

“I don’t know how to get there from here! You have to lead the way!”

And let my mate get turned into revenant kibble? Hard pass. “Seriously? You don’t know the way? You’ve walked it before—”

“Do I *look* like a student to you?”

Behind us, Winifred snapped and snarled, low and guttural. Right. Imminent threat of death. No time to bicker.

I put on a burst of speed and bypassed Jay, grabbing his arm and using every ounce of supernatural strength to tug him up alongside me. He stumbled at my too-fast pace, and then I stumbled over him. We went down in a tangle of limbs and filthy curses.

Behind us, Winifred let out a cackle that sent chills down my spine.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!* I lunged to my feet, panic hugging every breath and heartbeat, and catapulted us down the closest hallway. We just had to make it to the lab. It wasn’t far, now. I took another turn—and stopped short.

“What the hell?”

This wasn’t the way to Emmett’s lab—it was a dead end. A door at the end of a short hallway. No windows. No other rooms.

“This isn’t the lab,” Jay said slowly, his eyes wide and panicked.

Numbly, I raced to the door and tried the handle. It was locked. Of *course* it was locked. “*Shit*.”

“Lola, this isn’t Emmett’s lab,” Jay repeated.

I turned to him. “I made a mistake.”

“Wait, you took a wrong turn? After all that, you don’t know the way either?”

“I do!” I turned back to the door and shook the handle with all my considerable strength. “I just panicked and—”

A low snarling sound carried down the hallway, and my blood ran cold.

Winifred.

She’d found us.

I screamed, and Jay pushed me aside and desperately threw his body against the door. It shuddered but didn’t budge.

Winifred took a slow step forward. Her lips were pulled back into a feral grin.

“Jay,” I whimpered.

He took a running leap and slammed his body into the door again. With a crack and a boom, the door swung open, and he crashed to the floor. I wasted no time scrambling in after him.

We’d broken into a classroom, containing no weapons or escape routes as far as I could see.

“Lola, the door!”

I spun around and shoved the door shut, but it was too late. Winifred slammed into it and sent me flying backward into a desk as she burst into the room.

“Get away!” Jay snarled. He picked up a chair and chucked it straight at Winifred, but she shoved it aside, and it hit the wall and splintered into pieces. She stalked forward, her eyes bright orange and her face still twisted into that sick smile.

I locked eyes with Jay. We were helpless, trapped in this classroom with a bloodthirsty revenant-vampire, and neither of us could shift. I scanned the room for something, *anything*, that might save us…

There!

“The closet!” I scrambled to my feet and grabbed Jay, pulling him along with Winifred hot on our heels. I shoved him inside first and then followed. Winifred lunged for us, and I threw the door shut with a scream.

THUD.

Her body made contact with the door moments after it slammed shut. I was practically hyperventilating as I turned the lock and sank back against the warmth of Jay’s body.

THUD.

I screamed and pressed myself backward against Jay. Winifred was trying to break in! The door was a heavy wooden thing—it would buy us time, but if Winifred didn’t snap out of it, she’d be able to break through sooner or later.

And when she did, she’d tear us apart.

The closet was dark and cramped, and even with my enhanced vision, I could barely see. My hand skimmed over Jay’s arms and grabbed on. “Why can’t you shift?” I whispered. “Try again! Do it now! We can’t fight her without your wolf!”

THUD.

Jay’s body tensed. He was trying to shift.

Then he let out a breath. “I can’t!”

“I don’t understand!”

“I don’t, either. I’m so sorry, Lola.” His arms wrapped around me, and I held onto him for dear life.

“What are we going to do?” I asked. “We’re trapped. No one knows we’re in here.”

THUD.

Jay didn’t respond, just held me tighter. I closed my eyes and pressed my face against his chest, breathing him in for the last few moments that I would have with him.

The vise around my chest loosened a little bit. Even in this terrifying situation, somehow just having my mate here with me made me feel better, like somehow everything was going to be okay as long as we were together.

*If I’m going to die here, at least I’ll be with my mate…*

THUD!

The door cracked, and I gasped. “No, no, no, no, no…”

A new sound echoed from the room outside the closet. Footsteps. Someone else was here! Help had arrived!

I opened my mouth to scream, but Jay pressed his hand over it. “Wait,” he whispered. “We don’t know what else is out there.”

A muffled commotion sounded on the other side of the door, but no one was speaking. We craned our necks to try to make out who was in the room with Winifred, and whether they were friend or foe—

And then the room went utterly silent.

I chanced leaning forward to peek through the crack in the door. At first, I could only see overturned desks and chairs, and no sign of anyone else. I pressed myself against the door, Jay’s hands secure on my waist, and tilted my head to get a better angle.

“It’s Emmett!” I whispered.

He was standing over Winifred, who was now sitting placidly at one of the few upright desks, her hands in her lap.

I pushed the door open, ignoring Jay’s whispered, “Lola, wait—”

I rushed out. “Oh, thank god you found us!”

Emmett turned, his eyes wide. Despite the fact that he’d presumably just faced down a revenant-vampire, there wasn’t a single wrinkle in his clothing or a single hair out of place on his head.

*Wow. He really must have gotten the drop on her.*

“Lola, Jay, what are you doing here?” Emmett asked.

Relief washed over me, and all the adrenaline pumping through my veins ran dry. My knees buckled, and nothing except Jay’s grip on my waist kept me upright. His hands were shaking against my skin. I wasn’t the only one about to fall apart.

“We were on our way back to your lab, but she came out of nowhere and just attacked!” I blurted out.

“We couldn’t fight her,” Jay added. “All we could do was run. We holed up in the closet…”

“At which point I walked in, just before she could break in and kill you,” Emmett surmised. “Good timing, then.”

“Understatement.” I inched forward to look at Winifred. The once feral monster looked up at me blankly. She blinked slowly. Her eyes were back to normal.

I turned to Emmett. “Did you give her that stuff you gave Jacqueline?”

He nodded, but he looked very grave. “When it happened the first time, I had thought it was some kind of anomaly, but we’ve definitely got a real problem here.”

“Speaking of problems.” Jay’s eyes narrowed on Emmett. “Do you have any idea where the hell my wolf went?”

**Episode 1629**

Never in my life had I been so happy to be interrupted by Big Mac.

*Saved by the bell—or the grumpy witch.* I’d take it.

Had I seriously almost told my mom that I’d been interrupted on the verge of having sex with one of my mates? Come on, Cali. Boundaries!

Sure, I wanted to get some advice on how to handle the two demanding men who wanted to monopolize my time. But also… I literally couldn’t think of a single thing more horrifyingly awkward than talking about sex with my mom. To say nothing of the fact that me, my mates, and my parents all shared one not-so-gigantic house. What if I told her the truth, and then every time she heard noises coming from down the hall, she assumed I was boning one of my mates?

No, ignorance was bliss. And where my sex life was concerned, my parents being ignorant was the only option. Anything else would probably make me drop dead from embarrassment.

It probably shouldn’t have been that way, but what could I say? We were from the Midwest, and kids and parents didn’t have those kinds of relationships there.

Also, it would’ve been one thing if we all lived separately, and if I had some semblance of control over when my mates and my parents interacted, like normal people did. But alas, we were all jumbled together as one big not-so-happy family. And between the close proximity, the ever-present tension of the *due destini*, and all the crazy shit surrounding my dad maybe becoming a werewolf, I thought it was best to avoid adding to our familial woes.

I forced a smile. “Sorry, Mom. We’ll catch up later.”

She nodded, eyeing Big Mac. “No problem.”

I followed Big Mac down the hallway to the den. “Thanks for the assist,” I said.

She lifted a brow. “What are you talking about?”

Right. *Not* telling people about my personal affairs. If I couldn’t tell my mom, then looping the often mean and sometimes scary witch into things probably wasn’t a good idea.

“Um, never mind.” Heat rushed into my face, and I cleared my throat. “So, what’s going on? What did you need to talk to me about?”

“It’s the protection spell I’m working on for Marta and the pack when she tries to communicate with Deidamia. Since Marta’s going to be making herself, and everyone around her, vulnerable to spiritual interference, we need to make sure we set up as many protections as possible.”

“Oh, wow. That sounds really dangerous. Is there a way for her to contact Deidamia without taking such a risk?” I asked.

Marta was still so young, relatively speaking, and she didn’t have the history with Silas that the rest of us did. It didn’t seem right to ask her to put herself at risk to save the whole pack.

The witch shook her head. “It’s the cost of using her power to make contact. There’s no getting around it. If we want a real chance of reaching Deidamia, then this is what it will take. What we’re trying to do *is* dangerous, Cali. This isn’t a few kids playing with a Ouija board for kicks. This is using Marta as a bridge to reach into a tumultuous, unbalanced spirit realm to try to connect with someone who died centuries ago—which is exactly why we need to set up as many protections as possible.”

I blinked, taking in her lecture. *On the bright side, she doesn’t seem as annoyed by my questions as usual.* I nodded. “That makes sense. We don’t want anything to happen to Marta or any of the other pack members—but what exactly do you think I can do to help?”

Big Mac smiled. It was honestly kind of a creepy look for her, considering I was much more accustomed to her trademark scowl.

*Is she… trying to be nice, or something?*

“I’ve always admired how devoted you are to helping the pack,” the witch said. She only looked a *little* bit pained by the words. Huh. She really was going for friendly—even if it killed her, apparently. “You’re always trying to help, regardless of how well or poorly equipped you are to do so.”

*Ouch. But okay, that sounds more like the Big Mac I know.* I didn’t know whether to be offended or comforted. “Um, thank you?”

She smiled again. “With your Fae magic, you might be able to help with some of the spell casting—a Fae and a witch are stronger together, though we haven’t always been the most natural allies in the past. But… as I said before, this is a dangerous undertaking, and we don’t have a lot of options. So I think the most important thing is that we use all the assets we have at our disposal—including you. What do you think?”

Despite the wealth of backhanded compliments she’d just thrown my way, I felt a little touched. For so long, I’d felt like no one at the pack truly saw me as useful, even after my Fae heritage had come out, along with my powers. It was nice to be wanted, to be asked for help, and I was glad Big Mac was turning to me. Even if it was kind of a last resort.

“Of course.” I smiled, and it wasn’t even a little bit forced. “I’ll do whatever I can.”

She nodded. “Good. All I need is some of your blood. I know there are plenty of Fae in the house, but you’re the one with the closest *pack ties* so it seemed best to ask you,” she said. “Your blood should strengthen the spell. Two witches make for good odds, but two witches with Fae blood at their disposal will be even better.”

“Of course,” I said again. I was practically a blood bank at this point giving both witches some of my blood. “Anything to help. You know what? I’ve got a good feeling about this plan. Marta is obviously much more powerful than any of us ever suspected. We might actually be able to get some answers that will help us get to the bottom of this revenant threat.”

Big Mac nodded. “That’s the goal. If we can put this nightmare behind us, then the risks will have been worth it.”

I noticed movement behind Big Mac’s shoulder and glanced over to see Xavier approaching us, with Greyson behind him. Greyson was limping slightly, though I could tell he was trying very hard to hide it. I could tell from the expressions on both their faces that they had news, and it wasn’t good.

Instantly, I tensed, my body going on red alert. *Oh, god. What now? Are they seriously going to keep their Alpha-fest up in front of Big Mac?*

Xavier reached us first. “Have either of you seen Kira or Ava lately?”

I blinked. So they weren’t here to talk about the three of us… But why was he asking about Ava? And why were both Xavier and Greyson looking so grim?

I thought back, then shook my head. “Um, no. I can’t say I have.”

Big Mac shook her head too. “I haven’t either. Why? What’s going on?”

Xavier shared a long look with Greyson before turning back to the witch. “We’re not entirely sure what’s happened, but it seems Ava and Kira have both disappeared. And whatever they’re up to, I don’t trust it.”

Big Mac frowned. “Why do you think they’re up to something? How long have they been gone?”

“I’m not sure,” Xavier said again. He turned back to Greyson. “We need to get to the bottom of this.”

They both turned to leave, and I immediately tried to follow, but Big Mac grabbed my arm.

“Where are you going?”

“To help them look.”

She shook her head. “Leave this problem to them. They can handle a little hide and seek. We’ve got our own roles to play in this, remember? We need to talk to Marta and get the ball rolling on those protections so that when they find Kira, we can finish the prep work and try to contact Deidamia.”

Big Mac was clearly eager to get this show on the road, but I couldn’t help but feel a little reluctant. Xavier and Greyson were working together now? Without me? And their cooperation had something to do with Ava?

A wave of irritation crashed into me as I recalled the look on Xavier’s face when he’d talked about Ava being missing. Was he worried about her? *Ugh…*

Still, I followed Big Mac up to Marta’s room. She was probably right: the best way we could help was to get started on the protections and to make sure Marta knew what she needed to do to contact Deidamia.

When we reached Marta’s bedroom, we stopped in our tracks. The door was open, but the room was empty. The curtains fluttered around the open window, and a cold gust of air blew in, sending a chill over my skin.

I turned to Big Mac, my eyes wide. “What’s happened to Marta?”

**Episode 1630**

XAVIER

I prowled up and down the length of my bedroom while Greyson sat on my bed, resting his injured leg. I tried not to think about how long it had taken my big brother to make it up the stairs to my bedroom, or the pale sheen that had gleamed on his skin when he’d finally collapsed onto my bed.

He was in enough pain that it looked like he was going to be sick, but he didn’t make a sound. In fact, he was doing everything in his power to make it seem like things were hunky-fucking-dory.

If he wanted to live in denial, that was his choice. I had a bigger problem on my hands now, anyway.

I stopped pacing with a growl. “Nobody has seen either Kira or Ava recently. They’ve snuck out under our noses, and nobody in this house has a goddamn clue where they went.”

Greyson shook his head. “It doesn’t make any sense. What the hell would the two of them be doing together? They’re not exactly friends, right?”

I snorted, imagining the two solitary women and their mutual distrust. Wherever they were, it wasn’t a girl’s trip to the day spa. “No, not exactly.”

“But they both worked for Iñigo, right? So there’s a connection, at least. Do you think that might have something to do with it? Maybe they’re a little closer than you thought?”

I sighed and rubbed my face, thinking back to my last conversation with Ava. “The last time I spoke with Ava, she told me she was going to kill Iñigo to prove herself to me. Like, to earn my trust. And now that I’m thinking about it, Kira has a pretty damn good reason to want Iñigo dead herself. Maybe Ava somehow convinced Kira to team up with her, and they’re on some kind of assassination mission?”

“Huh.” Greyson seemed to perk up at this concept. “We did give Ava that ultimatum. Her life or Iñigo’s, right? If she’s finally taking action, then fine. Kira’s probably good backup. She knows Iñigo’s tricks, and she’s powerful in her own right. Maybe this is the best-case scenario.”

It made sense, but I still couldn’t help the unease slithering down my spine. “I’m not so sure.”

“Why?”

I shrugged. “Something about this just doesn’t feel right. I mean, we both know Ava can’t be trusted. She turns on people at the drop of a hat. Her only priority is saving her own skin.” And, apparently, trying to revive our broken mate bond. But I wasn’t about to tell Greyson that. “I think she’s up to something, and I don’t think she’d actually kill Iñigo if she had the chance. What you see with Ava is never what you get. You know that as well as I do.”

Greyson’s mouth thinned. “I remember.”

I was impatient. “What are we going to do about this?”

He shrugged. “I don’t think we need to *do* anything, Xavier. We’ll see how this plays out and go from there. I mean, if they’ve gone after Iñigo, they could be god only knows where. Tracking them wouldn’t be easy, especially with a horde of revenants at our door,” Greyson said.

“Seriously?”

“If Kira really is with Ava, then I doubt she’ll just accept it if Ava tries to betray her. From what you’re telling me, Kira wants Iñigo dead, perhaps even more than Ava, and she doesn’t seem the type to accept anything less than what was agreed upon.” He shrugged. “If Ava tries to back out, Kira will probably hold her accountable. At minimum, she might still take care of Iñigo for us, and we’ll have one less bloodsucker breathing down our necks. Might be a nice change of pace.”

I shook my head. “I don’t think Kira will be able to carry out any kind of revenge, even on Iñigo. She’s more bark than bite. I mean, don’t get me wrong, she packs a hell of a bite when she wants to, but I wouldn’t count on her to solve our Iñigo problem.”

“Then hopefully Ava can step up and finish the job. We know she’s no tenderhearted pacifist.” Greyson shifted his leg on the bed with a wince and sighed. “You should just let this play out. You can keep an eye on things when they return, but right now it’s out of your hands.”

I blew out a breath. I was trying to keep my cool, but my brother was being really fucking dense about all of this. “But it *is* our concern if they’re off doing something that’s going to cause trouble for us. You do see that, right?”

With a grimace, Greyson stood up, careful to keep his weight off his bad leg. “What exactly do you see going wrong here? If Kira and Ava are planning to kill Iñigo, the worst that could happen is that Iñigo kills them instead. Big fucking deal. Seems like a win-win.”

I gaped. “Seriously, dude? I mean, Ava I get, but what did Kira ever do to you?”

He sighed. “Fine. I don’t want Kira dead. She’s a powerful witch, and it’d be a damn shame if Iñigo killed her. But I’m also not risking any of our pack members to help her.” His voice took on that low, Alpha tone that warned me not to fuck with him. “And that’s final.”

Too bad I never had learned to listen to warnings.

I scoffed. “Are you seriously trying to give me an order here? You can barely walk.”

Greyson met my eyes. There was nothing but icy resolution in his gaze. “I’m still the Alpha here, little brother.”

For a long moment, neither one of us moved. We didn’t take our eyes off each other. We barely even breathed. And suddenly, this wasn’t just about Kira and Ava. Or Greyson’s leg. Or the mate we were both trying—and miserably failing—to share. It seemed like no matter what I did, no matter where I went, Greyson was always in my way. Taking what I wanted, what I deserved, then acting like I should bow down and fucking thank him for it because he was the high and mighty Alpha.

*Fuck that.*

I let out a bitter laugh. “We both know that you don’t get to order me around, pack Alpha or not.”

He took a step toward me and winced. “We need to focus here. Whatever games Ava and Kira want to play aren’t our concern. Our focus should be on keeping the pack safe.”

I scoffed again. “Are you that fucking dense? I don’t care what you say. I don’t care what you want me to do. I’m going to figure out what Ava and Kira are up to. I need to know that Ava hasn’t set some plan in motion that’s going to put us all in even greater danger. And I’m not asking permission.”

He stared at me for a moment, his eyes narrowing. Finally, he blew out a breath. “This isn’t about Kira or Ava at all, is it?”

I frowned. “What are you talking about? Have you heard a single thing I’ve said?”

Greyson shook his head. “This is about Cali. You just can’t stand that I’m in charge here, that I’m top dog. You feel like you need to take charge and play the hero to impress her.”

“Wow. You are un-fucking-believable, you know that? Yeah, I’m worried about Cali. I am *always* worried about Cali, because I’m her mate. But I’m also worried about whatever bullshit Ava and Kira are up to because they could bring heat down on the entire pack, and you know what? I’m worried about them too. You know, like you should be, as the *Alpha*—as you can’t stop telling me.” I stepped forward and got right in his face. “*You’re* the one trying to throw your weight around by ordering me to do nothing. *You’re* the one trying to impress Cali with your nonexistent leadership.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Greyson snarled. “You were the one who was too busy playing Rogue the past few years to man up and take charge. This pack needed someone to lead them—”

“I could have led them! I was *supposed* to lead them. This is *my* pack!”

Greyson leaned forward, his body trembling with the force of his suppressed rage. “Then where the hell were you? I did what I had to do to protect the pack! I was the one fucking paying attention to the threats on our doorstep while your head was so far up your ass—”

“And Saint Greyson was only too happy to step in and save everyone, right?”

“Someone had to. Face it, Xavier—you ran away when this pack needed you. When *Cali* needed you. And I was the one who had to pick up the pieces. So don’t you dare act like I took *anything* from you when you were the one who threw it all away.”

I was so angry I couldn’t see straight, and when Greyson crashed into me, I shoved him back with all my might.

“It’s a fight you want?” I snarled.

But Greyson just stumbled back, his face losing color. Oh, fuck.

He wasn’t trying to fight me. He just couldn’t stand up anymore.

“Greyson—”

My brother’s body pitched to the side, and I just managed to grab him by the shoulders.

“Greyson?”

His eyes met mine for a split second before they rolled back in his head and he crumpled to the ground.

**Episode 1631**

ARTEMIS

I had a white-knuckled grip on the pillow, holding it mere inches above Rishika’s sleeping face. Above the mouth I’d just kissed.

*Do it, Artemis*. That dark voice echoed in my ears. *She’s holding you back. End this now, and be free. End her, and achieve your true destiny.*

The voice was so certain, thundering through my very being, like it was controlling my breath, my bones, the blood that flowed through my veins. My muscles tensed, ready to follow the command. My master never led me astray.

And yet I couldn’t seem to close the gap. The few inches of space that kept Rishika breathing, sleeping, completely oblivious to the war that was being waged above her.

Something about this… It felt *wrong*, somehow. That same instinct in my gut that had kept me alive throughout all of the shit life had thrown at me—it was telling me *not* to do this. Who should I listen to? The voice in my head that urged me on, or the small tug in my stomach that begged me to stop?

Sweat broke out on the back of my neck, and my palms went clammy as they gripped the pillow.

*Do it, Artemis! Do it NOW!*

My arms started to lower the pillow, almost of their own volition. I frowned, confused by the war raging inside me, by the power commanding my body and the cold dread that had begun to spill into my stomach.

*You must do this! Do not falter now—not when you are so close to reaching your potential.*

Suddenly, the voice went silent, and my mind flashed back to Rishika, laughing in the yard as she taught me how to build a snowman. The echo of her laughter snagged on something in my chest, something deeper than the voice and its well of power. Something that ripped me wide open and sent a jolt of horror through every cell of my body.

“No!” I gasped, slamming the pillow down—next to Rishika’s head. Not on top of it. Not to hurt her. Gods, never… I could *never*.

A sob hitched in my chest.

The violence of the movement made the mattress bounce, and Rishika’s eyes fluttered open. She looked up at me, a sleepy smile pulling at her lips.

A smile I would never have seen again, if I’d gone through with that horrifying, unforgivable thing.

“Artemis?” Her smile dimmed, and a crease appeared between her eyebrows. “What’s going on?”

I stared down at her in horror, panting, practically hyperventilating. Another sob snagged at my lungs, and my eyes burned with a fresh wave of tears.

It was like I’d woken up—only instead of being freed from the nightmare, I was inside it. I was lucid and present and oh my *god*, what had I just been about to do?!

Rishika reached out for me, but I skittered back before she could make contact. I couldn’t let her touch me. Not now, maybe not ever again. Not after what I’d almost done to her. What I could stilldo at any moment.

“Artemis, is everything okay?” she asked. “Did you have a nightmare?”

A few tears escaped my eyes, and I wiped them away with the back of my hand, my chest heaving. I didn’t know what to say. There was nothing I could say. I could barely wrap my head around what I’d nearly done.

*I almost killed Rishika. I tried to smother her. I could have—*

Bile rose in my throat, and I swallowed it down with a ragged groan. What was wrong with me? What the hell was I doing? What was *happening* to me?

Rishika eyed me, worry etched into her face. “Artemis, you’re freaking me out a bit here. Talk to me. What’s going on?”

The concern in her voice—nothing but worry and care and love—pulled another round of tears from my eyes. I wished more than anything that I could tell her the truth, but I knew just how impossible that was. If I ever told her about what I’d nearly done, she would never talk to me again.

And I couldn’t live with that thought.

I mutely shook my head.

She bit her lip. “Are you worried that we’re moving too fast?” The worry on her face had shifted to hurt, and it snapped my heart in two.

*No. That’s not it at all. I love what’s been happening between us…*

Rishika was all I’d ever hoped for through all my lonely years. Someone who saw me as I truly was, and who still cared. And I wanted her too. I cared about her too… more than she would ever know.

But I knew the truth now: I didn’t deserve her. I was a *threat* to her. And I’d rather be alone for the rest of my life than live with the knowledge that I’d hurt someone I cared about so deeply.

I couldn’t have her. Not anymore. I couldn’t be close to this woman I cared so much about—not if it meant putting her at risk.

*Is this what it’s like to be in a relationship?* This was all new to me. What if I was going about things the wrong way? Was there even a right way? How was I supposed to figure it all out?

*She’s probably better off without me.*

The thought grabbed my stomach in a white-knuckled grip, and for a moment I thought I was going to be sick all over the bed.

“Artemis?” Rishika’s eyes were wide, brimming with tears.

I bolted from the bed and into the hallway, ignoring her cries for me to come back. I didn’t stop running until I burst through the front door, sprinted down the porch, and collapsed to my knees in the snow.

I drew in one deep breath after another, each exhale turning into a little white cloud. My head was spinning, and my stomach was still threatening to revolt.

I heard steps echoing on the main floor of the house. Rishika. She must have followed me out here.

I couldn’t bear to face her right now. I scrambled to my feet and burst into a sprint, heading into the woods. I ran and ran without really seeing where I was going, stumbling over rocks and roots, branches scratching at my exposed skin. Icy air sawed in and out of my chest, but I barely felt the cold. My mind was too fixated on what had just happened. On what I’d nearly *allowed* to happen.

I finally slowed to a stop, gasping raggedly to catch my breath. I looked around, suddenly aware of my surroundings, and stumbled back with a yelp.

I was standing at the edge of a pool. Another spirit pool.

*What the…? Why did I come here?*

I turned around, looking back in the direction I’d come from. I couldn’t see the house, couldn’t hear anyone else approaching. I was all alone in the woods, trembling, shivering, at the edge of the pool.

*You’re never alone*,the dark voice whispered inside my mind.

I clapped my hands over my ears with a whimper. “No! Leave me alone! I don’t want to talk to you. I don’t want to be here!”

I took a step forward, away from the pool, back toward the pack house—

And my entire body froze. I couldn’t move a single muscle, could barely breathe. It was like something had wrapped itself around me and was holding me tight.

“Please… Please, leave me alone. I don’t know what you want from me.”

A wave of darkness brushed softly against the edge of my mind, almost like a caress. *Yes, you do. You know exactly why you’re here. It’s time to stop running, Artemis. It’s time to face your destiny.*

The grip on my body loosened just enough for me to gulp down some air, and I screamed, “No, I don’t! I don’t understand anything!”

The soft caress turned to a swipe of razor-sharp claws.

“Ah!”

*Quiet! We’re not alone.*

“Artemis?” a deep voice called. “What are you doing out here?”

I whirled around. Or rather, the dark power controlling my body did.

Ravi stood behind me. He’d just shifted back to his human form, from the looks of it. He watched me with thinly veiled suspicion. “I saw you run outside… Are you okay? You’re acting kind of weird.”

In a flash of panic, I considered telling him the truth—that I was being held captive inside my own body. But as I drew in the breath to speak, my lungs slammed shut.

*Oh, I don’t think so*, the voice whispered harshly.

Ravi looked around the empty clearing. “Who were you talking to?” His gaze stopped on the pool, and then he looked up at me and took a step closer, so close he could almost have reached out and touched me. “Artemis, what are you up to?”

The voice in my head turned to thunder, pouring its will into my body, my mind, my very soul.

*GET RID OF HIM!*

And then everything disappeared. All the pain. All the anguish. All those insipid feelings.

I smiled. “I’ll show you.”

And then, before he could even blink, I rushed forward and shoved Ravi into the dark depths of the pool.

**Episode 1632**

GREYSON

When I peeled my eyes open, the world was spinning on its side. I groaned. My body ached and throbbed like I’d just been tossed down a mountain, and I was pretty sure I was on the verge of losing my last meal.

My eyes darted around, trying to anchor on something, anything. They found Xavier’s face, floating high above mine. His mouth was moving, but I couldn’t hear what he was saying. It almost looked like he was saying my name.

What the hell had happened to me?

My eyes lost focus, and the world tipped on its side again. Something firm and warm pressed against my cheekbone, tilting my head back. I forced my eyes open again. Xavier. He was leaning over me, his face furrowed with… Was that concern? For me?

His mouth kept moving, but I couldn’t hear him.

And then sound rushed back into the world.

“Greyson!”

I gasped, flinching. “What the fuck?”

“Are you okay?” Xavier was scared. I’d never heard him sound like that before. At least not when he was talking to me. I’d kind of assumed that if I were ever unlucky enough to be down for the count in front of my brother, he’d laugh his ass off.

But he sure wasn’t laughing now.

The warm, firm thing being held against my cheek, I realized, was Xavier’s hand.

“Greyson, talk to me,” he said.

My mouth was dry, and I tried to lick my lips. Tried to speak, but a sharp, pulsing sensation lanced through my skull, and all I could do was groan.

“Do you need me to get Torin?” Xavier asked.

I could barely think around the white-hot pain wedging itself into my skull, much less listen and respond. I tried to sit up, and another wave of blinding pain shot through my leg. I hissed.

“Wow. Easy.” Xavier’s hand moved to my back. He was quite literally the only thing holding me upright. My body had betrayed me—I was weak as a newborn pup, and in so much pain that I could barely breathe.

“Greyson,” Xavier tried again. “Talk to me. Tell me you can understand me. What happened?”

He prattled on, and I swayed slightly, even though Xavier was holding me up. The world was still off its axis, and pain blurred the edges of everything. My sight, my hearing, the physical sensations pressing against my skin like a thousand needles…

The door swung open, and Cali shot into the room. She spoke too fast for me to understand in my current state, but I thought I recognized the word “Marta.” And then she stopped short when she realized I was on the ground and nearly catatonic.

She scrambled over and dropped to her knees beside me. “Greyson! Oh my god. What happened?”

She pinned Xavier with a fierce glare that I would have found hilarious if I’d been able to feel anything other than pain. “What the hell did you do to him?”

He scoffed. “I didn’t do anything! He just collapsed. I’m trying to *help* him.”

Cali turned her eyes on me and cupped my face. “Oh, Greyson…”

God, I hated this. I hated this so, so much. I hated that Cali was seeing me in a vulnerable position like this, and I hated even more that it was happening when Xavier had a front row seat.

I took a deep breath, willing the world to stop spinning. Pain still wrapped tight around me, but I could deal with that. You didn’t grow up with Silas as a father without learning how to handle a little pain.

I struggled to my feet, ignoring both Xavier’s and Cali’s warnings to slow down, and forced my lips into what I hoped looked like a smile. “I’m fine,” I rasped.

I managed exactly one step before my leg buckled and I hit the ground again. Xavier was generous enough to catch me this time. I also managed to hold onto consciousness and stay upright.

“I’m okay…”

“You are clearly *not* fine!” Cali cried. “What is going on here?”

She looked at Xavier again, who shrugged. “I’m sorry, Cali. I really don’t know what’s happening.”

“Go find Kira—” She cut herself off. “Right. She’s not here.” She huffed. “Where the hell *is* everyone?”

I focused on her anguish, and the question it provoked. “What does that mean?”

She looked back at me, her eyes searching my face. It didn’t seem like she was happy with what she found. “Big Mac and I just went to find Marta, but she’s gone too.”

Marta was missing? Well that was just the icing on the shit cake, wasn’t it? She was our shot at reaching out to Deidamia, at trying to end Silas once and for all. My head swam with questions. Had Marta she run away, or had something taken her? Was her disappearance somehow connected to Kira and Ava being gone too?

A fresh wave of pain washed away all those concerns. “*Fuck*,” I groaned.

Cali sighed. “But that doesn’t matter right now. What matters is figuring out what’s happening to you.” She turned to Xavier. “Go get Big Mac.”

Xavier hesitated, probably because he didn’t want to leave us alone. What an idiot. I could barely move right now—the chances of him walking in on something when he got back were pretty damn slim.

Finally, Cali gave him a pointed look, and after responding with a curt nod, he left.

The second my brother was out the door, I gritted my teeth and forced myself to stand.

“Fuck,” I breathed. The pain was nearly blinding. Breathing deeply, I started limping toward the door. No way in hell was I going to be laid up in a sickbed in Xavier’s room.

Cali glued herself to my side the moment I was upright. “Greyson, slow down. You need to take it easy.”

“I will,” I gritted out. “Back in my room.”

She sighed. “You’re so stubborn.”

She put an arm around me and helped me down the hallway and back to my room. I was trying to keep as little weight on both my bad leg and Cali as possible, so it was slow going, but her warmth against my side was comforting.

When we finally reached my room, she walked me over to my bed, and I sank down onto the mattress with a groan. I was covered in sweat like I’d just run a mile instead of walked ten feet. I’d never felt so weak in my life, and I wished again that this had never happened while Cali was around to see it.

She sat next to me, careful to keep the mattress from shifting my weight too much. “What happened, exactly?”

“I don’t want you to worry about me,” I grunted. “I’m fine. I just haven’t gotten enough sleep lately. That’s all.”

Her eyebrows rose, dangerously close to her hairline. “You’re a terrible liar, Greyson Evers, so don’t you dare try to pull that crap with me. Remember when you confessed that you’d lied to me?”

Despite the shitty situation, I felt a smile tugging at my lips. “I remember. When I kissed you at the Lupo Finale.”

Her cheeks reddened, but she kept her expression dead serious. “The point is, you’re lying to me again. You told me the injury wasn’t a big deal. You told me you were fine. And you are clearly *not* fine.”

I sighed. “I thought I was. It’s just gotten a little worse.”

“A little?” she scoffed. “I want to look at it.”

I didn’t think that was a good idea. I could tell from the way the wound was throbbing that it wasn’t going to look good. I was honestly a little afraid of seeing it myself, so there was no way in hell I wanted my mate to see it.

“Love, I’m fine. You don’t need to worry about me—”

“Stop lying to me,” she snapped, and started tugging at my belt.

“Oh, if this is what you want, maybe I’ll try to get injured more often,” I tried to joke. The effect was ruined when I lifted my hips so she could ease my jeans down, and the fabric dragged over my throbbing wound. I winced again, and Cali’s face tightened.

Yeah, I was in trouble.

As gently as she could, she managed to slid my pants off, and her gasp of horror told me everything I needed to know about how the wound was looking.

“I thought the witches stopped this,” she whispered, her eyes glued to my leg.

“They stopped it killing me, at least,” I said gruffly. I hated the horror and worry on her face. My job as her mate was to make her life *easier*, not give her more things to worry about. I wished I could be stronger for her.

Cali shook her head slowly. “The edges of the wound are growing more defined. It’s raised, and it feels hot to the touch.” She lifted her eyes to mine, and I saw nothing but fear in those beautiful depths. “Greyson, it’s getting worse.”

**Episode 1633**

MARTA

We were driving very slowly down the forest road—or I was driving, and Lilac was gliding. Chugging would’ve been a better word for it. We were on our way to the old pack house on the lake, and I was being extra cautious. The fact was, I hadn’t driven for a long while, and I was extremely nervous. But it was just a short trip. I mean, what could go wrong?

Just that we were going to the house Big Mac told me not to return to. It was fine.

I swallowed hard. I was feeling pretty paranoid—and not just because I was so rusty behind the wheel. My thoughts turned again to the revenants, what with them being out and about. Maybe we should have gotten someone else to go and get the pendant. I knew summoning Deidamia was going to be risky, which meant I really needed that insurance. If Rain thought an anchor would help, then I had to listen to him.

At this stage, if I had learned anything, it was that I had to look after myself—otherwise who would?

Still.

Still. I glanced nervously at Lilac. I didn’t speak, but as usual, he sensed my mood.

“What?”

“Maybe we should have told somebody where we were going,” I said.

Lilac gave me a reassuring smile. “Nervous huh? I hear you. This is pretty creepy. But on the other hand, we’re going to be so quick it’ll like we were never gone. We’ll slip in and out ASAP.” His cheerful confidence only served to get further under my skin.

I snorted. “I hope you’re right, and that the necklace can help us. Otherwise we’re taking a massive risk for no good reason,” I said. “I mean, look at us! We’re probably just driving around these dark, creepy woods for absolutely nothing!” I bit my lip. “And come to think of it, if Greyson or Xavier knew we were out here in the woods alone, they’d totally flip their shit.”

“Okay, okay grandma,” Lilac sang out cheerfully. He seemed completely unfazed by my grumbling—if anything, he seemed amused by it. “Well, if it turns out that our mission was for nothing, at least we got a romantic evening out of it, right?”

Clearly my doom and gloom wasn’t putting him off.

I shot him a look. “Oh yeah, because creeping around in a forest filled with zombies is totally my ideal dating scenario. *Not*.” I hurried on, perhaps a little too fast. “I mean, not that we’re dating or anything.”

An extremely heavy and awkward silence followed. My face felt hot. I had gone too far, but what was I supposed to say? I mean, we *weren’t* dating. Ugh. Our whole situation was so messed up.

We drove on in silence for a while until Lilac suddenly pointed up ahead.

“There it is!”

I peered through the darkness; Lilac was right—there was the old pack house lit up in the car’s headlights. I let out a sigh of relief. Perhaps this wouldn’t be so bad after all.

We parked and got out. When we approached the house I could make out that the porch was all boarded up. I knew that some guy named Phil had been working on the repairs, but he still had a *long* way to go. Seeing the boards gave me a queasy, nervous feeling in the pit of my stomach.

I turned to Lilac. “I really don’t like the idea of breaking in. Maybe we should just go back?”

Lilac, to my annoyance, only shook his head and made an impatient gesture. “Marta, we’re not breaking in. It’s not like we’re not allowed to be here. Look.” He pointed to a shattered window, damaged by the fire. “C’mon!”

I sighed. I didn’t want to do this. There was something in my gut that told me it was a very bad idea. On the other hand, though, Lilac had a point—we weren’t exactly trespassing, and we were here now anyway.

I gingerly climbed through the window, taking care to avoid any shards of glass, and examined the room.

It was clear that the fire had really done a number on the place. There was soot everywhere, the furniture was mostly burned beyond recognition, the floor was covered in twisted metal and broken glass… The damage was insane. I stood in the center of the room and tried to stay calm. I truly, *truly* hated being back in the house. I’d had such bad luck with houses—especially houses I’d almost died in. I just wanted to get out as fast as humanly possible. Speaking of, Lilac pointed upstairs.

“We need to check Violet’s room. Let’s go.”

*Ugh*. I shuddered. I didn’t want to go, but I knew we had to.

*Get the anchor then leave.*

I eyed the stairs. They hadn’t fared much better that the rest of the house. I remembered trying to make my way to them in the smoke and heat… I didn’t remember going down them; that must have been when Lilac picked me up. The stairs had clearly suffered some structural damage, because it looked like they were literally sagging in the middle.

“No way,” I said, gesturing forward. “I’m going to fall clean through those!”

Lilac started to argue, but I persisted.

“Seriously, can’t you just go and float on up there? You could take a look without me having to risk breaking my neck.”

Lilac sighed, puffed out his cheeks, and folded his arms, taking mock offense. “*Float?* Seriously? I don’t float, I *glide*!”

“Oh my god.” I gritted my teeth and took a deep breath. “Fine! Great. Wonderful. Then would you mind gliding your lovely self up there to see if you can find it? That way I can stay down here, where I’m less likely to risk breaking my neck by plunging to my death.”

“Okay, okay.” Lilac smiled and shrugged. “You’re getting so worked up about potential death. It’s not so bad.” He grinned, took a few steps up, then stopped. “Shit!”

“What?”

“I can’t go any further. The tethering wont’ let me.”

“Ah, right. Great.”

Lilac looked pained but resigned. “Sorry Marta, but you’re going to have to come with me.”

With that, he extended his hand. I looked down at it. The moment seemed to go on forever. I was really torn. Yes, we needed the necklace, but did I really need to take Lilac’s hand as well?

*Take it!* A small voice urged from somewhere inside me. *Take it and you’ll feel stronger—less afraid.*

I exhaled, and with a big—admittedly ungracious—grimace, I took his proffered hand. I could feel his ghostly fingers pressing into mine. I didn’t want to admit it—and I would never have said it aloud—but the slight pressure brought me comfort. I took one step, then another. In no time, we were standing in Violet’s room, looking around and trying to work out where she might have put the necklace.

“Okay, okay” Lilac paused. “Let me think.” He stopped and closed his eyes, clearly trying to visualize everything. “Got it!” He opened his eyes, clearly triumphant. “Go and lift up the end of the mattress—Violet always loved to hide things there, and she probably still does.”

I took a deep breath and slowly made my way to the bed. The floor creaked and groaned under my feet, and unexpected fear gripped me. Lilac placed a comforting hand on my shoulder, and my strength and resolve came back. I lifted the mattress.

There it was. The pendant—perfectly preserved and totally flawless. I gave a massive sigh of sheer relief.

Lilac was elated. “Hey, you found it!”

Thank god.

“Now we can get the hell out of here.” In this state, the house was really giving me the creeps. I was getting more “Bert’s mansion” vibes than “werewolf pack.” And I still had to get back down the stairs.

I picked my way down each step, truly terrified that any one of them would collapse at any moment. My feet kept freezing, and Lilac had to give me constant pep talks.

“Marta, it will be okay. Look, you’re almost there. You can do it.”

Finally, I was back on the ground floor. The relief was enormous. I took some small satisfaction from holding the necklace up, watching as it glinted and sparkled in the moonlight.

If I was quietly relieved and pleased, it was nothing compared to Lilac, who seemed exhilarated. How nice for him.

“You know, I just have this feeling that the pendant is going to serve as a great anchor for the spell. And not only because it was mine.” He whirled around me, still wild with excitement. “Do you even know how big this could be? Seriously? I mean, if you’re able to bring back Deidamia and get some answers, she could be the key to all of this!”

He stopped right in front of me and grinned. I couldn’t help but return it. His excitement was catching. We locked eyes, and we both moved closer. There was something in the way Lilac looked at me that made me tingle all over. Moving closer still, our lips parted—and that was when we heard it. A noise in the doorway.

We jumped apart and turned to see what it was.

York was standing there, staring at us.

**Episode 1634**

RAVI

I thrashed around in the water. Desperately, I fought to get to the surface, but I couldn’t tell what was up and what was down. I was completely confused. I had absolutely no idea what had just happened or where I was—it was like I’d woken up from a deep dream to find myself struggling underwater. Now I was lost, alone and helpless, and I was going to drown.

*Ravi, stay strong. You can do this.*

I opened my eyes, searching for any light to help guide me. I got another horrible shock, because I wasn’t alone in the water. There was a face floating directly in front of me. It was the most terrifying thing I’d ever seen. It looked like a corpse, with the skin stretched tightly across the bones. Its mouth was wide open in a hair-raising scream, but no bubbles or sound were coming out of it. Instinctively, I pushed back as hard as I could.

*Get away! Get away from it!*

As I moved backward, I was hit and then surrounded by an incredibly cold sensation, as if ice had seeped into my bones. *Oh my god. It can’t be*. But it was. I had passed directly through another of those corpse creatures.

*No! Please no!*

I spun around, and there they were. Their rotten skin stretched tight, their mouths open in silent screams. I was completely surrounded by horrors. An army of water-logged corpses swirled around me as far as the eye could see. There were hundreds of them—maybe thousands—their mouths open and crying out silently for an eternity. It was like I’d been dropped into the ocean, with no hope of reaching the surface.

I started to hyperventilate underwater, taking in massive dark swallows of cold water. I couldn’t breathe. My vision started to blur. This was it. I was now surrounded by something like mist, soft and cool and light against my skin. Against my will, the mist began to relax me. I let go and closed my eyes, knowing that I would slip away and be glad of it. At least I’d never see those things again.

When I opened my eyes, I was lying flat on my back. An almost painful relief flooded through me—I was able to breathe again. I wasn’t underwater. It wasn’t real. For a moment, I was content to just lie there and thank god that it had all been a horrible nightmare. Admittedly the worst nightmare of my life, but nothing more than that.

I slowly sat up and looked around, beginning to take in some of my surroundings. I realized with a dull thrill of fear that I had no idea where I was. I seemed to be in a forest, but it wasn’t the familiar forest that surrounded the pack house. The trees were different, somehow—they were twisted and strange, and had a distinctly sinister vibe. The air was thick with fog. This place… Something was wrong with this place. My heart pounded as I slowly stood. I had just gotten to my feet when I froze. I could just see the blurred figure of someone stepping out from the trees, moving toward me. The person came closer. I blinked, stared, and blinked again.

My heart stopped for a moment, then started pounding again so hard I thought it would burst out from my chest. I took a tentative step toward her.

“Joss?”

I had to be dreaming. I had to wake up. If I didn’t, this would become far too painful.

I pinched myself as hard as I could, and winced in pain. My head was spinning. I tried to swallow, but I couldn’t—my throat was too dry. What the hell was going on here?

But there was no mistaking her blue hair, radiant as ever. The soft bow of her lips. The sway of her hips. My chest felt like it was caving in on itself. The woman I loved was standing before me, like she’d never left. Like it was another day together. Like we could run away together.

Like she wasn’t dead.

Joss moved to stand by my side, placing a hand on my arm. “We don’t have much time, Ravi,” she said.

I gasped—I couldn’t help it. Her touch was so warm and so real and so completely *alive*. I felt my eyes widen as I stared at her in complete wonder.

“Joss?” I asked again, my voice breaking. “Is this real?”

Joss only shook her head, still patient, still smiling. “Ravi, I wish I could tell you. But honestly, there’s no time to explain.”

“What?” My voice was shaking, and I tried my best to steady it, but it was hard. I was so stunned and confused. “Joss, what’s going on here? Am I… Am I dead?”

Joss laughed gently. I’d always loved the sound of her laugh—it was so low and warm and genuine. It was only one of the million things I missed about her. I needed to hold her against me. To feel her skin against mine again.

Maybe if I were dead it wouldn’t be so bad. At least I would be with her.

“No, Ravi, you’re alive,” Joss said, squeezing my shoulder. “And what’s more, it’s important that you go back.”

“Go back?” How could I go back anywhere where she wasn’t?

She nodded. “You need to warn the others about what’s coming.”

“Joss, what the hell are you talking about? What’s coming?” I asked. “Are you in danger?”

But Joss only shook her head again. “I wish I could tell you. But trust me, it’s not safe for you here. You have to leave. You have to get out of here.”

Now it was my turn to shake my head. I could feel the panic starting to rise. “No! I can’t leave you, not when I’ve found you again. I’ll never go back without you. Come with me.”

I saw Joss’s face twist in agony, and I winced. What had I said wrong? I never wanted to cause her pain. Ever.

“Oh Ravi, it isn’t that.” She smiled softly. “I wish we had more time together, too.”

I clung to her hands, pleading. “But isn’t there some way you could come back with me? Please Joss, please! I’m begging you. I can’t do any of this without you.”

I *was* begging her, and I sounded desperate, but I didn’t care. I *was* desperate.

“Please,” I rasped. “I don’t want to live without you. I *can’t*. Every day without you is unbearable. I miss you. I miss you so much.”

“*Ravi*.” Joss looked like she wanted to cry. “I miss you too. You’ll never know how much I miss you. But it’s just not your time—not yet.” She drew in a shaky breath and then looked me straight in the eye. “You have a role to play, an important one. Ravi, you need to go back.”

I shook my head vehemently. “No. I won’t leave you! I can’t leave you, Joss. I’m not sorry.”

Joss studied my face in silence for a long, long while. Then she slowly ran a finger down my cheek.

“Please know…” Her voice was soft, barely above a whisper. “Please know that I love you too.”

She pulled me into a kiss. I melted into it, pulling her even closer, holding her even tighter. I wouldn’t let her go, not now, not ever. This was the kiss that brought me life. The woman I wanted. The woman I chose. I tasted her against me, trying desperately to remember the feel of her, the taste. She was the love of my life, my soul, my heart—

Joss pulled back.

“Go Ravi.” Her voice was choked with tears. “*Go*!”

The eerie forest with its twisted trees and thick fog began to melt away.

“No!”

I tried with all my might to hang onto her, the woman I loved. But everything went black.

When I opened my eyes, I was back in the pool. Confused and thrashing, but at least this time I could see a faint light, wavering near the surface. I kicked upward as hard as I could. My lungs were burning, and I felt like I was going to explode. Finally, I broke through the surface, gasping and choking, taking the sharp, cold air into my lungs, which felt like they were on fire.

I dragged myself out and lay there, gasping and coughing, completely shattered and exhausted. I didn’t know how long it took me to realize that there was a woman standing over me, staring down at me.

She was very pale and slim, but clearly athletic. Her long, dark hair fell heavily around her face. Her eyes were piercing.

She stared down at me, and I stared back, transfixed and terrified. Who was this person? What did she want?

We stared at each other for what felt like an eternity until finally the question burst from my lips. I drew in another painful breath and tried my hardest to focus.

“Who are you?” I croaked. “What’s going on?”

**Episode 1635**

Greyson moved his hand to cover his injury. With the other hand, he slowly and gently reached out to take my chin, then tilted my face so that my eyes met his.

“Cali?”

I tried to shift my gaze away, but he locked eyes with me and it was no use.

“Cali, listen to me.” He spoke clearly and softly with measured care, so that I knew he meant every word. “I’m fine. I promise.”

I stared into his eyes, the intensity of his gaze burning through me, practically sizzling through my skin. I started to say something, but under the heat of our shared glance, the words faltered and died in my throat. I could feel the blood tingling under my skin. Our faces were now only inches away from each other.

My stomach was entirely in butterflies. I couldn’t help it—the way Greyson affected me was insane, and instead of getting used to it, his hold on me only seemed to be growing stronger. All I wanted to do was protect him, but it felt like each and every attempt was foiled.

I cleared my throat. As much as I wanted to kiss and jump on him, I had to address the issue at hand.

“Greyson, I just don’t understand it. I mean, the last time we saw your wound it was healed, so why has it opened up? Why did it get *worse*?”

Greyson only shook his head, looking as frustrated and confused as I felt.

“I don’t know, love. I just don’t know. But remember,” he said, brightening slightly, “the three witches did say that they’d stopped it from killing me.” He took a breath. “I just hope that wasn’t a one-time thing.”

My heart squeezed painfully for him. “I hope so too.”

Greyson tried to smile, but it seemed like an effort. “It’ll be fine. Don’t worry, love.”

I stood up abruptly. I’d had enough.

“You know, Greyson, I just don’t understand why you’re not taking this seriously!” My tone was more indignant than I intended, but I couldn’t hide how I felt. “It’s not funny, and it’s not something you should laugh about. For all we know, you could be… You could be…” I faltered. I’d tried to say, “you could be dying,” but my throat had closed up and now I couldn’t get the words out.

It’d been a possibility before. The witches had said they’d prevented the wound from getting worse, but apparently there were some things even witches didn’t know. Losing Greyson wasn’t an option. I had to snap out of this and figure out what to do.

Just then, I heard a kind of throat-clearing noise. We both looked up. There in the doorway stood Xavier and Big Mac. Once they saw us looking at them, Xavier took the opportunity to step in. His gaze had dropped, so mine did too. I followed his all the way to Greyson’s pants, which were still down.

*Oh shit.*

“So… when we didn’t find you in my room, we thought we’d find you here.” Xavier’s voice was tight and hard, his annoyance barely suppressed.

Big Mac, however, clearly couldn’t have cared less about Greyson’s pantless-ness. I guess she was marrying Mrs. Smith, after all.

“We figured you’d either be here, or you’d have up and left like half the pack, apparently.” She entered the room, all business. “All right Greyson, I need you to show me the injury—right now.”

I hovered around as Greyson stuck out his leg to show her. I tried to read Big Mac’s expression as she examined the wound, searching her expression for extra anxiety or concern. I tried to hold myself back to keep quiet, but all too soon I was grilling her.

“Why has it opened up again? Does it look worse? What do you think it is? Is there anything we can do?”

Big Mac glared at me. It was clear that the lovely moment we’d shared earlier was long gone. She looked to Greyson. “Can you get her out of here? Please?”

“Hey!” I protested. “That’s not cool. I’m staying right here!”

But Xavier had other plans.

“Gladly,” he told Big Mac.

Then, with one swift motion, he picked me up as though I weighed absolutely nothing and carried me out of the room. I glanced back at Greyson. His jaw was set, and a pulse was beating obviously in his neck.

Xavier brought me back to his room and, still holding me, glared up at me. He was clearly irritated with me, but that went two ways.

“Hey! What the hell was that for?”

Xavier didn’t reply, just continued to glare at me.

“Xavier! I asked you a question,” I said. “And by the way—*put me down!*”

He dumped me unceremoniously onto the bed, and I immediately bounced back up, glaring right back at him.

“What?” he asked.

Oh *hell* no. He didn’t get to pull this innocent shit. I continued to glare at him.

“Well forgive me if I don’t completely love coming across my mate and my brother with his pants pulled all the way down!”

I let out a little huff of frustration. “Oh please, are you kidding me? *Seriously?* I was checking out his injury. And I think you know that.”

And Greyson had walked in on the two of us in a bit more than a compromising position. This was so far from that. Thank *god*.

Xavier only grunted in reply.

That truly pissed me off. It was the straw that broke the camel’s back.

“You know what, Xavier? Even if something had been happening, it would’ve been part of what we all agreed to. I mean, if I’m going to attempt to be with both of you, a large part of that is you understanding and accepting that I’m actually going to *be* with both of you! Let me tell you something—it’s never going to work if every time I’m with one of you, the other sees and flies off in a jealous snit. I mean, it’s not like this is super easy for me, either.”

Xavier’s expression softened. His jaw relaxed, and his eyes lost their menacing glare.

“I know,” he muttered gruffly. “I know. I’m sorry, but I just can’t help it.” He looked up at me then, straight in the eye. “Cali. The truth is that I’m never going to be okay seeing you with Greyson. If I’m being really honest, that’s just the way it is.”

I had to admit, I was surprised. “But… But it was your and Greyson’s idea in the first place!” I stammered.

Xavier sighed heavily. “I know,” he mumbled, sounding defeated. “I know that.”

“Okay, then.” I didn’t want to press on, but I had to make sure he understood. “You know,” I began, making my voice firm and gentle, “if you actually want this arrangement to work, you’re going to have to do a much better job with at least *trying* to pretend you’re okay with it. I mean, didn’t you two agree to this because you wanted to make things easier for me? For each other? Let me tell you—you getting into a shitty mood and throwing a fit every time you see Greyson and me together is actually making this *so much harder* for me!”

Xavier turned his face away and huffed a little. “So what, Cali? Are you saying I’m jealous or something?”

I didn’t bother replying. I just shot him a look that said it all.

Xavier bristled. “So what? What if I am? There’s nothing I can do about it. It’s just how I feel.” He turned to face me, and I could see that he was getting worked up again. “Or would you rather I keep my emotions inside and not tell you how I’m feeling? Is that what you want?”

I took a breath and paused, hoping the moment would calm us both down.

“No, of course not,” I admitted. “If something’s upsetting you, then obviously I want to know about it.”

Xavier swallowed. “Well in that case, I’m sorry if I’m not going about it in the best way possible. But the thing is, Cali, when it comes to you, I’m always going to be possessive. It’s just the way I am, and it’s just the way things are.” He moved closer to me, and against my will a thrill ran through me. “You know, it’s how I’ve always felt, from the first moment I saw you.”

He came even closer, and his proximity made me shiver. I couldn’t help myself. Xavier was gazing deep into my eyes now.

“Cali, I hope you understand that your happiness is the most important thing in the world to me. So I’m sorry, but it’s just that you… Well, you mean everything to me. You know that, right?” The way he was looking at me took my breath away, I couldn’t even take a breath, let alone form the words to answer him. “But if it means so much to you, then I’m willing to keep working on it. You just have to be patient with me, all right?”

He was so close that I couldn’t even think straight.

“Cali, can you do that?”

**Episode 1636**

VIOLET

I couldn’t believe it. I stared at Iris, who was standing resolutely in front of me and Charlie. Chad—that total asshole—clearly couldn’t believe it either. He’d been standing behind the uniformed man, but now he stepped forward and pointed directly at me.

“She’s not with them! Look at her! She’s a werewolf!”

I had to give Iris some serious credit, she didn’t even bat an eye, only addressed the uniformed man, firmly and clearly.

“It would seem as though your students still need quite a bit more tutelage.” Her voice was cool, disdainful and almost amused. “I assure you that Daisy Blackburn is in fact the daughter of a dear friend of mine, and part of a wonderful hunter family.” Her voice dropped, becoming low, sad and respectful. “You see, her parents were killed.” Iris was amazing. Even I was starting to believe her. “So Daisy is now under my sponsorship, and the poor thing got a bit lost on her way to camp.”

“She’s lying!” Chad burst out. His face had turned beet red, and it was clear that he was furious. “She’s lying! That girl is a werewolf! I’ll bet you anything!”

The uniformed man looked back and forth between Chad and Iris like he was watching a tennis match.

*Oh shit. We’re never going to pull this off.*

Suddenly, Charlie burst into gales of harsh laughter. I turned to him, startled. It sounded so fake and desperate, but Charlie continued to laugh. Then he paused and stared contemptuously at Chad.

“Hey man, I know how much you hate me and are out to get me, but this is going a little too far, isn’t it? I mean, even for you!” Charlie then glanced at Iris and rolled his eyes. “You know, Mom, this guy has been out to get me from like, day one! But I have to say, I didn’t think even he would stoop this low. Just ignore him, he’s a total moron.”

Sophie started laughing at this, and I turned to her, surprised. Meanwhile, Chad had started to protest again.

“Sergeant Pepperdine, sir, listen to me! I’m telling you, this girl is a werewolf. Examine her and you’ll see for yourself!”

But to my relief, the uniformed man—Sergeant Pepperdine—wasn’t buying it. He gave a long-suffering sigh and held up a hand.

“You know what, son? Just can it, okay? I am by no means interested in student spats.” He then turned then to Iris. “You’ll vouch for this girl?”

Here it came. I held my breath; I couldn’t help it. But Iris nodded firmly. “Yes, I will. And what’s more, I think she’ll make an excellent hunter.”

Sergeant Pepperdine sighed again, indicating that he wasn’t paid enough for this shit.

“As you know, we don’t normally accept such late students.” He stared at me, and I did my level best to hold his flat stare. “But given that she’s been backed up by Iris Kim, I am willing, just this once, to make an exception.”

The relief that flooded through me was almost painful.

“But now,” he continued, “we should all focus on getting back to camp. The woods aren’t safe right now.” He turned and addressed Sophie and Chad. “Come along with me.”

Iris, Charlie, and I had no choice but to follow him. As we walked through the woods, I let out a silent breath. I still couldn’t believe it—first that Iris had actually stood up for me (*me*, of all people), and more importantly, that her vouching had actually seemed to work. It was a lot to take in, and I was still feeling pretty shaky and nervous. The whole experience had really thrown me.

We walked in silence for a while, our feet crunching over twigs and leaves. As I was thinking over all that had happened, I noticed that Charlie had dropped back. Now, he came over and discreetly took my hand. My entire body bloomed in heat. How did he always have that effect on me?

He leaned over and asked in a whisper, “Are you okay?”

I nodded, grateful for the warmth of his hand, and for his support. I didn’t know what I would have done if he hadn’t reached out and touched me then, but Charlie and I were so connected he could probably feel how much I needed him. What I really needed was a huge hug. I squeezed his hand harder.

We walked on, and I began to feel just a little better. Charlie at my side tended to do that. Then, up ahead, someone called for Charlie.

“I better get up there,” he said and gave my hand one last squeeze. “I’ll try to be right back.”

I nodded, watching with a sinking heart as he joined Sergeant Pepperdine. Then I noticed that Iris was falling back, coming toward me. *Uh oh.* That couldn’t mean anything good. I looked straight ahead and tried to ignore her, but eventually she fell into step with me, and soon we were walking side by side. She glanced around to make sure we were truly out of earshot before whispering harshly to me.

“Don’t think for a moment that you’re in the clear, *Violet*,” she said. “As far as I’m concerned, I wouldn’t trust you as far as I could throw you.”

*Ouch*. I winced and recoiled. I couldn’t help it.

“But… But I don’t understand.” I kept my voice to a low murmur. “You just helped me. Why?”

Iris scoffed quietly, looking absolutely disgusted. “Yes, I did—and it was all for my son’s sake. *My* *son*. Can you even imagine how it would look to others if he was caught…” She glanced at me with a sour expression, and her lips twisted with unbridled scorn. “*… fraternizing* with a werewolf?”

“Hey, everything good here?” Charlie asked, joining us. I could tell by the look on his face that he’d just heard what his mom said. Shit. He stepped toward his mother. “Are you forgetting that your son is also a werewolf? Imagine what all of your people would say if they learned *that* little fact!”

Iris ignored his comment completely, which I thought was bullshit, since it was a fair point. Instead, she turned to me, her eyes narrowed, her voice as cold as ice.

“As for you, well, now that I’ve had to make up this ridiculous story and vouch for you, let me tell you, *Daisy*—you’d better do a damn good job of sticking to it. Because it’s not just you on the line anymore, is it? If anyone—and I mean *anyone*—finds out your little secret, it won’t just be the end of you. It will be the end of our whole family.”

She gave a low laugh without any humor in it, which further chilled me.

“Don’t you see what an impossible position you’ve put Charlie in by coming here? Your refusal to stay out of his life has been beyond thoughtless and selfish.”

I swallowed roughly and took a step back. It felt like she’d just slapped me in the face. I couldn’t believe how much this woman, Charlie’s mother, hated me.

*Selfish, thoughtless, Charlie and his family’s downfall.*

I blinked my eyes trying not to let her venom affect me. How the hell was I meant to respond to that? *Sorry lady, but I can’t help it if I love your son with my whole heart*?

Charlie, for his part, squeezed my hand tightly, like he was trying to send strength and love through his grasp.

“Can’t you leave Violet alone?” He kept his voice quiet, but it was clearly an effort. He was furious. “Don’t you understand that it’s me who won’t let her go, not the other way around?”

I was truly moved by this and tried to give Charlie a little smile, to show him what his words meant to me. I wanted to tell him how I felt, but I realized that we couldn’t talk anymore—we’d reached the outskirts of the camp.

I felt a little shiver of fear run through me as I took a step out onto the lawn, and silently cursed Iris.

*Damn you, Iris! I know you were put on the spot, but couldn’t you have come up with a better excuse?*

It was one thing to sneak around the camp, but it would be entirely another to actually fit in. It felt like I was deliberately walking straight into the lion’s den. I stared around the grounds and was filled with dread.

*This place was built to kill people like me.*

It was a terrible, chilling thought. Right on cue, as if he’d heard my thoughts, Sergeant Pepperdine walked up to me and gave me one of the grimmest smiles that I’d ever had the misfortune of seeing.

“Welcome to hunter’s camp, Daisy Blackburn.” He took a few steps closer. “And just so you and I are crystal clear, you should understand that just because Iris Kim vouched for you, doesn’t mean that I won’t be keeping a very close eye on you. Understood?”

**Episode 1637**

I couldn’t help but be truly touched. I could tell that Xavier was making a real effort with me, and with the situation. It was truly a sight to behold.

“Yes.” My voice was soft with the effort of holding back my emotions. “All right, Xavier. I can be patient with you.”

Xavier studied my face intently, as if trying to memorize my expression, to see what lay beneath. If I really meant it.

“Yes, Cali? Are you sure?”

I nodded again. I’d been patient this far, hadn’t I? I’d been patient when we’d first met and his wolf had to come back. I cleared my throat. I needed to tell him how I felt. I had to tell him now.

“Xavier, don’t you know? I’d do anything in the world if it means I won’t lose you.”

Xavier shook his head, couldn’t seem to find the words. We locked eyes and gazed at each other. He was so beautiful and so close, his eyes full of concern. I couldn’t stop myself from leaning further into him. I’d always found such comfort in his presence, his warmth and masculinity, his tenderness. He’d always been such an anchor for me from the moment we’d become mates.

Xavier tried to clear his throat, too. “Try not to worry. Everything will be all right. We’ll get through all of this.”

I nodded and tried to smile. “I know, I know. You’re right, but…”

“But?” He echoed the word with a faint smile and raised eyebrow. “Doubting me already?”

“*But*,” I continued, “that doesn’t make this situation any easier.”

“I understand,” he murmured. “I get it, I swear, Cali.”

Then his arms were wrapping around me, holding me close, cradling me. I fought it, but all too soon I was planting kisses up his neck and searching for his mouth, and once I found it, I couldn’t help but take comfort from his warm, soft lips, which pressed themselves to mine. He needed to feel how much I cared for him. How much I appreciated what he was trying to do for me.

His kiss was tender at first, his lips so gentle on my own, delicate and sweet. He kissed my lower lip, and then my upper one, taking his time, not pushing or rushing it. I savored the sweetness, but I was getting more impatient by the second. Xavier took his time kissing each corner of my mouth, and my lips tilted up into a small smile. It was too much, too delicious. My lips parted, my mouth opened, my hand grabbing a fistful of his shirt. I wanted more. I wanted to be utterly consumed and enveloped by his kiss.

By him.

He obliged finally, deepening our kiss. His tongue darted along with mine as he wrapped an arm around me for support. Together, we moved into a beautiful movement, a rhythm, deep and intimate. I felt the raw passion behind his kiss, but I could tell he was restraining himself. Underneath my touch he was tense. He was holding back. I didn’t want him to.

Was he worried about overwhelming me? I was ready and willing to be overwhelmed.

I wanted to live in his kiss, to live in this moment of his lips and tongue and him forever and ever and ever. He was giving all of himself to me. Surrendering himself in a kiss so passionate my body felt engulfed in flames.

Eventually, we broke apart, and I buried myself in his chest, breathing in his clean scent. Xavier wrapped his arms around me, and I could hear the strong, steady beating of his heart, which echoed mine. I closed my eyes, and for a few shared heartbeats, I was content to stay there. I wanted to stay here like this with him forever.

But then the guilt started to seep in like some toxic, sludgy poison, dark and slick and staining everything in its path.

How could Xavier and I kiss like that when Greyson was in such pain? I knew in my bones that it was wrong… But was it? If it comforted me too? God, I was so messed up by all of this. The *due destini* had a cruel sense of humor. I didn’t think I’d be able to handle this situation for much longer. Xavier, of course, sensed the shift in my mood.

“Cali, what’s wrong? Are you okay?”

I wanted to be honest with him. Wanted to let him know how I really felt. But before I began to speak, I stopped myself. If Xavier could swallow how much he hurt whenever he saw me with Greyson, then I was going to have to swallow how much it hurt to think about causing either of them pain. It was so hard, though.

I shut my eyes again and felt a small sharp stab of agony in my heart as the thought came to me clearly.

*No matter what we do, there just isn’t any solution that won’t hurt either of them.*

But if Xavier was doing the work—or trying his best to—the least I could do was try to make sure that when I was with him or Greyson I was truly present, and not thinking about the other man. With a considerable effort, I pushed all thoughts of Greyson and what he might be going through down. Then I turned back toward Xavier and smiled at him.

He smiled back, and it both filled and broke my heart.

“You’re amazing, Cali,” he told me, and gently kissed the top of my head.

I tried to let myself relax and enjoy this moment—

Someone knocked on the door, and I bolted up immediately.

*Oh dear god, please don’t let it be Greyson. Please god, I just can’t handle any more today…*

But to my relief, Rishika’s voice came floating through.

“Cali, are you in there? Cali? Can I come in?”

My relief was quickly replaced with concern—Rishika sounded really worried. *Uh oh*. Was it Artemis? I hoped she was okay.

I leapt off the bed, moved swiftly to the door, and wrenched it open.

“Rishika, what’s going on? Is everything okay? Is Artemis all right?”

I’d acted without thinking—not that that was too unusual, but now I felt a little embarrassed. I realized that my clothes were pretty disheveled, and my hair was messed up. One look at Rishika though, and I could tell that she was totally distracted and couldn’t have cared less about my appearance. She shot a glance at Xavier.

“Hey Cali, do you mind if you and I talk alone?” she asked. “Just for a moment?”

I turned back to Xavier who nodded. “You should go,” he said. “I’ll be here.”

I nodded, and Rishika and I headed back to her room. I peered inside and saw that it was empty. Artemis wasn’t there. What was going on?

“So… uh…” Rishika looked incredibly uncomfortable and awkward—hardly a natural state for her. “I have something to ask you.”

“Sure.” I tried to keep my voice level and calm, but I was getting nervous.

“I just… I just wanted to know…” She paused for a long while before suddenly blurting out, “Has Artemis said anything to you about me?”

I blinked. What did she mean? She must have seen the confused expression on my face.

“I mean, uh… Like, about *us*?”

“Oh!” I paused, trying to think how to answer.

This was not exactly what I had expected.

I’d honestly been expecting some horrible new supernatural development. Or something along the lines of, “Oh no! We’re in danger! Artemis is running around with a kebob skewer with a goldfish on it claiming to be queen of the world!” I would’ve been prepared for something like that, not this. I couldn’t help but feel relieved that this sounded like a totally ordinary problem. I thought back and drew a complete blank.

“No,” I answered cautiously. “Not that I can think of.” I glanced at Rishika’s face—she didn’t look happy. “Why? Did something happen?”

Rishika hesitated, clearly uncertain how to answer. “You know, I’m not sure. I guess Artemis thinks that maybe we’re moving too fast?” She gazed at me hopefully, needing answers that I couldn’t give her. “What do you think?”

Oh no. I didn’t want to go there. I couldn’t possibly speak for Artemis—especially because I had no idea what she thought about her and Rishika. And what if I screwed something up? That would suck, since I was such a huge fan of the two of them together, but sisterly boundaries and… whatever. I didn’t know. I was still pretty new to this sister thing.

I took a deep breath and tried to work out a neutral answer that would keep Rishika happy without actually saying anything.

But before I had a chance to reply, we heard a loud bang from downstairs.

We both jumped and spun around.

It was Ravi, and he must have been yelling pretty loudly, since the sound of his panicked voice came wafting up all the way to the top of the house. It sent a chill down my spine.

“Somebody! Anybody! Please, help me! Someone’s after me!”

**Episode 1638**

We all gathered around a shaken Ravi, offering as much moral support as we could as we questioned him about what had happened. He was soaking wet and had a look in his eye like he’d just seen a ghost. His teeth were chattering, and he was still shivering, even though Mrs. Smith had covered him with a thick flannel blanket.

“I was out in the woods—no idea how I got there—and a strange woman tried to attack me!” he spluttered.

“A strange woman?” Big Mac urged. “Describe her. What exactly did she look like?”

“Have you seen her before?” Greyson chimed in.

“Did she use her bare hands like a badass, or did she have weapons and stuff?” Torin asked, his eyes wide. Big Mac shot him a look. “Never mind!” he said quickly, before stepping back behind the others to shield himself from Big Mac’s wrath.

Artemis appeared in the doorway, her eyebrow knitted in confusion as she took in the scene.

“That’s her!” Ravi exclaimed, pointing a shaky finger right at Artemis. He recoiled and burrowed deeper and deeper into his blanket like he was afraid she might attack him right then and there. “That’s who attacked me!” He ducked his head and averted his gaze from Artemis, clearly afraid to make eye contact with her.

*What’s going on? Ravi knows Artemis, he’s fought beside her in battle.*

Artemis looked shocked at the accusation, and I tried to wrap my head around the idea that Artemis had actually done what Ravi was accusing her of. He was probably delirious. After what he’d been through, he probably didn’t even know which way was up.

“Um, don’t you remember Artemis, Ravi?” Greyson asked, looking as confused and taken aback as I felt. “Did something happen between you two?”

Silence fell over the room as everyone looked at Artemis and Ravi. I couldn’t help but notice the suspicious look on Big Mac’s face. Great. That was all I needed—another person getting Big Mac’s hackles up about my sister.

“I didn’t attack anyone,” Artemis said, perplexed. “I was just out for a walk, trying to clear my head.”

Big Mac heaved a big sigh and made a face that I didn’t like one bit. It was the look someone gave when they didn’t believe a word another person was saying. Wasn’t a girl allowed to go for a walk without sinister intentions?

“I came across Ravi out in the woods. He looked completely confused and lost. I was just worried about him. When I tried to ask if he was okay, he totally flipped out on me,” Artemis explained.

Greyson stepped forward, and I wondered if I was the only one who saw the cloud of pain that passed quickly over his features.

“Ravi, what happened in the woods?” Greyson paused and shot a confused glance at Artemis. “This woman is Cali’s sister. You remember her, right? You know her?”

“Yes, and my sister wouldn’t hurt anyone in this pack,” I said quickly, prompting Big Mac to roll her eyes at me. The bonding moment we’d shared not too long ago seemed a million miles away, now. Clearly, I was back to being a thorn in her side.

“Why did you run from her? Did Artemis actually attack you?” Greyson asked.

Ravi shook his head. He pulled the blanket tighter around him and looked down at his feet. “No, but I felt like something was about to,” he finished weakly.

“See? He clearly didn’t know who I was. He’d just fallen into this pool of water, and I wanted to help him,” Artemis said.

Big Mac cut her eyes at Artemis. “A pool of water? You mean the strange pool at the foot of the twisted tree?” she asked sharply. She turned to Ravi. “What were you doing in the pool? Did you fall in? Did someone push you?”

Ravi hesitated again, his eyes ricocheting back and forth between his feet and Big Mac. I felt sorry for him. He was trying to get over whatever had happened, and all the while we were lobbing questions at him like a firing squad.

“I’m not exactly sure,” Ravi muttered. “I can’t even really remember why I was in the woods to begin with.”

“Loss of memory seems to be a new thing the pond can do,” Greyson said, almost to himself. He looked over at Xavier, who had a neutral expression on his face. I could tell that he was just taking everything in before he made a decision about what he thought of all this. “Xavier, did anything like this happen last time you came across that pool? The one you think might be a portal?”

“No,” Xavier said. “I don’t know what’s different this time.”

“I wouldn’t have just gone over there myself without a reason. She must have lured me out there,” Ravi said, pointing at Artemis again.

His shivering had worsened into body-wracking tremors, and I was starting to wonder if he was going to recover from this latest mishap. He’d been through a lot, even before whatever had just happened out in the woods. He was undoubtedly still mourning Joss, still trying to get some semblance of normalcy back. *If he wanted normalcy, he shouldn’t have come here*,I thought bitterly. I knew as well as anyone that dealing with one crazy thing after another could really take its toll.

“What is he *talking* about?” Artemis said, her top lip curling. “Why would I want to lure Ravi out into the woods?”

Big Mac peered at Artemis, her eyes narrowed. “Well, what exactly *were* you doing out by that pool at night? We all know it’s a portal of some kind, and both Ravi and Xavier already warned us about it. Most sensible people would steer clear until we knew exactly what we were dealing with.”

Artemis paused, as if searching for an answer that wouldn’t send Big Mac further down the rabbit hole. But Big Mac had a point. It *was* odd that of all the places to go for a walk it just happened to be near the creepy ghost pond.

“Like I told all of you before,” she finally said, “I was out taking a walk, trying to clear my head. I heard a commotion, something that sounded like someone in distress, so I went to help.”

She’d been a little out of sorts lately. I thought back to the time when I’d slept in Artemis’s room to keep watch over her. She’d disappeared the next morning only to appear out of nowhere, in her bathrobe, apparently fresh out of the shower, looking just as confused as she was now. History was repeating itself, it seemed.

Ravi was clearly telling the truth—that he didn’t remember exactly what happened—and as much as I didn’t want to admit it, it *was* weird that Artemis had just happened to be out there. The woods were vast, and there were plenty of better places to clear one’s mind than near a portal pool. An uneasiness crept into my stomach. This seemed like a clear example of dark magic at work.

Greyson pinched the bridge of his nose as he considered everyone, his jaw set in thought. “Ravi, Artemis, come with me. Everyone else, try to get some rest. It’s been a long day,” he said.

It was obvious that he wanted everyone to disperse, and thankfully, everyone took the hint. As everyone started to file out, talking among themselves and casting concerned looks back at Ravi, I saw Rishika pull Artemis aside. She had a concerned look on her face and a pleading look in her eyes. Without trying to, I overheard their hushed conversation.

“What’s going on, Artemis? Why did you run off like that? Did I do something wrong?” Rishika asked.

I cursed to myself, hoping that everything was okay between them. Rishika was good for Artemis—she looked out for her when I couldn’t, and she made Artemis the happiest I’d seen her since she’d left her home in the Fae world. Still, I felt weird eavesdropping on what was clearly a private conversation, so I turned to make my way out as well.

Xavier intercepted me at the foot of the stairs. He nodded toward Artemis and Rishika. “What’s going on there?” he whispered. “Did Rishika want to talk to you about Artemis earlier?” He lowered his voice even more. “If she’s been acting strangely, no matter how small it might seem, we need to know about it, Cali.”

I shook my head. “It wasn’t like that. In fact, it was something quite… normal, considering. It sounded like they’d had some sort of fight, a lover’s quarrel,” I said. “That would explain Artemis’s need to get some fresh air and clear her head. Maybe they’re in a rough patch or something.”

I wanted to tell him that I had my concerns, too—that I believed Ravi, and that I had a sinking feeling that there might be dark magic at play here, but I needed to think all of that over on my own before I told Xavier, or Greyson. Once they got wind of something, they tended to fly off in a frenzy trying to fix everything, and I didn’t need that right now—not until I figured out what exactly was going on.

Without meaning to, my ears tuned back in to Artemis and Rishika’s conversation, just in time to hear Artemis say, “It’s over, Rishika.”

I was completely shocked. *Are they breaking up?*

**Episode 1639**

MARTA

The sight of York standing there with his eyes glowing as orange as a setting sun made my breath catch in my throat. Where had he come from? Lilac and I gasped and shrank away from the door. More than anything, I wished that Lilac were here in the flesh so that I could grab his hand for comfort. My mind raced, trying to figure out how we were going to get ourselves out of this.

Lilac hovered close beside me. “What do we do?”

Though my mind was moving a mile a minute, the rest of me was frozen in place, and so was Lilac. The few ideas I came up with would only thrust us deeper into danger, and I wasn’t exactly sure of what York was capable of. The one thing I managed to do was slide Lilac’s necklace into my pocket as slyly as I could. There was no way I was going to lose it after taking such a risk to come get it—a risk that was getting deadlier by the moment.

“You shouldn’t be here,” York said, advancing farther into the room, closer to where we stood. His voice sounded like a thousand voices rasping at once, and terror snaked through my chest.

I didn’t know how to respond to him, or even if I should. The thought crossed my mind that we were on our own. Completely. No one knew we were here, and so no one was coming to save us.

“Look out the window!” I whispered to Lilac. “See if I can jump out and onto something without hurting myself.”

York’s eyes flickered over to Lilac. For a second, I was surprised that he could see him, but York was a revenant, after all. Lilac was probably closer to York’s world than my own.

York snarled and leapt forward before Lilac could move an inch. I screamed and dodged out of the way, landing awkwardly and scrambling to keep my balance. Lilac’s wolf appeared at my side—I still wasn’t used to that—and even in the throes of this very present danger, I couldn’t help but admire how beautiful it was.

*Get a grip, this isn’t the time to swoon over Lilac’s wolf!* I scolded myself as York came at me again, driving that point home. I managed to dodge again, but it wasn’t lost on me that I’d come dangerously close to being snapped into York’s clutches. I shook with terror, panic scrambling my thoughts. I was a lot of things, but a fighter wasn’t one of them.

York whirled to attack again, this time with his sights trained on Lilac. Lilac moved to dodge, but he wasn’t quick enough. To my horror, York easily grabbed hold of Lilac, proving that not only could York see him, he could touch him as well. Lilac cried out in panic—and at the sound of his distress, fury blossomed in my chest, replacing the fear that had been there only a millisecond before.

In the next instant, swirling ghosts filled the room, their faces drawn and white in the darkness. In the back of my mind, I knew they’d appeared because of the intensity of my emotion. I’d conjured them out of thin air, just like I had when Artemis had choked me. It seemed that being a medium came in handy in really tough spots.

The thick shroud of ghosts took York by surprise, which allowed Lilac’s wolf to jerk out of his grasp. Lilac snarled and lunged toward York, his magnificently sharp teeth bared as he advanced with impressive menace. York stumbled back, his hands up like he was protecting his throat as he cowered away from Lilac, his glowing orange eyes wide with fear.

My own fear had melted away completely, and I was in the zone now. I closed my eyes, sensing all of the power radiating from the ghosts whirling around me. I took a deep breath and let all that power flow into me. It felt like liquid electricity as it filled me with a boldness and clarity I’d never felt before. I opened my eyes, and when York yelped and cringed away from me, I knew that he could see that power written all over my face. I smiled. It was his turn to be afraid of *me*.

I loved watching him squirm as I lifted my hands, not thinking of letting him get away for a moment. I channeled my crackling power into the tips of my fingers and loosed a stream of brilliant white light right at York, illuminating the entire room, maybe the entire house. It was beautiful. York tried to leap out of the way, but he wasn’t fast enough. The beam tore into his arm, tossing him back against the wall with a satisfying crack.

Lilac and I watched in fascination as his arm seemed to disintegrate in a puff of sizzling smoke. York looked down at where his arm used to be, his mouth drawn in terror, and then his eyes met mine, clearly questioning who the hell I was.

“I’m your worst fucking nightmare!” I cackled, drunk on the power that coursed through me. I’d never felt this strong, this powerful, this… *happy*. I wished I’d known how badass I was during all those years I’d been trapped with Bert.

York scrambled to his feet and took off out of the room, his screams echoing down the hallway as he went. It was unbelievable to think that only a few minutes ago, I’d nearly given up, so wracked with fear that I couldn’t imagine getting out of this alive.

Almost as if my body sensed that the danger was gone, I sagged to the floor, completely spent. The ghosts disappeared as quickly as they’d come, and in the calm silence they left behind, it was almost as if they’d never been there in the first place. The only sign that any of it had happened was the spray of black soot against the wall from me burning York’s arm to a crisp. I smiled to myself as I thought of it. It couldn’t have happened to a worse guy—or whatever he was.

I looked up to see Lilac staring down me at in amazement, his mouth agape. I was still a bit in shock at how quickly things had escalated. We sat there for a few moments, our eyes locked, breathing heavy.

“That. Was. *Awesome*,” Lilac finally said, his eyes ablaze with reverence. “Marta, I wish you could have seen that through my eyes. You looked like some sort of… of… ancient goddess!”

My cheeks warmed, and I knew that I was blushing like crazy. Lilac’s admiration was beyond adorable. “I’m not even sure how I did it,” I said shyly. “It just kind of came to me.”

Lilac stooped down and made a ghostly grab for my hands. It didn’t connect, but I knew what he was going for. “But you did it before, remember?” He was getting more and more excited. “Marta, don’t you see how powerful you are?”

He beamed at me, and I was reminded, yet again, of how absolutely handsome he was. Especially when he smiled.

“I’m not so sure about that,” I said demurely, ducking my head and trying to control my own smile, which seemed to be stretching my cheeks to their limit. “Don’t get too excited,” I warned. “Like I said, it just sorta happened, so I’m not sure if I’d be able to do it on purpose. It kind of felt like something that happens, like it was out of my control.”

“Well think—what exactly triggered it this time?” Lilac pressed.

I thought back, remembering the surge of emotion that had dashed all the fear and uncertainty from my body, leaving focus and fury in their place. “It was when he attacked you. It made me so angry… I was so worried that he was going to hurt you.”

I felt a familiar sting behind my eyes. I wasn’t going to cry now, was I? It hit me then, that the tears were from *worry*. That was a wholly new emotion. I couldn’t bear the thought of anything happening to Lilac—he’d already been through enough, and despite it all, he always kept the brightest attitude. For the first time, I realized how much I admired that—even if it got on my nerves sometimes.

Lilac seemed to be taking in what I was saying, and I wondered if, like me, he was pondering how the connection between us seemed to be growing stronger each day—despite my best efforts to push it out of the way.

“You were worried about me?” he asked, his voice low.

Like a knee-jerk reaction to the thought of us getting too close, my walls shot up again. He sounded so intense. “Well, if you’re trying to get me to admit that I like you…”

Lilac wasn’t interested in making light of the situation. His expression remained serious, and he leaned in close, looking me directly in the eyes. “Do you?”

**Episode 1640**

LOLA

I could tell by the look on Jay’s face that he was getting more upset as the seconds ticked by.

He repeated his question to Emmett. “Where did my wolf go?”

Emmett flinched at the pure hysteria in Jay’s voice. He shook his head. “I have no idea, Jay.”

It hurt me to see Jay in this much distress. I’d lost my wolf, too, so I knew exactly how hopeless he was feeling. I wouldn’t wish that pain on anyone—it was one of the worst things I’d ever gone through, and to think that Jay was going through it too… It tore at my heart.

“Well, it obviously has something to do with your serum! It can’t be a coincidence that I was doused in your—your—mad scientist goo, and now my wolf’s disappeared!” Jay buried his face in his hands.

Emmett stroked his chin as he considered Jay. He looked like a scientist eyeing a lab rat. “Very interesting,” he said in a low voice, almost as if he were talking to himself.

“*Interesting?*” Jay shouted, fury reddening his cheeks. “This is *interesting* to you? When I agreed to stay here so that you could experiment on me, obviously I didn’t have any idea that something like this could happen!”

Jay was losing it, and I didn’t blame him one bit. I felt horrible, and more than a little guilty. The only reason Jay had even come to this place was because of me, and he’d only agreed to Emmett’s experiments and hanging around in his lab because it allowed him to be closer to me, to keep me safe.

If I hadn’t been overcome with vampire heat, we never would have made out like wild animals and knocked the serum onto his arm in the first place. He was my mate, and even though I still didn’t have the memories to understand exactly what that meant, it didn’t take a rocket scientist to know that we were supposed to look out for each other, and that I should have been better about watching out for him.

“I’m sorry, that’s not what I meant,” Emmett said, trying his best to placate Jay, who looked like he was seconds from tackling Emmett to the ground. “Besides, it’s not like I actually strapped you down and administered the serum. If you had actually done what you were supposed to, and been more careful instead of engaging in shenanigans in my lab with your girlfriend—”

“My *mate*!” Jay cut in.

“With your mate,” Emmett corrected derisively, “then none of this would have happened.”

“Or we could already assume we feel bad enough about the whole thing,” I said, my guilt level rising. Though what Emmett had said was true, it wasn’t helping, and it was majorly unfair of him to blame Jay for his current state. Besides, what kind of scientist left a serum that powerful sitting out on a desk unattended?

Jay shot up from his seat to get in Emmett’s face. I braced myself, wondering if they were going to start fighting again. Jay’s hands were balled into fists, his chest was heaving, and he had a wild look in his eye. I knew that I should probably try to stop them, but I had to admit that Jay looked pretty hot when he was all riled up.

Emmett threw up his hands in surrender, clearly not looking for a fight. “Calm down, Jay. It’s going to be all right. Let’s be levelheaded about this and try to get to the bottom of it.”

I snuck a glance at Winifred, struck by how out of place she looked. She was just sitting there, her hands crossed in her lap, placid and emotionless—like two men *weren’t* on the brink of coming to blows not three feet away from her. Something about it really creeped me out.

I gestured toward her and looked at Emmett. “What exactly is going on with her? It’s like Jacqueline all over again. How does the serum work on revenants, exactly?”

Emmett shook his head again. “I’m still not quite sure, I’m sorry to say, but believe me, I’m hoping to find out. You remember how I told you about the high hopes that I had for the serum? That I hoped it would offer vampires a chance to have a more human experience? That it would, even temporarily, give them all the experiences and sensations that they might miss from being human—like having a heartbeat, craving and enjoying human food, et cetera? An opportunity to actually be alive again?”

I nodded. How could I forget? It was one of the most intriguing things about Emmett, that he was on the verge of figuring out how to give a virtually inhuman existence some very human elements.

“It was the entire reason I was so intrigued by you in the first place, Lola. You are, basically, the very thing that I hoped to create with my serum: a ‘living’ vampire,” Emmett said, his eyes shining.

I frowned at him. “Yes, I remember all that, but it still doesn’t explain why the serum would affect revenants the way it does.”

“But doesn’t it make sense if you really think about it? Maybe it affects them this way because vampires are dead—and so are revenants from what you’re telling me. Perhaps something about giving the revenants a heartbeat forces out the dark magic,” Emmett theorized. He *really* looked like a mad scientist now.

I stared at Winifred. She was still sitting there, stock still, as if in a trance. *Is she even following what we’re saying? She looks like she’s watching paint dry.* I sighed and looked back at Emmett.

“If vampires can be affected by this, then who’s to say it won’t spread?” I demanded. “Couldn’t this turn into a much bigger problem?”

I shuddered at the thought of a school full of out-of-control vampires possessed by dark magic. It sounded… less than ideal. In fact, it sounded like a complete nightmare.

“Um, *hello*?” Jay said, glancing between me and Emmett. “All this postulating is interesting and all—very, very impressive, really—but I’m kind of freaking out over here!”

That was an understatement. He was clearly in panic mode, and again, my heart went out to him. I felt like I was in a perfect position to know what to say, except there wasn’t anything “right” to say when you lost your wolf. It was too deep and painful a loss. I still struggled with it all the time.

“I don’t care what Irma said. I’m not leaving,” Jay continued. “There’s clearly something big going on here, and I’m not leaving until I can be sure that Lola’s safe—and I get my damn wolf back! If Irma wants me gone, she’s going to have to drag out my rotting, stinking corpse!”

I winced. He was being a little dramatic, but again, I couldn’t blame him. Then it hit me. *If he doesn’t have his wolf anymore, he’s basically a defenseless human in a school full of potentially murderous vampires.*

I took his hands in mine, a little panicked myself now that the full reality of the situation had dawned on me. “Jay, I know how you feel, but maybe it’s too dangerous here for you now—”

Jay cut me off with a fierce look. “If you think I’m leaving you here alone in this hell house, you’d better think again. I’m not going anywhere!”

I was touched. *Sheesh, this mate shit is no joke.*

Emmett sighed. “Listen you two, it’s late, let’s call it a night. We’ll start looking into this first thing tomorrow.”

I was surprised when Jay agreed. He stood up and stretched, and I could tell that he was working overtime to be calm about everything. I admired his restraint.

“C’mon Lola,” he said, taking my hand.

The contact, as usual, sent a spark of electricity through my body. *Cool your jets, girl, that’s what got us into this mess in the first place.*

We made our way back to my room hand in hand. We didn’t talk much, and I was okay with that. A lot had happened, and I knew that Jay was probably sorting through a wave of conflicting emotions.

Just as we walked into my room, I stopped cold. Images and sensations flooded my mind, one after the other. It was like a floodgate had opened. It was all coming back: images of Jay and me together, in each other’s arms, in the pack house, laughing, walking through the woods—everything! I gasped, and my knees nearly buckled. I sagged against the doorjamb.

“Lola, are you okay?” Jay asked, rushing to my side.

“Jay, I… I remember everything!”

I stared up at his perfect face, his soft lips, his striking eye. He was the most handsome man I’d ever seen in my entire life. How could I ever have forgotten him?

Jay smiled wide and pulled me into his arms. I buried my face in his chest, taking huge breaths of his scent and feeling like I never wanted to be anywhere else but right here in his embrace.

“I knew your memories would come back,” Jay whispered as I pulled away to look up into his eye again. He leaned down, his warm breath tickling my lips.

We were just about to kiss when a sound startled us apart. We followed the sound to the window, both of us peering out into the darkness. We gasped in unison at the sight that met us.

There was a crowd of revenant-vampires outside, their eyes glowing in the darkness.

**Episode 1641**

GREYSON

Xavier and I pulled Ravi aside, managing to ignore the tension that still simmered between us. Xavier poured Ravi a splash of whiskey, which he slammed down in one gulp.

I glanced over to see Artemis and Rishika arguing, and Cali hovering nearby with a concerned look on her beautiful face. She was always so protective of her sister, and because I loved Cali, I was, too. Still, I had to admit that it was more than a little suspicious that Artemis had just happened to be out in the woods at the same time as Ravi—and right in the same spot, no less.

“It’s over!” Artemis said, before storming off.

I looked away, not wanting to embarrass Rishika if she happened to notice that I’d seen all that go down. I needed to focus on Ravi, anyway. At the moment, nothing was more important than figuring out why one of my pack members had woken up in the middle of the woods with no memory of how he’d gotten there.

“So, Ravi, tell me again—start from the beginning. What happened? And are you completely sure that you don’t remember anything? Why did you go out into the woods in the first place?” I prodded.

Ravi shook his head. He still had a shellshocked look on his face, but it seemed like he’d finally warmed up a bit, as he wasn’t shivering as badly as before. Maybe the whiskey had helped. “I don’t know,” he said. “All I remember is crawling out of a pool in the woods.” He lowered his voice. “You know, the pool full of spirits.” He looked haunted and downright spooked. “Do you think someone possessed me, or something?”

“I’m not sure, man,” I replied, fully aware that I did not sound the most comforting or confident. “What I am sure of, though, is that I don’t like the sound of this. I know this is hard, but let’s keep going. When you crawled out of the pool, Artemis came and found you?”

Ravi shook his head. “No, she was just standing there. Like she was waiting for me. But it was weird, I didn’t recognize her. It was like I couldn’t think straight, or something.” Ravi shook his head again and swiped a hand over his face.

Xavier and I exchanged a glance. I could tell that we were both skeptical and unable to sort out how much of Ravi’s story was even true. He was clearly rattled. The type of rattled that could make you remember things differently from how they actually happened.

“You should probably get some sleep, Ravi. Try to relax,” I said.

Ravi gave a brisk nod and got up to leave, but before he walked away, he looked me in the eye. “Look, my memories may be jumbled, but I know how I feel. And right now, all my instincts are telling me one thing: you shouldn’t trust her,” he warned.

When he was gone, Xavier and I sighed in unison, one of those rare moments when were both on the exact same wavelength.

“What do you make of all this?” I asked Xavier.

“I don’t know any more than you do—but what I do know is that pool is trouble.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” Big Mac’s voice rose up behind us.

We turned to face her.

“We know the pool is a portal, so could there be a way for us to seal it off with magic?” I asked her.

Big Mac shook her head. “No,” she said. “If we could do that, believe me, I would’ve been two steps ahead of this thing.”

“Yes, but maybe if you and Kira joined forces and worked together on this—”

Xavier shot me a look—probably because we didn’t even know where Kira was right now. I ignored it and returned my gaze to Big Mac, who had an indignant look on her face.

“It’s not a question of whether or not I’m personally powerful enough to pull something like that off,” she spat, clearly offended. “It’s that portals don’t work that way, and there’s no magic in existence that can do such a thing—but I wouldn’t expect you two to know something like that.”

“Sorry, sorry—I wasn’t implying anything about your prowess, Big Mac, forgive me if I’m grasping at straws here,” I said.

Thoroughly frustrated, I got up and started pacing. I winced as a shock of pain sliced up my leg. I hoped no one noticed exactly what state I was in. What a time to be injured. Big Mac moved in close, uncharacteristic concern in her eyes. I should’ve known that I wouldn’t be able to get anything past her.

“You need to rest,” she said quietly. I waved her off. “Hear me out,” she said, a bit more steel in her voice now that she was doing her best to make sure the others wouldn’t hear. “You’re no good to the pack if you don’t take the time to take care of yourself and let this thing heal.”

I wanted to tell her to buzz off and remind her that I could take care of myself—and had done so for years—but I had to admit that she had a point. Everyone had already gone up to bed, anyway, so it wouldn’t hurt for me to do the same. I gave her a stiff nod and left the room, making a painful beeline for the stairs. I hesitated at the foot of the staircase for a bit, swaying on my feet as the pain in my leg intensified, nearly taking my breath away. I wasn’t looking forward to climbing those stairs. At all.

I took a deep breath and made my way onto the first step. I sagged against the banister, sucking in air through my teeth, louder than I’d intended. The pain was so bad that I was starting to feel a little sick. I gritted my teeth, thinking about the blow my ego had taken earlier when I’d collapsed in front of Xavier. Not my finest moment, by far.

After what seemed like an eternity, I finally made it to the top of the stairs. I was winded, and my leg was throbbing in time with my elevated heartbeat. I started down the hallway, passing by Cali’s room on the way. I saw her inside, pacing back and forth with the same concerned look on her face that she’d had when Rishika and Artemis had been arguing downstairs. Despite how much I was now looking forward to collapsing into bed to sleep off this pain, I tapped lightly on her door and went inside.

“Greyson,” she said, the concern on her face deepening.

“Hey Cali. You should be trying to get some sleep,” I said.

“I know,” she said. “But I think Artemis and Rishika just broke up.”

I sighed, replaying their conversation in my head. “Yeah… I saw that, too. Still, that’s not your concern. They’re adults. They’ll figure all that out on their own.”

Cali didn’t respond right away. Her eyes shot to my leg and then back up to meet my gaze. “How are you doing? Your leg…”

“I’m fine. At least I will be. Big Mac did a spell to help kickstart my werewolf healing so that it can take care of the wound. I don’t want you worrying about me. Promise me that you won’t?”

Cali came closer to me, a playful smile on her lips. “Me? Not worry? Do you even know me?”

I chuckled. She had me there. I reached out and trailed a finger down her soft cheek. *Oh, I know her, all right.* I couldn’t help myself. I leaned in and pressed a gentle kiss on her lips. For a second, I forgot everything—the tortured look in Ravi’s eyes, my awkwardness with Xavier, the pulsing pain of the wound on my leg. Whenever I was with her like this, nothing else seemed to matter.

I pulled away before the kiss could intensify. I wished that I could ask her to come and spend the night with me again, but I didn’t want to push. I knew she’d been struggling with our arrangement lately, and I didn’t want to put even more pressure on her. She needed to be free to make her own decisions about who she wanted to spend time with without either of us trying to force her in either direction. We owed her that much, at least.

In the end, I just smiled at her and placed another soft kiss on her forehead. I got a whiff of her shampoo, and my heartbeat quickened.

“Try to get some sleep, Cali,” I said. “For me.”

She smiled up at me and nodded. She shut the door softly behind me as I left, which was great, because it meant she couldn’t see how bad my limp had gotten as I made my way to my room. I clicked on my light and shut the door. I couldn’t help but notice how disappointingly empty the room looked without Cali.

I slid out of my clothes and was just about to turn down the covers when I saw something out of the corner of my eye and froze.

*Silas*.

He was standing with his back to me, looking through my bookshelf like there was absolutely nothing strange about him being here. Then he turned to look at me. “Hello son.”

**Episode 1642**

LOLA

Jay and I gasped, stumbling back from the window in horror. *Please let that be a hallucination!* I hoped with every fiber of my being that my eyes were deceiving me, but I knew what I’d seen. I crept back to the window, ducking down low so that they wouldn’t see me looking out at them. What the hell were they doing standing out there like that? What if they were getting ready to scale the wall like something straight out of a zombie movie?

I leaned up a bit to hazard a closer look. No, they weren’t coming up the wall, but the reality was much creepier. They were all still unmoving, lined up in orderly rows, swaying ever so slightly, blank looks on their faces. Their skin shone ghoulishly in the moonlight, and their glowing orange eyes were like dozens of tiny lanterns blazing in the night.

It sent a chill down my spine. I fought to keep my breathing steady, wondering if they could hear how hard I was panting in fight. To calm myself, I reached out to take Jay’s hand. He was looking now, too, and we both watched, completely spellbound, as more and more revenants poured in through the garden gate until the entire courtyard was full of them. It reminded me of an army getting into formation.

I felt a breeze prickle across my skin, and I realized that the window was open just a crack, which meant that they were all so completely and unnaturally silent that you could’ve heard a pin drop. I gave Jay a look and pointed at the partially open window, letting him know that we’d better not make a sound, either. We were quite a way up, but for all I knew, they had supersonic hearing—which might not have been too far off, since my own hearing had sharpened further since I’d become a vampire.

I nearly gasped when, among the rows of unfamiliar revenant faces, I spotted Irma. I couldn’t believe it. It was strange seeing the same woman who’d scolded Jay and me standing out there now, with burning orange eyes and a face completely devoid of emotion. Irma took a small step forward, and every other revenant head snapped around to look at her.

*Oh my god, is she in charge of them?* I suddenly felt dizzy, and I stumbled back from the window as my arms and legs numbed with shock. *Oh shit, this is really bad.* Unable to look away for long, I crawled back and looked again, only to see them start to file out of the courtyard, just as quickly as they’d come. I wondered how long they’d been out there, and what they were up to.

Before she went through the gate, Irma turned and shot a glance in our direction. Jay and I barely had enough time to duck down out of sight.

“Stay away from the window!” I hissed at Jay, thinking that any minute now Irma was going to come crashing through said window with her fangs bared, just like Jacqueline and Winifred.

I shuddered at the memory of Winifred chasing Jay and me down the hallway, gaining on us so fast that I was still surprised we’d managed to get away—barely. I had no doubt that if she’d gotten her hands on us, she wouldn’t have hesitated to kill us. I didn’t think I could handle being chased by another possessed vampire. I’d had enough of that to last a lifetime. The thought of all those vampires coming at us at once sent another shudder racing through me.

We waited, not moving and barely breathing. Staying low, I tiptoed over to the bedroom door and double-checked that it was locked.

I turned to look at Jay. “Did you see Irma out there? If she’s somehow in charge of these things, this entire school is totally screwed.”

I’d suggested that very scenario to Emmett—that this whole revenant thing might have taken control of more people than we could imagine. It had seemed like a scary, but far out, possibility, but now I knew the truth.

“Definitely screwed,” Jay agreed. “I saw Irma all right, and I’m freaked, too. They were just standing there, almost like they were waiting for something. This is a fucking nightmare.” Jay shook his head. I doubted either of us would ever forget what we’d seen. I couldn’t remember ever having seen Jay so afraid, which said a lot, since we’d been through some pretty crazy things together. He was just always so levelheaded and composed. “What should we do now?” he asked.

“I’m not sure, but I’m sure as hell not leaving this nice, safe, locked room.” I glanced at the window. “Even though we can’t see them, I know they’re still out there.” I shivered. I never would’ve thought that seeing them nearly motionless and calm would somehow be scarier than seeing them in action. “Let’s wait it out until morning, and then we can tell Emmett what we saw. It’s obvious that they’re planning something. That looked like some sort of meeting, didn’t it?” I was pacing back and forth, trying to calm the panic that was still fluttering around in my stomach. “I don’t understand what it all means, or why it’s happening now.”

“Do we know if we can trust Emmett? I mean, it’s a little weird that he’s been experimenting with all these creepy serums and now this is happening. Not to mention, anyone who has a serum that can completely take a werewolf’s wolf away should be handled with caution,” Jay said.

He had a point, but somehow, I couldn’t see Emmett having a hand in this whole revenant-vampire thing. Among other things, he was too invested in the success of vampires and improving their station to turn them into the creepy, mindless shells we’d seen tonight.

I shook my head. “I get what you mean, but you said that this is happening at the pack house, too. There’s no way that Emmett could have caused that, as well. I think it’s pretty clear that whatever’s happening, it’s bigger than any of us.”

“Okay. I’ll take your word for it.” Jay snuck a look at the window. “Do you think I should check to make sure Irma’s not still out there?”

“I don’t know…”

“If I don’t, I’ll worry about it all night,” Jay said. “I’ll stay down and be super careful.”

He was so brave. If I hadn’t been absolutely terrified, I might have found it hot that he was willing to take a risk to bring us even a shred of peace of mind. I held my breath as I watched him literally crawl over and peek out of the window.

“She’s gone. They all are.” He sighed.

He came to sit beside me, and we stared at each other, not speaking, though I knew both of our minds were racing.

“Jay, what do we do now?” I asked.

I was getting more and more stressed, and I was right on the verge of freaking out. Ever since I’d come to this school, it had been one thing after the other. I’d come here hoping for a calm, quiet place to learn to control my newfound vampirism, and all I’d learned was that the world was even more dangerous and unpredictable than I’d thought.

Jay’s gaze softened, and I knew that he could tell I’d reached the end of my rope. He gathered me into his arms. “Whatever happens, as long as we stick together, we’ll be all right.”

I looked him in the eye, struck by all the memories of him that had come flooding back. With the shock of seeing the revenants outside, I’d almost forgotten, but seeing his face made it all rush to the surface again, and I was grateful. I was so lucky to have him, and I chided myself for ever agreeing to go along with anything that would lessen our connection, even temporarily. I reached up and touched his face.

“I never want to lose you again,” I breathed.

“You never will,” he said, placing a soft kiss on my lips. “We’ll make it through this together.”

In his arms, I felt safe and protected, so much so that I could feel myself relaxing, little by little. I couldn’t imagine seeing something like that while I was alone. I probably would have lost my mind immediately. I was so happy that Jay had come to see me. Having him at my side made me feel like everything was going to be okay.

I kissed him again, hungrily, wanting to blot out all memories of the awful, terrifying thing we’d witnessed. I moaned as I got lost in his kiss, in his scent, in simply having him near.

We got up from the floor, still wrapped up in our embrace, our lips never breaking from one another’s as we tumbled carelessly onto the bed.

**Episode 1643**

GREYSON

I stared at my father in absolute shock. He was just standing there at the bookcase, looking more alive than ever. My head was spinning, and I became acutely aware of everyone in the pack house, all asleep, all unsuspecting. *Should I call out and alert them?* No. Something told me that this was something that I had to handle myself, as an Alpha. I took a step forward, bracing myself for whatever he might have up his sleeve.

“What are you doing here, Silas?”

Silas looked at me and tilted his head to the side. “Don’t you know?”

I was confused, but I kept my face as blank as possible—I didn’t want him to suspect that he’d me caught me off-guard. He could smell weakness and uncertainty, and when he did, he almost always took advantage of it.

“You’re not welcome here,” I said.

Silas only stared at me, and then he started to laugh. The sound grew louder and louder until it was almost unbearable, so loud that my ears rang with the sheer volume of it. I squeezed my eyes shut and slapped my hands over my ears, trying to think, and when I opened my eyes again, Silas was gone. I ran over to the bookshelf and then whirled around, my eyes searching every nook and cranny of the room. *Where did he go?* I blinked again, trying to figure out what the hell was going on.

I dropped down onto my stomach and checked under the bed, even though I felt silly doing so. Not under there. I ran around checking the windows—all closed, no way to escape. *Was it all in my head? But it felt so real!* I’d almost *felt* his physical presence in the room, and the feeling lingered even now. I exhaled loudly and eased down onto the bed. My head was still spinning, and I felt vertigo set in—almost like I was on the verge of passing out. *This can’t be good.*

That was yet another time I’d seen Silas since we’d killed him—and others had seen him as well. What did it mean*?* Was it somehow real? Some kind of otherworldly projection? I had no answers, but I knew that it didn’t bode well for any of us.

I jumped at a soft knock on the door. I perked up, hoping it was Cali. She was the only person in the world who’d be able to take my mind off of this latest unpleasant surprise, though I knew that nothing would be able to push it out of my head completely. The mere sight of Silas, real or imagined, made my skin crawl.

The soft knock came again, and my mother’s voice floated through the door. “Greyson, are you in there?”

I was more than a little disappointed. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to see my mother—I just wanted to see Cali even more than I’d realized. I limped over to the door, unable to resist the loud intake of breath that blew through my teeth as pain ripped through my leg. I’d managed to forget about the sharp, incessant ache while dealing with Silas’s latest appearance, but now that the adrenaline had subsided, it was too much to ignore.

I opened the door. My mother handed me a steaming hot cup of tea as she came into the room.

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome, sweetie. I figured you could use a little something,” she said. She took a seat at my desk and looked at me with a brand of concern that I could only describe as maternal. “How are you doing?”

I waved her off. “I’m fine.”

I sounded convincing to my own ears, but I could tell that she wasn’t buying it, at all. I averted my gaze and took a sip of the tea. It was really hot, but good. Chamomile, maybe? I hadn’t known that I needed it, but it was hitting the spot.

“Greyson, please, be honest with me. I’m worried about you, honey. That wound… I know that you don’t want to show any weakness to the pack, but I can tell that you’re suffering.”

I sighed. Clearly, I wasn’t doing as good of a job of hiding my pain as I’d thought.

“You’re not wrong,” I conceded. It was true that I was suffering, but that didn’t make it any easier to admit it. Showing this much weakness—to anyone—went against everything I knew about being an Alpha. But if there was anyone in the entire world I could be honest with, it was my mom. “I’m concerned about it, too, but I don’t want you to worry about me. It’s nothing I can’t manage.”

Wanting to change the subject, I looked up at her.

“I’m more worried about the portals,” I said. “We don’t fully understand them, and now what happened with Ravi… Do you think that there’s anything that Big Mac can do to help?” I thought back to how Big Mac had snapped at Xavier and me when we’d questioned whether she was powerful enough to seal off the portals. Maybe she couldn’t do that, exactly, but she was a powerful witch—there had to be *something* she could do that would at least slow down whatever fresh hell was spilling out into our world.

“Big Mac made it perfectly clear that there’s no magic capable of sealing off the portals,” I said, “but is there anything she might have said to you that could help? Anything at all?”

Sabine shook her head. “I wish there were, Greyson. She’s just as worried as you are. Trust me, if she could do anything about all this, she would.”

I sighed. “I figured as much, but it was worth a shot.”

I hobbled back over to the bed, glad that I’d confided in my mother, as I was in no shape to hide how difficult it was to walk. It literally hurt so badly that it was sapping all the strength out of my calf and ankle—it felt like my leg could give out at any moment.

I plopped down onto the bed, my head spinning again. There were so many damn issues to deal with. The portals, the revenants, Silas. Ava and Kira were still missing, which bothered me more than I’d let on to Xavier. It was yet another thing that had slipped beyond my control. I was the leader of this pack, and keeping things in line was my responsibility. I hadn’t been doing a great job of it lately, and with my injury, I feared that I would continue to fall short. I hung my head as I thought about Cali. I had to protect her. If anything happened to her, I didn’t know what I would do.

My mother got up and came to stand in front of me. She put a warm hand on my shoulder, and it was surprisingly comforting. “You need to get some rest, Greyson,” she said, her face still a mask of deep concern.

I looked up at her and laughed. “You sound just like Big Mac. How on earth am I supposed to rest? Things are completely out of control. There’s danger coming at the pack from every direction, and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“Exactly. Right now, there’s nothing you can do about it, so you might as well rest up and gather your strength,” she said.

“You’ve got a point.” I sighed. Sleep sounded amazing right now. It was the only thing that seemed even a little bit enticing, despite how wound up I was after seeing Silas. “Fine, if it’ll make you happy, I’ll rest.”

My mom gave me a small, reassuring smile before taking my empty teacup and turning to leave.

“How am I supposed to deal with all of this?” I asked quietly.

She came back over to me and cupped my cheek. Her voice was tender as she said, “We’ll get through this together. I know it.”

She pulled me into a long hug. After a while, I lifted my arms and returned it, surprised at how much it helped, just knowing she was there for me. It was strange to feel this vulnerable, but it was nice moment, and I decided that I would, for once, allow myself this comfort.

My mom pulled away. “I know that whatever happens, you’ll do the right thing. Now get some sleep.”

When she was gone, I swung my legs onto the bed and lay down on top of the covers. Even though I knew it would help, even though I was exhausted—more exhausted than I could ever remember having been—there was no way I would be able to sleep now. My mind was racing too fast, and there was too much at stake for me to let my guard down for even a second. I had to figure all this shit out. It was my duty—and truly, my responsibility alone.

My phone dinged, and I frowned in confusion as I looked at the screen. It was a text from Maren.

*U up?*

**Episode 1644**

LOLA

Jay pressed feather-light kisses all over my cheeks and my lips, and I sighed, letting him take control as he shifted on top of me. The delicious weight of his body set off another cascade of memories of moments we’d shared, entwined together in bed, laughing, kissing, exploring each other’s bodies in the moonlit night. Just like tonight. The fear that had clawed at my mind only a few moments earlier seemed far away and meaningless in his arms, and all I could think about was how Jay would never let anyone, or anything, hurt me.

While I now regretted the hypnotherapy, I had to admit that reliving all of my vivid memories of Jay seemed to be making me fall in love with him all over again, reigniting the red-hot spark that had burned between us early on in our relationship.

“Is this okay?” His husky voice broke through my thoughts. His hand hovered over my breast, so close that I could feel the heat rolling off it.

I gave him an eager nod, and without another word he ripped open my blouse and unsnapped my bra, groaning as my breasts sprang free.

He placed kisses all over them and suckled at my nipples, looking up at me as he did so. I ran my fingers through his thick hair and then down over his eye patch, remembering the sacrifice he’d made for me as heat gathered at the pulse between my thighs. I spread my legs wide and gasped when he moved up to face level so that his erection pressed into my center.

“I’m so happy you’re here,” I whispered before placing soft kisses along the shell of his ear and down the stubble of his jawline. I was so grateful that he’d done so much to be here with me, that he’d left the pack—which was clearly going through its own share of problems right now—to make sure that I was okay. He really was my safe harbor in the middle of all this craziness.

He ground his cock against me in a rhythm that sent bursts of images spinning through my mind, naughty memories of the way he used to make love to me with languid, slow strokes, switching it up with hard, body-shaking thrusts that never failed to send me spiraling into ecstasy. I spread my legs wider and bucked against him, my panties so wet that it was like there wasn’t even any fabric between us anymore. He made that a reality as he wriggled out of his pants and slid my sopping wet panties down my legs.

He crawled back on top of me, and I reached down between us to take his cock in my hand. Yes, I remembered it well—heavy and thick and laced with veins that throbbed in time with his heartbeat as it hammered against my chest. His head dropped down beside mine on the bed as I stroked up and down on his cock, remembering that I couldn’t get carried away here, because he’d always said that my touch alone could push him over the edge.

When I felt the familiar tremor in his body that signaled he wouldn’t last much longer, I rubbed my center against his cock a few times and then, without another thought, shoved him inside me. I closed my eyes, and it was like a fireworks display went off in my mind. He pinned my hands to the bed and rocked against me, his breath coming in short bursts through his clenched teeth.

“Open wider,” he grunted, and I laughed, because my knees were already spread so wide that they were touching the bed, but I knew what he meant.

I drew my knees up toward my ears, and he cursed under his breath. I lost myself for a moment, struck speechless by how good he felt inside me—a sensation that memory was incapable of capturing completely.

It took me a moment to realize I was moaning like crazy, loud enough that if I didn’t shut up, the entire floor would hear me. I clapped a hand over my mouth, but Jay pulled it away.

“Let them hear,” he said, his eye hazy and unfocused as he looked down at me.

He increased his speed, our flesh slapping together in a fast rhythm. When I came, I screamed because I couldn’t help myself, and for a second, I was outside of my body, floating in the clouds. When I came back down to earth, Jay was coming too, and he jerked against me, not making a sound, savoring the last dregs of his climax. Then he fell down beside me, spent, and I nestled into his arms.

Just like that, all the tension and drama drifted away, and all that was left was us, the only two people in the world, it felt like. I looked over at him. His eye was closed, and his skin was still flushed.

“It’s so incredible to have all of my memories again,” I said, my voice a little hoarse after all the screaming I’d done. *Worth it*. “Thank you for coming here, Jay, and for helping me get this part of myself back. I wasn’t really *me* without it.”

Jay kissed the top of my head. “And I’m not me without you.”

I noticed that with my mate connection back, my vampire heat felt somehow more under control. Was it because of Jay and the mate bond? Because I needed to learn how to control it and now I could? I didn’t want to question it too much. *I’ll take it!* I looked up at Jay, who’d gone completely quiet. It looked like he was deep in thought.

“Are you thinking about your wolf?” I asked.

“Sorry. I don’t mean to ruin the moment, but I can’t stop stressing about it. Emmett doesn’t even know how it happened, so there’s no guarantee he’ll know how to fix it.”

My heart went out to him. I knew exactly how he felt. “I’m sure we’ll be able to get it back, babe,” I said, trying my best to make him feel better, even though I was worried too.

“But Lola, what if it doesn’t come back?” He was getting upset. “I can’t imagine living like that…”

I couldn’t help but feel a little irked by that statement. “Well, I have to live like that, and I’m still standing,” I snapped.

Jay’s eye went wide as he realized what he’d said. “Of course.” He kissed me. “I’m sorry, that was insensitive of me. I’m a little messed up right now.”

I shook my head. “It’s okay. I get it. I know how important this is to you. There must be some way to fix it, and we’ll find it.”

We lapsed into a comfortable silence, and I snuggled deeper into his arms. I was about to drift off when there was a knock on the door.

“Lola, are you in there?”

I sat up in surprise. Of all the people to interrupt us now… I did *not* want to deal with Jacqueline.

Jay sat up too, confused. “What does she want at this hour?”

Just like that, we were both on edge again. After what we’d seen tonight, there was no telling what was waiting for us on the other side of the door—not to mention the fact that I’d already had a close encounter with Jacqueline in revenant form.

We got out of bed and slipped our clothes back on.

“Stay back,” I warned Jay as I crept up to the door.

I looked through the peephole and recoiled, my heart racing. It was Jacqueline all right, but her eyes were glowing bright orange. *Not this shit again!*

I rushed to Jay’s side. “She’s a revenant,” I whispered.

Jacqueline knocked on the door again, this time so hard that the door rattled loudly.

“Lola, let me in!” Jacqueline demanded, her voice deeper and more commanding this time. She pounded on the door again, and it vibrated with every strike.

*She’s going to break it down!*

I grabbed Jay’s hand, and we crept over to the window. “We’ve got to get out of here.”

I threw the window open, breathing a sigh of relief when I saw that the courtyard was still empty. I motioned for Jay to follow me, and we crawled slowly, carefully, down the drainpipe. Every second seemed like an hour as we made our way down.

I couldn’t help casting glances up at my window, thinking that Jacqueline would come barreling through it at any moment. We were breathing hard, and I kept having to stop to wipe my shaky hands on my jeans, fear making them clammy and slippery. It was so damn dark. Not even the moon was out, and I could feel something evil in the air.

Finally, we hit the ground. We crept across the courtyard, Jay pointing toward the parking area where he’d left his car.

“We can make a break for it and head back to the pack house,” he whispered.

“Okay,” I said, my voice shaking.

We were almost there when it happened. Revenants started pouring out of the shadowy corners of the courtyard, their glowing eyes aimed right at us. Jay took my hand, and we picked up speed, racing across the courtyard as the revenants ran after us, their eyes flickering and burning like hungry flames.

I screamed, unable to contain my terror, and Jay held my hand tighter, all but dragging me the rest of the way to the parking lot. The revenants were so close that I could feel their cold breath all around me, and we broke into a sprint, running like our lives depended on it. If we slowed down even a little, they’d be on us.

Finally, we made it, and Jay unlocked the car. We yanked the doors open and flew inside, scrambling to lock them behind us. Jay thrust the key into the ignition and tried to start the car. But nothing happened. The engine didn’t even try to turn over.

“What are we going to do?” I shrieked, staring in horror as dozens and dozens of revenants surrounded the car.

**Episode 1645**

I was in my bedroom, wide awake. I was too wired with worry to even close my eyes. My heart wouldn’t stop hammering like I was encountering some sort of unseen danger, and my mind raced as I thought about all the stressful events that were closing in on us.

Most of all, I couldn’t stop thinking about what happened between Artemis and Rishika. I remembered better days between the two of them, how they’d teamed up to train me, how they’d laughed and talked and played off each other. When Artemis was with Rishika, she seemed calm, well-adjusted, and more vulnerable and open than I’d ever seen her. I’d been so happy when they’d gotten together. There was no doubt in my mind that Rishika was good for my sister.

I couldn’t believe that their relationship—still so new—had crashed and burned so fast. I hadn’t noticed a single sign that things were going sour between them, even though it was hard to know what was truly going on between two people while observing from the outside. From the look on Rishika’s face when Artemis had told her it was over, I knew she’d been blindsided. How in the world had they gotten to that point?

I glanced at my bed. *Should I try to sleep?* No. There was no use trying. I was way too worked up. I had to go talk to Artemis. That was the only way I would even be able to attempt to get any sleep tonight. I stalked over to my door and threw it open, only to come face to face with my sister, her hand poised to knock. Without a word, she pushed past me into my room, closing the door behind her.

She looked at me, an open expression on her face—a rare sight indeed. “Is it okay if I stay with you tonight?” she asked me. “I don’t want to be alone.”

“Of course,” I said, relieved and happy that she’d come to me during this tough time, despite the tiffs and misunderstandings we’d had in the past. “I was actually on my way to come talk to you.”

Artemis gave me a stiff nod and plopped down onto my bed, not looking at me. I sat down beside her. I could tell that she was upset, and I didn’t want to push, but I couldn’t help myself.

“Artemis, what’s going on? Why… Why were you out by the revenant pool? You know it’s not really safe out in the woods right now, especially there.”

I waited, but Artemis didn’t respond. I let the silence stretch on between us for a few uncomfortable seconds before I spoke again.

“Did you leave to go out into the woods because you were upset about something that happened with Rishika?” Artemis winced at the sound of Rishika’s name. Still, I pressed on. “I’m worried about you,” I continued. “Did something happen? You can tell me.”

Artemis still wouldn’t look at me. She shook her head slowly. “No, nothing happened. But maybe… Maybe I’m not good for her.”

Not good for her? Rishika was on cloud nine whenever they were together—that couldn’t be true.

I frowned. “Not that I’m the queen of good relationship advice, but you both seemed so great together. You shouldn’t toss that aside.”

Artemis sighed. “Yeah, but what if *I’m* not great?” Something in the tone of her voice made me even more worried. *What does she mean by that?*

“Artemis, you *are* great!” I said. She shook her head again. I didn’t want to keep prying, but then again, I *needed* to know. “So, you got into a fight with Rishika and went off to get some air, then you happened to hear Ravi in the woods?”

I hoped I wasn’t being too transparent, but I couldn’t shake the suspicion circling inside me. The pool was in a pretty remote part of the woods—Xavier had described it as an area he had never really travelled through, and he knew those woods like the back of his hand. Why would Artemis have been there? Especially with danger lurking around every corner. I’d been avoiding those woods like the plague. Something didn’t sit right about it. It was all too coincidental.

Artemis looked up at me. She looked tense, defensive. She had a look of pure exasperation on her face. It was obvious that she knew that everyone was suspicious of her, including me. But could she really blame us?

“I heard some sort of commotion; it sounded like someone was in distress. What was I supposed to do? Ignore it?”

I heard the annoyance rising in her voice. I didn’t want to scare her off. Artemis could get skittish at a moment’s notice.

“No, of course not,” I said hastily. “Ravi’s lucky that you were there.”

Artemis nodded slowly, but she still wouldn’t meet my gaze.

“So, what do *you* think happened to Ravi?” I asked. “Seems like it has something to do with the Orb and all the dark magic. People don’t just up and lose their memories, right?”

I thought back to all the random Silas sightings—including the one during the fire that had torched the other pack house. I shuddered at the memory, reliving the moments right after the fire. A chill raced down my spine as I thought about how badly Greyson had gotten hurt.

“You didn’t see anything weird by the pool, did you? Like… ghosts? Silas, even?”

“No, I didn’t see anything like that,” Artemis said, her tone wooden. “I’m really tired. Is it okay if I crash?”

“Of course, we can share the bed.”

Again, I couldn’t help but push. This was too weird, and Artemis wasn’t being forthcoming enough with everything that was happening right now. Wasn’t *she* worried about how crazy things were getting? How scared Ravi had been? Why didn’t she seem as freaked out as I was? As we *all* were? I knew that I wouldn’t be able to sleep unless I got something out of her, some sort of reassurance.

“You sure you don’t want to go talk to Rishika?” I pressed. “Make things right? Maybe you’d sleep better if you did.”

Artemis shook her head, tears shimmering in her eyes and her mouth pressed into a tight line. No matter how much I pressed, she was giving me nothing. I wished I understood what had happened between them, but Artemis clearly had no desire to be open with me.

I got up and watched as Artemis burrowed into the bed, turning away from me to face the wall. A wave of sadness washed over me. I wished that she wanted to talk more—we could have had a sisterly sleepover, a rare bonding moment that I knew would’ve made both of us feel better. Most times I felt I couldn’t relate to her in the ways I was sure she needed, but in this one case I knew I could help. I understood, though. She’d just had a pretty intense day and was probably completely exhausted. I thought for a moment about getting into bed with her and trying to force myself to sleep, but I was still too wired. Instead, I turned out the light and quietly slipped out of the room.

I was surprised to find Xavier out in the hall, about to head into his own room. I came up behind him. “Hey.”

He turned, his eyes lighting up when he saw me. “I’m happy to see you—is everything okay?”

He pulled me into a hug, and when he moved to pull away, I pulled him back and held him tight. I just needed to feel comforted for a second. I was so on edge, and I didn’t know what it would take to make me feel semi-normal again, but this was a start.

Finally, I pulled away and nodded. “Yes, I’m okay, I guess. I can’t sleep. Too much on my mind. Artemis is actually asleep in my room right now.”

Xavier studied me closely. “How did she seem to you?”

I couldn’t help but feel defensive. I definitely had my own doubts about her and what she’d been up to so close to the portal pool, but if I didn’t stand up for her and protect her, who would?

“Physically she’s fine, but, she’s having some trouble with Rishika.”

Xavier nodded, but I could see the suspicion in his eyes.

We stood there in his doorway for a beat, not saying anything, just looking at each other. I leaned toward him, feeling drunk on his nearness. Seeing him had awakened a longing that I hadn’t realized was lurking right under the surface. I was about to suggest that we spend the night together when my phone rang. It was Lola!

I answered it, happy to hear from my friend. But I didn’t even get a chance to say hello.

Lola gasped into the phone, her voice loud and fearful. “Cali, we need your help!”

**Episode 1646**

CHARLIE

I was in my dorm room, doing my best to relax despite how fast my head was spinning. Talk about a shocking turn of events. I couldn’t believe that Violet was actually going to be attending hunter camp with me. This whole situation felt crazy. It was already dangerous enough to have one werewolf in disguise around this many hunters, let alone two. If anyone found out the truth about who we were, it would be a disaster—and a deadly one at that. The risk of being discovered here at the camp had risen to a mind-blowing level, given that we were two of the very creatures that the campers were thirsty to hunt.

If *anything* happened—if we lost Romilly’s bracelets or were faced with some threat that made us shift or if any other spate of bad luck hit us—we would be no match for the hundreds of campers that lived here. We’d have to escape, and I knew that would be a challenge, based on how adept the campers were at dividing and conquering the area around the camp. Violet had already had a close call.

But despite everything, I couldn’t help but be excited at the idea of being able to see Violet every day again. I’d missed her so much.

Even with the extra stress this new arrangement would bring, I was trying my best to look on the bright side. Maybe we could learn things together here, things that we could take back to the pack to help them better protect themselves against people like this, people whose entire lives were devoted to trying to take out people like us.

Things had moved quite quickly after my mother had introduced “Daisy” to the staff. We’d been separated almost as soon we’d gotten back to camp. The staff members and their cheerful welcome wagon had ushered Violet away to get her situated in a dorm room of her own. I wondered where she was, and how she was feeling about all of this. She had to be as freaked out as I was. I tapped into our mind link and tried to reach out to her, hoping that she was close enough for it to work. *Violet, can you hear me?*

She responded immediately. *Charlie?*

Hearing her voice filled me with a sense of warmth. I couldn’t believe my luck. We’d be able to talk all the time now.

*I’m okay*,she said. *But this place is a little freaky. Everyone seems pretty intense*.

*You can say that again*,I said. *I wish I could tell you that they aren’t like this all the time, but I’d be lying. Do you have any roommates? Have you met anyone?*

I thought back to my experience of getting to know the campers. I only hoped that Violet wouldn’t have an instant nemesis like I’d found in Chad.

*Yes, I’m rooming with two other people. They seem nice.* A beat passed, and I hoped that we hadn’t lost our link. I breathed a sigh of relief when her voice came through again. *One of my roommates—Kerry, I think her name is—snores, though*,Violet said with a laugh.

I pictured Violet lying in bed and couldn’t help myself. *What are you wearing?*

Violet laughed in surprise. *What am I wearing?*

I grinned to myself, thinking about the clothes Chad had found—especially her lacy bra.

*Yeah, what are you wearing?*

I wanted to pretend that I was actually in bed with her. It crossed my mind that being together in bed might be a reality very soon. The camp encouraged partnering up with other campers, after all, and I finally had someone I wanted to do that with.

Violet flirted back. I loved that she was game for this. *I’m in a really sexy lingerie set. I bought it with you in mind. Super lacy, pink, frilly, and very, very racy.*

I swallowed roughly, getting all hot and bothered as I pictured the delicate fabric against her skin. *That sounds amazing. I wish I could see it in person.*

Violet giggled. *Charlie, you idiot. I’m in sweats and an old T-shirt!*

I laughed, now picturing her in her ratty PJs, realizing that the imagery of that was just as hot. She could wear a crumpled paper bag and still look like a million bucks.

*How are you?* I asked, getting serious. *I’m sorry that I got you dragged into all this. That was never my intention.*

*Shush, Charlie. Sure, a hunter camp probably isn’t the safest place to be, but at least now, I get to be with you. I wouldn’t trade that for anything. I have to wonder what the plan is, though. Am I going to have to pretend to be Daisy Blackburn forever? Until I graduate from werewolf hunter camp?*

I’d been trying not to think that far ahead. It was too much to consider.

*I’m not entirely sure*,I said ruefully. *Unfortunately, I think we’ll have to play it by ear. At least for the time being, you’re safe. That’s the main thing. Everything else, we can deal with together.*

I could feel my eyes getting heavy, and I was starting to drift off. The last few days had been taxing, to say the least—both mentally and physically.

*Goodnight, my beautiful Violet*,I said with a big yawn.

*Goodnight, my hot Charlie*,she replied.

Despite the danger we were both in, I felt happy—elated, really. Even though I didn’t know exactly where she was, simply having her close by gave me a sense of satisfaction that I hadn’t felt since setting foot in this place all those weeks ago. I thought back to the night of the dance, and all the hoops I’d jumped through for the chance to get back to her. It was funny how things had worked out. We may still be in hiding, but I’d meant what I’d said—together, we could take on anything that came our way.

I thought back to what my mom had done to cover for Violet. I’d been impressed by how quick on her feet she’d been, coming up with a new identity for Violet right on the spot. She’d been convincing as hell, which was a little scary if I really thought about it. I knew that she’d only done it to protect me, but I couldn’t help but hope it meant that maybe, down the line, she would come to accept Violet. A man could dream.

I was drifting off when there was a knock at the door. I turned over, irritated, trying to go back to sleep. Someone else could deal with the late-night visitor. I wasn’t expecting anyone, anyway.

Zachery came over a few seconds later and shook my shoulder. “There’s someone at the door for you, bro.”

Was he serious? He was giving me a little cheeky grin that made me worry that Violet might have snuck out to come see me. While it was a thrilling thought, it was way too risky, and I hoped that it was anyone but her. We didn’t need to bring any extra attention to ourselves right now, and in this gossipy camp, sneaking around to see each other during the wee hours of the night was a surefire way to become the topic of conversation.

I went to the door and slipped out into the hallway. To my surprise, Sophie stood there waiting for me. I was beyond confused.

“Sophie? What’s going on?”

She stood there, giving me a little grin that didn’t look too different from the one Zachery had given me.

“I know it’s late,” she said boldly. “I was trying to fall asleep, and I got to thinking and needed to get something off my chest.” She fluttered her long eyelashes at me and pursed her lips.

“Okay…?” I said, not liking where this was going.

I was still super grateful to Sophie for having my back over the last few days, but I hoped I’d made it clear that things between us were completely platonic—especially now that Violet was here. My stomach sank as I imagined some sort of face-off between them. I didn’t want to see Violet and Sophie in any sort of fight. Sophie was a badass in her own right, but I doubted she’d be a match for Violet, and despite everything, I didn’t want to see her hurt. But I was getting ahead of myself.

Sophie leaned in. “I know the timing is all off, but I wanted to let you know that I’m into you. In a big, big way.”

More smiles and fluttering eyelashes. I wondered if she practiced this look in the mirror.

Heat prickled across my cheeks. Shit. This wasn’t good.

“Sophie… I told you about my mate…” I trailed off weakly.

“Like I said, I know that it’s bad timing and everything, but I just couldn’t keep it inside any longer. I had to tell you. Especially since I think I know something about the new girl.”

I braced myself. I didn’t think I could take any more of her revelations.

Sophie leaned closer, still grinning. “The new girl. Daisy. She’s totally Violet, isn’t she?”

**Episode 1647**

AVA

Kira and I were crouched together in the woods outside Iñigo’s estate, planning out the details for our attack.

“He’s big on using his guards, placing them as sentries out in the woods. He lays it on thick—there can be dozens of them out here sometimes, watching, waiting to pounce on anything that moves,” Kira explained, laying out what she knew about Iñigo’s defense patterns. “They work in shifts, so they’re always fresh.”

“Got it. I still think the best plan is to sneak in and try to catch him unawares, but we have to be very careful,” I said, looking around to see if I could spot any of the sentries right now. We’d seen a couple of them as we made our way to this spot, but we’d gotten by them without any issues. “We know now that he’s been affected by the dark magic, and he probably won’t be acting rationally. Well, he’ll be less rational than usual.” I peered into the darkness, my eyes keyed in to catch the slightest movement. “I can tell that the back entrance is unguarded right now. Might be a shift change. Time to strike. You ready?”

I turned to look at Kira in the darkness. She was resolute and prepared. Though I still wasn’t her biggest fan, I knew we were united in our common purpose, and I felt confident with her at my side.

“I’ve been ready for a long time,” Kira said through clenched teeth.

We snuck toward the back entrance, making sure to stay low. I stopped short and grabbed Kira’s arm. I could see an aura shimmering around a revenant at the front entrance.

“That one might see our approach, so we have to take him out first,” I whispered.

Kira nodded. “On it.”

We edged a bit closer, and I directed Kira’s attention to the revenant on patrol. She lifted her hand, sending out an impressively silent blast of magic that knocked him to the ground.

“Now he’s a non-factor,” Kira said. I could tell that she was enjoying this quite a bit.

We snuck by the guard, now a smoldering mess on the ground, then went around to the back entrance and slipped inside. The house was dark, quiet, and creepy. Though there was no one around right now, it looked like the place had been a chaotic mess not too long ago. Papers were strewn all over the floor, and tables and chairs were upturned everywhere, piled into corners and partially blocking the doorways. There were long, jagged scratches down the walls, and the fancy wallpaper was hanging in ribbons.

“Where do you think he’ll be?” I whispered to Kira.

She pointed up. “His office is upstairs; he’s probably in there.”

We made our way through the mess toward the hallway, where the main staircase spiraled upward—only to run straight into a prowling revenant. It was someone I recognized from before, but he looked like a totally different person with his blank stare, his glowing orange eyes, and the telltale aura vibrating around him.

The revenant opened his mouth wide, and I shifted, preparing to take him out. But before I could lunge at him, Kira took him out with another quiet magic blast. *Impressive.*

Though the blast hadn’t made a sound, the revenant tumbled loudly to the floor. We froze and waited, straining to hear any signs of movement that signaled that someone had heard the commotion. We locked eyes, both breathing a sigh of relief when the silence went unbroken. We were safe—for now.

We moved around the body and climbed cautiously up the staircase. No matter how lightly we tried to step, it seemed like every third or fourth stair creaked loudly, echoing through the large house. We paused each time, waiting for someone to come running out to attack. Paranoid, we stopped every time we heard something, anything. It took us forever, but we finally made it to the top.

“This joint is a dump,” Kira mouthed as we looked around.

She wasn’t wrong. I was struck by the condition of the place. It looked like no one had done any upkeep for a long time. The overall disorder only added to the off, creepy vibe in the air. I couldn’t wait to get this over with so that we could get the hell out of there.

Kira grabbed my arm and pointed to a closed door with a strip of light shining underneath. Iñigo’s office.

We crept along as silently as possible, taking care to step over the piles of trash and broken furniture that covered the floor. We pressed ourselves against the wall right outside the door. I was doing my best to be as quiet as possible, calming my breathing so that I didn’t make even the slightest sound. We were so close, and I didn’t want to blow it.

I raised a hand to tell Kira to wait, then pressed my ear to the door. I could hear someone moving around inside. I listened for a few moments. It didn’t seem like there was more than one person inside. I nodded at Kira, an unspoken message passing between us: *Ready?* We nodded, and I shifted and lunged at the door, smashing it from its hinges. I hit the floor and growled as Iñigo whirled around, clearly shocked to see us both there. I was proud of us, managing to sneak up on a vampire as powerful as Iñigo.

He scowled and bared his long, sharp fangs as he leapt through the air, coming right for me. I spun out of his path as Kira lobbed a beam of magic at him. It came close, but it missed him. On his feet again, Iñigo set his sights on Kira and hissed as he sped toward her, moving so fast that he was a literal blur. He grabbed Kira, his hands closing around her neck, but she exploded in a blast of blinding magic that threw Iñigo back against the wall.

I lunged toward him, wanting more than anything to be the one to take him out and finally prove myself to Xavier, but Kira was equally determined and wasn’t letting up for a second. She set off wave after wave of magic, as quick and unbroken as a Gatling gun. It was only Iñigo’s vampiric speed that saved his undead ass. The magical rays ricocheted off the walls, leaving smoking, crumbling holes where they misfired.

I thought for sure some of the spells were going to hit me, but before I could try to dodge out of the way, I realized Kira had done something to the spells so that whenever the magic strikes got close to hitting me, the beams disintegrated into puffs of smoke. She let off so many that more than a few blasts connected with Iñigo, striking him in both shoulders. He hissed and snarled as he flew back over his desk.

I leapt over the desk after him, feeling like I was moving through total chaos as the walls shook with Kira’s magic. Though Iñigo had taken a few hard hits, he was back on his feet almost instantly, snarling like a demon. I clawed at him, but he managed to bound out of the way before I could make contact.

He seemed more powerful than ever as he increased his speed so that it was impossible to pin him down. He appeared next to Kira and swiped at her, his long pointy nails flashing in the moonlight and leaving a trio of bloody wounds on her stomach.

She screamed and backed away, and Iñigo didn’t miss a beat as he turned and came straight for me. He rolled to the floor and was beside me in an instant. I nipped at him, catching his arm in my jaws, but he twisted easily out of my hold, took me by the leg, and hurled me with such force that I nearly broke straight through the far wall of his office. I slid to the floor and lay there, stunned. Kira moved in front of me, her face scrunched up in pain as she hurled spears of red-hot magic at him while maintaining a glowing white barrier in front of me as I tried to get my bearings.

The room spun around me, and a chorus of bells rang in my head. I’d been so sure that I could take him, that a fight between us would be easy, but we were barely able to keep him at bay.

Iñigo shrugged out of the way of one of Kira’s blasts and appeared beside her, as if teleporting through time and space. He hit her, hard, and she went flying across the room, narrowly missing the window. Her head hit the wall with a sickening crack, and she crumpled to the ground. She didn’t move.

I was still recovering, but a spike of adrenaline rushed through me and I leapt to my feet and ran at Iñigo, my mouth open and a loud growl escaping through my teeth. He whirled around, way too fast, and struck out at me, his claws digging into my side as he sent me crashing into a bookshelf. I watched in horror as the bookshelf wobbled and fell on top of me, pinning me to the floor. I panted and scratched, trying to free myself, but I couldn’t move, and I felt a shooting pain in my hip. I yelped and prayed that nothing was broken.

Still, I fought to get the bookshelf off me, and I finally succeeded—just as Iñigo walked over to me, his fangs bared. I tried to get up, but the pain in my hip sliced through my body like an electric shock, and I crumpled back to the ground.

Iñigo grinned, stooping closer so that his fangs were dangerously close to my neck.

“I should have done this a long time ago,” he hissed, and lunged straight at me.

**Episode 1648**

LOLA

“Where are you?” Cali exclaimed through the phone. “What’s happening?”

How did I explain to my best friend that a bunch of revenant-vampires were running around, closing in on our car and looking at Jay and me as if we were delicious snacks to be devoured? How did I tell her that without freaking her out?

In the end, I settled for, “We’re at Tottenville, and revenants are attacking us!”

“She’s at the vampire school, and revenants are attacking her and Jay!” Cali repeated, sharing the information with someone. Was it Xavier? Greyson? Never mind—I definitely did not have the time to contemplate which one of my friend’s mates was about to witness her losing her shit.

The engine made a chugging sound, kind of like a scream of despair, which totally matched my mood.

“Come on, come on!” Jay yelled as he kept trying to start the car, not giving up hope just yet. There was a part of me that felt pride that he was so strong under distress, but of course I didn’t have time to moon over him.

A revenant slammed onto the windshield, hissing, making me scream in fear and surprise. I dropped my phone and choked out, “Shit!”

The thing kept pounding on the glass, and Jay squeezed my shoulder.

“If I can’t get this car started, I need you to get out of here, Lola. Run,” my mate said, and in that moment I felt deeply connected to him. I could never leave him! In fact, I was getting pretty angry at these annoying, flaming-eyed assholes. How dared they try to hurt my Jay? I couldn’t allow that—I was a vampire, for god’s sake, and I had power of my own!

“I’m not leaving you. *Never*,” I declared. Determined, I glared through my window and rolled it down. “You want a piece of this?” I yelled at the horrible creature, and Jay let out a very manly screech.

“What on earth are you doing?” he demanded, looking panicked.

“I’m saving your ass!” I declared, and bared my fangs to drive the point across. I leaned out the window, fully ready to bite off the closest revenant’s hand or something, but then Jay grabbed my arm and pulled me back.

“NO!” he yelled, but it was too late. I lunged for the windshield, grabbed a revenant by its neck, and hauled it away, yanking with a force that I hadn’t known I possessed. I slammed it against the side of the car, because I was pretty infuriated over here. But now, unfortunately, the creepy creature was also pretty mad.

It grabbed onto my wrist and wouldn’t let go, its mean orange eyes fixed on me. I slammed it harder against the metal, leaning farther out the window, the glass digging into my side.

“I can’t believe you, I can’t believe this is—” Jay stopped talking when the engine finally roared to life. “Get back inside!”

That sounded great in theory, but I could not for the life of me shake off the hissing revenant. Cursing, Jay shoved the car into drive. As it screeched forward, I found my opportunity. I slammed the revenant down, onto the ground, nearly falling out the window as the body fell between our car and the one next to it. The revenant made a nightmarish sound before it finally let go.

The thump that I felt right under my seat and at the rear of the car made me jump. The car had bumped over the revenant’s body, and even though I doubted it had died, I was pretty sure we’d finally gotten rid of it. That was great. What was still a problem was the fact that I was about to lose my balance and fall out the window—but then Jay grabbed me from behind, yanking me back inside.

“Don’t ever do that again!” Jay ordered, and I did not like his tone one bit.

“Seriously? I just saved your ass, so don’t you complain!”

Jay looked at me, lost and shocked. It took me a second to realize he was not, in fact, looking at me. He was staring over my shoulder, wide-eyed—and then he hit the brakes.

I looked around, panting.

There was a crowd of revenant-vampires blocking our way. My heart wouldn’t stop racing. Jay looked composed, even though I knew—we both knew, actually—that this was a complete and utter mess.

“Fasten your seat belt,” Jay said, his voice gruff and determined.

I barely had the time to do it before Jay stepped on the accelerator—and the car plowed right into the vampires!

They went flying, scattered like bowling pins. One of them, though, popped up by Jay’s window, smashing it with a bang.

“Oh no you don’t!” I seethed, propelling myself forward to protect Jay. But the damn seat belt held me back as Jay swerved and fought off the revenant at the same time. I couldn’t let him deal with this alone!

With newfound rage, I let out a cry of fury and finally managed to unfasten my seat belt. I was shaking, bumped back and forth by Jay’s understandably inelegant driving, but I managed to grab the revenant by the arm.

“*Let. Go. Of. My. Mate!*” I screamed, and yanked its flesh with so much rage that the revenant’s arm was ripped off before the thing fell to the ground. I gaped, staring at the severed arm in my hands. I almost felt sick.

“Get away from me!” I said to the arm and threw it away, accidentally hitting Jay in the face.

He choked, horrified. “What are you *doing*?”

I was about to toss the arm into the back seat when there was a pounding on the roof. I looked up, adrenaline surging through me, and saw the roof starting to cave in. The dents were shaped like fists.

“Jesus fucking Christ, do these things ever give up?” Jay muttered before reaching through his window. He was about to grab the revenant when I shook my head.

“Don’t worry, I got this!”

I leaned out the window myself, wielding the severed arm like a club. The revenant stared at me with wide orange eyes as I hit it with the arm again and again. The thing looked surprised, and confused, and I felt pretty proud of myself. It easily lost its grip on the car, hissing and growling as it fell off.

*Finally!*

“Did you see that?” I asked Jay, huffing. “I destroyed it!” At the same time, I realized that I was still holding the severed hand, gagged, and tossed it away with a shriek.

I turned to look at Jay, but instead of seeming proud of me, like I was, he actually slowed the car down.

“What are you doing? Do you have a death wish?” I asked, alarmed.

“We’re heading the wrong way,” Jay said tightly. “We can’t get out. We have to go back.”

I blinked, turning to look behind us. The revenants had regrouped. Even the one with the severed arm was coming toward us. I swallowed roughly. “This is bad. This is so bad that—”

I didn’t finish my sentence. Jay slammed the car into reverse and spun it around, reminding me of those *Fast and Furious* movies. Where the hell had he learned to drive like this? Regardless, it was really sexy.

*Oh my god, focus, Lola!*

“It’s time to go bowling!” Jay said, and in a second, I realized what he meant.

He drove right into the revenants, purposefully running them over, hitting as many as he could. Revenants were tossed all over, and I helped Jay by knocking one from the passenger side, until we finally, *finally* burst out of the entrance of the school and raced away.

I’d barely breathed in the past few minutes, and now I was panting. With the car going faster and faster, I looked back. The outline of Tottenville was fading into the distance. Both Jay’s and my breathing was coming out sharp and fast.

“That was…” I stared at him, a smile on my lips. “That was fucking incredible!”

I wrapped my arms around Jay, tight, ignoring the fact that he was trying to keep control of the car. I kissed his cheeks, the corner of his mouth, his jaw. I was running on adrenaline, fear, and excitement.

Jay grinned at me. “You’re incredible. You were like Supergirl and Wonder Woman in one.”

“Wasn’t it amazing?” I enthused. “Especially when you just ran over them like they were bowling pins!”

“I loved the part where you protected me from one of those things,” Jay said with a smirk.

“Of course I did. Thank you for acknowledging my superior efforts,” I said cheekily.

He laughed. It was gorgeous.

“I can’t believe we’re free!” I said. “That’s just…”

I stopped talking when I felt something twitch by my feet. Somehow, the severed arm had fallen there, even though I’d tried to throw it out. *Ugh!* Gagging, I tossed it out the window, this time for real.

I didn’t say another word, my excitement fading away. Jay didn’t speak either. The gravity of the situation had finally set in.

When I finally broke the silence, my voice was low and shaking. “Where are we going now?”

Jay’s expression was serious. “We have no choice. We have to go to the pack house.”

**Episode 1649**

“Lola?” I said into the phone. “Lola?”

My best friend didn’t reply. All I could hear was the screeching of tires, Lola screaming, Jay grunting, and other sounds that told me a fight was going on. That couldn’t be good. How many revenants were they facing?

“What’s happening?” Xavier asked, staring at me.

“They’re fighting revenants,” I said, my hands shaking as I gripped the phone tighter. “And Lola can’t hear me! It’s like she dropped the phone or something! Or maybe…”

*No*, I thought. Lola was going to be okay. She wasn’t hurt. She couldn’t be! *But she did ask for my help, didn’t she?*

And I couldn’t help her right now. *Shit*.

“Lola?” I said, shaking. “Can you hear me?” I shook the phone as if I could jump down the line and defend her myself. “You evil revenants, LEAVE HER ALONE!”

There was no response. Just talking, the roar of an engine, and then silence.

*Oh no…*

I could just picture it—Jay and Lola fighting the revenants, giving it their best, until one of those orange-eyed fuckers sank its teeth into Lola’s flesh.

I imagined Lola’s mouth dropping open in outrageous pain, but the only thing she could do was fall silent. The image was so terrifying that I didn’t breathe during the ten seconds of silence.

And then, finally, there was a scream from Lola’s end of the call, then talking, and more talking.

*OH MY GOD, SHE’S ALIVE!*

“Lola? Where are you? TALK TO ME!”

“Cali, calm down!” Xavier said, but I wasn’t listening.

“LOLA!” I shouted into the phone, until I heard her voice again.

“Cali, are you still there?” she asked.

I gasped. “Of course I am! What did you think, that I’d go do laundry while my best friend was being attacked?”

Thankfully, Lola wasn’t offended by me being offended. Mostly because she knew me really well and realized that when I was being this irrational, it was because I was worried out of my mind.

“I love you, babe,” Lola said in a quiet voice.

“Are you okay?” I asked desperately. “What happened?”

This was where I lost her. She started talking about revenants and a severed arm and her using that arm as a weapon to hit another revenant, and then she also talked about Jay, and she got a little off track there because it was suddenly very important to her to talk about how his biceps had looked as he’d tried to kill a revenant.

“You should have seen my mate!” Lola said. “He was such a badass!”

“Jay was a badass,” I told Xavier, who arched an eyebrow.

“And I was also a badass! Jay said that I was like Wonder Woman and Supergirl in one!”

Why did that remind me of shampoo and conditioner in one?

“Put her on speaker phone,” Xavier told me. When I did, Lola was still talking about the severed-arm saga, and Xavier frowned. I did not blame him. I was still worried sick.

“But are you okay?” I asked, glancing between the phone and Xavier.

“Is Jay okay?” Xavier asked.

“We’re fine, actually,” Lola said, like she was talking about the weather. “In fact, we’re coming to the pack house.”

“You should come to the old pack house,” Xavier spoke up. “My house.”

“Sounds good. We’ll be there in four hours,” Lola said, almost… *cheerfully?* Wow*.* Here I was, dying from worry, and she was all chipper.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” I said quietly.

“I’m sorry I scared you,” Lola said in a more serious tone.

When I hung up and looked up at Xavier, my heart was still racing. I took a deep breath. “That was the most terrifying phone call ever.”

Xavier shook his head, pulling me into a soft hug. “It’s fine. They’re fine,” he murmured in my ear, rubbing my side as he kissed the top of my head. “Don’t forget that Jay would never let anything happen to Lola. Just like I would never let anything happen to you.”

His words were touching, but I still wasn’t settled. I couldn’t help but worry about Lola. Even though Artemis was my sister, Lola was the person I’d grown up with. We’d spent our lives together, shared so many firsts, fought and made up three million times or more. We might have had our differences—I thought she could be annoying, and she thought *I* could be annoying, which I supposed was part of our mutual charm. But anyway, all in all, I considered her my sister. I loved her with all my heart.

I had no idea, though, what her return would mean for the pack.

“What about her vampire problem, though?” I wondered out loud. “Do you think she has it under control now?”

Xavier shook his head. “You need to stop worrying.”

I huffed. “What am I supposed to do? Just forget all the issues that made my best friend leave? This could be dangerous, Xavier!”

He stared at me. “Everything is always dangerous, Cali. Especially right now, when anyone could become a revenant.”

“So what you’re saying is that everything is a mess already, so why should I worry about Lola?” I asked dryly.

“Exactly,” he said with a shrug. “And at this point, all you can do is wait and see what happens when they get here. It won’t be useful to obsess over it in the meantime.” He let me go gently, and I swallowed, looking up at him as he added, “Maybe you should get some sleep, try to relax.”

He stepped aside, clearing the doorway for me.

Could I *really* sleep after that phone call? I didn’t have the energy to stay and keep talking about this, though. I sighed. “I guess you’re right.”

I headed to my room, my joints aching for reasons I didn’t understand. I felt Xavier’s heavy footsteps behind me. There was something comforting about the sound of them, about his presence. When I turned to face him, he was already staring.

“What’s wrong?” he asked quietly.

“I just… I don’t know if I can sleep tonight.” My words were calm, but I felt all jittery. I knew I had to let my mind clear, to stop worrying about Lola and Jay and Artemis, or else I’d never be able to rest. But I couldn’t help the way I felt.

Xavier seemed to understand every bit of what I was feeling. This was a very interesting development, considering the fact that once upon a time, I’d thought he had the emotional intelligence of a woodpecker.

“Do you want some company?” he asked. “Just to help you sleep.”

I nodded softly. “Yes, please.”

He stared at me, the emotion in his eyes making me feel better about everything. “I’ll take care of you.” His voice was a whisper, and I shuddered. He kissed my forehead once more, then my cheek.

He led me into his room and softly closed the door behind us. He sat down on the bed first and eyed me as I neared him. “Maybe you want to finish taking your clothes off first?”

I looked down at myself and realized that I was half-dressed for bed. I snorted, shaking my head. I literally had just one sock on. “Are you seriously judging my leisure wear choices right now?”

“There’s definitely room for improvement,” Xavier said with a smirk, and I smiled. He was being so sweet and cute.

I took off my lone sock, slipped into one of Xavier’s T-shirts, and then headed to the bathroom to wash my face and brush my teeth with a spare toothbrush. When I got back into the room, Xavier was right where I’d left him.

Shirtless, leaning against the bed’s headboard, hair all messy and—of course—sexy. He got up instantly and pulled back the covers. “Come on, I’ll tuck you in.”

I climbed in, feeling all mushy inside. This was exactly what I needed. “Thank you.”

I expected him to get in with me under the covers, cuddle me, but instead he lay beside me. On top of the duvet.

I frowned. “Why are you not smothering me in hugs right now? We did get interrupted earlier…”

He chuckled. “I just want to make sure you fall asleep.”

“I can certainly fall asleep with you squeezing me,” I said.

He raised an eyebrow. “Was squeezing all you had in mind?”

I hummed, thoughtful. “Not sure. Why don’t you come closer so I can figure it out?”

He snorted at my cheesy line and leaned in to brush his lips over mine. “Close your eyes, Cali. Rest.”

But I didn’t want to close my eyes. I wanted to keep staring at him. He was so breathtakingly beautiful, and there was only one way that I could imagine myself sleeping tonight.

As he made a move to withdraw, I grabbed him by the sides of his neck and pulled him in for a real kiss. A kiss that made my toes curl. The intensity was searing from the very first second our lips made contact, the electricity that coursed through me familiar and yet always exciting.

He brushed his mouth over my collarbones, his hand moving from my shoulder to my waist, gently squeezing before he lowered it further to my backside. I whimpered, moving closer, but his kisses were too soft, and the friction wasn’t enough. The pressure wasn’t enough.

I needed more.

I stared into his dark blue eyes, my heart pounding. And then I whispered, “Get under the covers.”

**Episode 1650**

GREYSON

*U up?*

I reread the text from Maren. That kind of phrasing was usually used for a booty call—I’d had more than one of those in my time. If the circumstances had been different, I might have responded with something suggestive, flirty, and fun. But I hadn’t been in that place for a long time.

I wondered if I could just ignore Maren. Pretend that this had never happened. But then again, she had seen that I’d read the text. I didn’t know much about the mystical world of instant messaging, but I was pretty sure that leaving someone on read was not a good look.

Taking a deep, long-suffering breath, I typed back.

*Hi.*

Wow, that was really stupid.

*LOL, don’t hurt yourself with all the enthusiasm. Was it really that hard to answer me?*

Maren’s responding text was a lot smoother, so I snorted. Why was she even contacting me, though? What was going on with her?

*How are you? Everything okay with Fenrir?*

I hadn’t had a chance to think about the little boy with all the stuff that had been going on here. But I could feel a twinge of emotion for Fenrir, the kid who I’d once thought could be my own.

*There’s a reason why I’m reaching out. Aiden wants to see his son.*

My stomach clenched. Fenrir was Aiden’s son, not mine. How the hell was that fair? What the fuck was wrong with the universe, that it would let an abusive asshole like Aiden be a father? The guy had given Maren a black eye, and in return I’d offered him a taste of his own medicine and broken his arm. He was lucky I’d been feeling charitable that day.

*?*

I stared at the question mark Maren sent me and typed back, *What do you want to do?*

*I don’t know, but I’m worried*, was her response.

I contemplated my options. I couldn’t leave the pack house, of course. And even if I wanted to, my leg was a massive problem, though I hated to admit it. But I couldn’t stand the idea of Aiden getting anywhere near an innocent kid like Fenrir.

Was inviting Maren back an option?

I shook my head at myself. Maren had left the pack house in the first place because she’d felt that our home wasn’t safe for her kid. And I couldn’t blame her. A bunch of revenants later, things had only become more unsafe.

*I’ve managed to stall Aiden for now, Greyson. But I just wanted you to know.*

I wasn’t sure why my knowing was important, but I hoped it helped her. That it made her feel more secure, and like she wasn’t all alone in the world. That it made her feel like she could count on someone to protect her kid, if worse came to worst.

*That sounds good. You did the right thing. Keep me posted.*

I was about to put my phone down when it beeped again.

*Fenrir asks about you.*

The twinge of emotion I’d felt earlier returned tenfold.

*Tell him I said hello.*

Maren didn’t respond. I sat down on my bed and dropped the phone next to me, closing my eyes for a moment and breathing deeply. I had no idea how I should be feeling right now. I didn’t want the complication of having Maren around. It would only cause problems—*more* problems—with the pack and with my mate. And that was the last thing I needed right now.

I fell back on the bed, groaning, and stared at the ceiling. There was no way that I could sleep right now, was there? No matter how much I tossed and turned and counted sheep or dead revenants, I just couldn’t sleep. I decided to get up and test my leg. The pain wasn’t as bad as I’d expected. I slowly walked up and down the room. Maybe Big Mac’s spell was working? Or was I just slowly dying, and pain was beginning to be unimportant?

Whatever.

Either way, I wasn’t going to sleep. I put on some clothes—a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt—and left the room. I was about to go downstairs to make myself a cup of tea when the thought of Cali entered my mind. Or re-entered it. The thought of her had never left, really.

I wondered if I should check on her. Today had been intense, like most days. I really hoped that she’d been able to get some rest and wasn’t staring at the ceiling like I had earlier, wide-eyed and freaking out. Determined, I headed toward her room, but my stomach clammed up when I passed Xavier’s door.

I instantly realized that he was not alone. I heard the sounds of heavy breathing, and then a lusty moan. My heart sank.

*Fuck.*

Cali was with Xavier, and I had been out here, worrying about her. I was such a fool. And a loser. And an almost-revenant, probably. Maybe. Either way, I was a fucking mess, and I knew I shouldn’t have been upset or resentful, but I couldn’t stop myself from clenching my jaw. I spun around, marching downstairs while ignoring the pain in my leg. I needed some air.

Bursting out onto the porch, I looked away, into the distance. I was breathing sharply, pain expanding inside me, even though I knew I’d agreed to all this. But still, the same feelings tore into me. I could blame neither Cali nor Xavier.

Even though I would’ve fucking *loved* to blame Xavier, I was certain that this wasn’t easy for him either. It wasn’t easy for Cali at all, even though it might’ve looked like she was having a good time. I knew that emotionally, she was a wreck. This agreement of ours was just a Band-Aid for an oozing wound.

Part of me wanted to do what most werewolves would have expected from me. I could challenge Xavier and prove myself the better Alpha, the better mate. But all that macho bullshit would infuriate and hurt Cali. There was no way that I *could* ever be with her after hurting Xavier. Honestly, I didn’tfucking *want* to hurt him. Maybe rough him up a little, mostly for fun, but not really hurt him. He was my brother, and we’d come a long way.

This was such a fucking mess.

My thoughts were interrupted by a pounding sound, coming from the back of the house. I scowled. What now?

Rolling my eyes and already feeling entirely fed up, I followed the sound. I was surprised to find Ravi. He was pounding away at a punching bag that was hanging from a tree, suspended by a chain. That was a nice trick.

“Hey,” I murmured.

Ravi looked startled to see me. He wiped his eyes and turned away, grunting a gruff, “I thought everyone was asleep."

It was pretty obvious that Ravi had been crying, but I didn’t want to push him. Male werewolves didn’t talk about feelings. Not easily, at least. Maybe if we were at gun point, or if our mates forced us to.

“It’s okay. I couldn’t sleep, so I thought I’d wander around out here, get some fresh air,” I said. “What are you doing?”

“Couldn’t sleep either,” Ravi said. “Thought I’d do a little training.”

I raised an eyebrow. “At this hour?”

Ravi shrugged*. Oh, boy.* I wouldn’t be able to avoid the feelings conversation, would I?

Taking a deep breath, I grabbed the bag to stop it from swinging. I had no idea how to broach what I was certain was a sensitive subject, so I just marched in head-first to get it over with. “It’s okay, man. You don’t have to pretend.”

Ravi paused. “What are you talking about?”

I shook my head. “It’s okay to show your emotions. Or whatever. It’s normal that you feel bad after ‘seeing’ Joss earlier.”

Ravi sighed and hung his head. “I miss her. And it makes me angry that she’s not here.” He shoved at the bag.

“I get it. I get you.”

Ravi stopped. “Everything’s so fucked up.”

“Does this help at all?” I asked, gesturing at the bag.

He snorted bitterly. “Give it a try.”

When I struck the bag, I imagined that it was Xavier’s face. By accident, of course. Or on purpose. Whatever. It felt good, regardless. Maybe too good. Fuck it. Who the hell cared? The two of them were in bed right now, and they definitely didn’t give a damn about me.

The next punch I threw at the bag was harder, and the third was full of vicious anger. I attacked the bag, one pounding fist after the other, so much fury inside me that I could feel it vibrate through my hands and into the bag until it couldn’t take it anymore.

Literally, it fell to the ground, in tatters at our feet.

Ravi looked between me and the bag, his expression dark. “Guess you have some pent-up anger too, huh?”

I was breathing hard, a little embarrassed that Ravi had witnessed this. But the man looked unbothered.

“Good night,” Ravi said. “See you tomorrow.”

I stared at the mess I’d created. I couldn’t believe I’d let my emotions get the best of me. Shaking my head, I cleaned up and followed Ravi inside. But as I approached the front porch, my leg started throbbing. The witch mark was burning.

I didn’t want anyone to see me like this, not even by accident, so I rushed upstairs. I slipped into my room, ready to examine the wound and figure out if it had gotten worse, but then I noticed that my window was open. I scowled—I hadn’t opened it.

The curtain was waving in the wind, and the movement drew me in, somehow. I couldn’t ignore the curtain’s smooth motions, couldn’t look away from it.

When I drew the fabric back, though, what I saw in the yard made me freeze.

Silas was standing there, looking up at me.

There was a young boy by his side.

“Hello, Greyson,” Silas said. “Come meet your son.”

**Episode 1651**

XAVIER

Cali’s kiss was so hot, I felt dizzy. I was elated to be with her—there was always this fucking hunger inside me that could never be sated. Everything about Cali—her touch, her kiss, the taste of her skin—made me feel addicted.

I just couldn’t let go.

Now that we were finally alone, I was certain that nobody would dare come in and interrupt. And if they did, they’d have another thing coming. I wasn’t a patient man, and Cali’s eagerness set me on fire. This was my love, my person, my one and only, and I had to have her.

She was mine.

She had always been mine.

She would always be mine.

“Get under the covers,” she said breathlessly, breaking the kiss.

“Since you asked nicely…” I trailed off, and she rolled her eyes, grinning as I slid under the covers. She instantly glued herself against me, throwing her leg over my hip. I hitched it higher, trailing my hand down her thigh, my mouth at her neck, licking and kissing.

She was squirming against me, inching closer, her fingertips digging into my bare arm, her hips arching toward me. She kissed my jawline, brushing her lips over my skin, her hand moving from my chest down to my abs. She was gently tweaking the waistband of my sweatpants, and I followed her lead. The softness of her movements made me feel lightheaded, and when she slid closer, gripping my hand and pulling it between her legs, I knew that she was ready for more.

“Want me to touch you, baby?” I asked.

She whispered, “Please.”

The heat of her was amazing. She was hot all over, and when I reached between her thighs, she slid her hand down my sweatpants. I hissed at the contact, at her touch, and I mirrored her movements, feeling how wet she’d gotten just from our kiss.

“You feel so fucking amazing…” I bit the shell of her ear, and her whole body twitched.

She looked up at me, swallowing roughly. Her chest was heaving, her hips arching toward my fingers. She went faster now, stroking me harder before she pulled my sweats down to give herself better access. I did the same, pulling her panties off. My stomach grew tight with her every movement, with her need to please me. I went a little harder, my hand working between her legs, making her moan and bite at my shoulder.

“Xavier,” she choked out, her eyes closed, her thighs stuttering and spasming with my fingers still inside her, her body clamping down on me. I needed to feel that around my cock, right the fuck now.

I pushed her back while she was still shaking, rolled the covers off, and dragged her down to me.

“You’re so fucking gorgeous,” I said gruffly, shoving the T-shirt up to see her tits, to cup and tease them. When my hard-on brushed between her legs, she keened, gripping her pillow tight, looking up at me with wide eyes. I eased just the tip inside, watching her pelvis spasm, her flushed body and face doing wonders for my ego.

I pinned her hips down, panting, “Patience, tiger…”

She scoffed. I expected her to start yelling at me, but what she did instead was reach up and drag me down for a kiss. It was hard not to slide inside, her body so fucking hot and slick it felt like she was melting under me.

“Say you want me,” I groaned in her ear, and she choked, open-mouthed, at the impact of my thrusts.

“I want you. I want you so much,” she moaned, clinging onto me, her arms and legs wrapped around me tight as if she’d be ruined without me inside her. But that wasn’t enough.

I wanted to play, to watch her reactions.

With all the strength and self-discipline I could muster, I pushed her back again, one palm spread out on her chest, the other on her quivering hips.

“I wanna see it,” I whispered, staring at where we were joined, where she was wrapped around me. “I wanna see how wet I can get you…”

She arched her hips, a cry leaving her lips as I started rubbing at her, right at the apex of her thighs. I wanted more, of course I did, but watching her come undone like this so easily at the barest of contact drove me nuts with desire.

“That’s it,” I whispered, looking between her face and where her body parted for me, just for me. All mine. “You’re so fucking beautiful—*fuck*.”

She was panting hard, her eyes closing. “Please,” she moaned, and I slid right in, all the way, just to feel her break and quiver, just to have her wrap her arms and legs around me like she could never let go. She didn’t have to. I let myself go, then, the sound of our bodies meeting making me smile as she kissed me, whimpering and crazed. Her need to be fucked was so fucking obvious that I would’ve kept her right in this room forever if she let me.

Just her and me, no outside world, nothing touching us.

“You feel so good,” she choked out. Her fingers shook as she brushed my hair back, arching up to meet my thrusts. “I love you so much, Xavier.”

My body stuttered, bursting at hearing those words from her. My lips captured hers in yet another kiss as I was pushed over the edge, inside her, marking her as mine.

In this moment, she was mine, and I wouldn’t have traded it for the world.

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“I think I'm tired now,” Cali mumbled, yawning.

I chuckled. I loved this girl so much. She snuggled into my chest, and I kissed her forehead, stroking her arm. “Glad I could help.”

She managed to playfully smack my arm before she finally closed her eyes and went to sleep. I caressed her back, her shoulders, loving every moment. I would never get over staring at her as she slept, enjoying the sight of her, the sound of her breathing turning into a steady rhythm. I never thought I could feel this way about someone. I closed my eyes and focused on that sound. Maybe I’d be able to drift off myself.

Just sleep here with Cali, and pretend that everything would be okay.

But then all the unresolved issues started to roam inside my head. Ava and Kira’s disappearance was no joke; the revenants had come after Lola and Jay, not to mention everyone here at the pack house; and then there was the thing with Artemis. Not to mention Greyson’s witch mark from hell. And of course, I could never forget our rivalry over Cali.

She was with me right now, but that didn’t mean that she wouldn’t be kissing him tomorrow, first thing in the morning.

My thoughts were interrupted when I heard the sliding door open downstairs. An alarm went off in my mind. What was that? It was late—why would the door be opening? Was the patrol coming in? Could it be Ava or Kira? If so, I needed to talk to them. I couldn’t ignore this. I had to go look.

I disentangled myself from Cali’s octopus grip while managing not to wake her up. That was the last thing I wanted. She needed to sleep, not to worry—especially after that phone call with her best friend. I could see that everything had been weighing on her, and I wanted her to have this moment of peace.

After successfully releasing myself, I pulled sweats and a hoodie on and crept downstairs. The house was almost eerie at this hour after everything that had happened. I didn’t like feeling that way, not in my own house. Someone was outside, actually, and it didn’t look like my ex-mate or Kira. I frowned. Opening the door, I stuck my head out to get a better look.

Before I saw him, I smelled him.

My brother was just hanging out in the yard, all casual. He was walking along the edge of the property. What the hell was he doing out here?

“Hey!” I hissed between my teeth. There was no need to wake everyone in the house. “Greyson!”

He didn’t turn to look at me. What was wrong with him this time? Why was he out here in the freezing cold? Rolling my eyes, huffing, I headed out—barefoot, mind you—to make sure he wasn’t dying or something. My brother was walking strangely, actually, and it looked like… Was he sleepwalking? Because that was the only explanation I could come up with for the fact that he was literally ignoring me.

When there were just ten feet between us, I called for him once more. “Greyson! What are you doing out here in the cold, you jackass?”

My brother finally turned, but he didn’t seem to see me at all.

He didn’t look like himself.

In the darkness, I saw a slight tint of orange, glazed over Greyson’s eyes.

**Episode 1652**

AVA

Iñigo moved toward me like a predator. He was taking his sweet time, his cold eyes on me, dragging across my fur. He could just end everything right now, as I struggled to regain my strength, but no. Not Iñigo. He was going to make me suffer. He was going to enjoy this, draw it out to watch me writhe and cry out in pain.

Was this how I died?

Was this how it all ended? At the hands of a bloodthirsty vampire who never showed any remorse? The image of death flashed through my mind. Xavier, standing over me, panting, half-shifted with his teeth nearing my neck. Sharp gleaming canines sinking into my skin as he ripped my throat out, an act so violent on its own, but much more so when someone did it to their own mate.

But things between us hadn’t always been so terrible. We’d loved each other once. I could almost see it now, in the same way that people said that their lives flashed before their eyes when they died. For me, everything I saw had to do with Xavier. *He* had been my whole life. As if in a dream, I remembered the first time I’d seen him.

We were maybe fourteen years old. It had been a beautiful day, and the sun had been blinding. I’d covered my eyes to shield them, but then a dark shadow had blocked the rays. It had been Xavier, with his back to me. It was the first thing I’d seen, his bare back, and I remembered blushing. He’d caught a ball and thrown it back, and then he’d noticed me. His serious, almost brooding expression had split into a beaming smile the second our eyes had met.

Looking back at moments like that, I couldn’t doubt who he was meant to be to me. My mate. There was no question, no alternative.

Once, he had loved me.

How had we ended up like this?

*How did we end up like this?*

The memory was jerked away as Iñigo snarled. He grabbed me by the shoulders, pulling me up effortlessly. It didn’t matter that I was still shifted, still a massive wolf. To him and his vampiric strength, I had to weigh nothing.

“I should have ruined you from the very first moment,” Iñigo hissed. “I should have known that I could never trust you!”

His disgust was so toxic that Xavier’s face dissolved from my mind. I was filled with rage that made the survival instinct roar inside me. I was not going to die this way. Not at the hands of an evil vampire. Not before I got Xavier back.

I snapped at Iñigo’s hand, my teeth nearly breaking skin, but he didn’t release me. His grip remained strong, and I realized that I needed to do something to distract him, otherwise it would all be for nothing. The only thing that I could think of was far-fetched, risky, insane.

What I was about to do could either save me or instantly kill me.

I shifted back to human.

Iñigo was still holding me by the neck. But he froze, clearly not expecting this. His eyes widened slightly as he took in my bare body. I looked up at him with sorrowful, needy eyes. And then, I whispered, “You can have me, Iñigo. All of me.”

He didn’t speak for a long moment.

I waited. I held onto him, pretending I wasn’t disgusted and infuriated by his very existence. My fingertips dug into his chest, through the thin material of his shirt, and he swallowed visibly. He looked down at my body, his gaze lingering this time, and that was when I knew I had him.

Men were really all the same. Human or supernatural, werewolf or vampire—their urges always leaked into their brains and made them vulnerable.

Every man was vulnerable if you knew how to play your cards right.

And Iñigo? He just couldn’t resist.

I kicked him, catching him unawares, shocking him enough that he let me go. Moving quickly, I lashed out, taking him by surprise. My nails dug deep into his arm, making him roar, and then something grabbed me from behind.

A revenant.

I didn’t have time for this. Enraged, I wrapped my hand around its throat and squeezed with all my strength, yanking the creature forward to use as a weapon. I turned toward Iñigo, who was still in pain from my earlier attack, and swung the revenant into the vampire like a baseball bat.

“You treacherous *bitch*!” Iñigo howled, fighting with the revenant as I caught sight of Kira. She was back on her feet, using her purple electric glow to knock down a couple more revenants. There was blood trickling down her face, but she looked positively murderous. More powerful than I could’ve imagined.

As Iñigo struggled with the revenant, I was ready to shift and attack him, finish him off, but then I stumbled over someone’s rolling head. At the same time, Iñigo threw away the last of the revenant’s remains and leapt forward. He grabbed me by the arm and threw me into the door. It shattered from the impact, pieces of wood flying everywhere, digging into my flesh.

I tumbled into a hallway, bruised and aching, as Iñigo cracked his neck and prowled toward me. His voice was a chilling, terrifying whisper. “I'm so disappointed in you, Ava. I had thought I’d found an equal… Clearly I overestimated you.”

“How could you ever believe that I would be with you?” I spat, full of contempt. To my shock, he did recoil. “What is it, then? Don’t tell me you fell for a werewolf’s bullshit? Don’t tell me you caught feelings for me? Monsters like you can’t feel a fucking thing!”

Instead of an answer, Iñigo offered a roar. It was so loud that it made the walls around me shudder. He charged toward me, and instinct took over. I rolled to the side, tumbling down a stairwell, each step digging into my already bruised ribs. When I smashed into the banister, my head pounding, my whole body on edge, I looked up.

“You think you can run?” He snarled and climbed down the stairs, his fangs glistening. “You think you can beat me in this little game you’ve created?”

“It’s not a—”

“Of course it was never a game!” he spat. “Because I’ve always been the winner. I’ve always been the powerful one, and you were my plaything. Something I used to pass the time.”

I looked around. Could I shift? Or…

The remains of the banister were on the floor beside me.

This was it.

“You think I could ever care about an animal like you? So unintelligent? So inferior?” He laughed. There were only six feet between us, now. He moved slowly, back to his cat-and-mouse routine. “I could never want you, Ava. In fact, nobody wants you, do they?”

I swallowed the pain his words caused and slowly moved my hand toward a broken piece of railing. A piece of wood.

“Not your pack, not your supposed mate. Nobody cares if you live or die, Ava,” Iñigo said with a sinister smile. His words cut so deep that I had to swallow a growl.

I gripped the stake tightly, sliding it behind my back as he got to his knees before me. He had been so fixated on humiliating me that he hadn’t looked at anything other than my face for the past few moments. He leaned forward, his breath hot against my throat as he whispered, “I hope you enjoy this as much as I—”

With Xavier’s memory in my head, that memory of us being together, meeting for the first time, I thrust the wooden piece of railing into Iñigo’s chest. He didn’t finish his sentence.

There was a tearing sound, and wet, sticky blood burst onto my fingers.

“*Yes*,” I hissed against his lips. “I did enjoy this, Iñigo.”

He looked between me and the hole in his chest, his mouth dropping open in shock, his eyes wide and terrified. In seconds, I saw the light fade from them. Fighting a sob, I shoved him off me the moment his eyes closed. His body started leaking blood and other venomous fluids everywhere, and I couldn’t handle the horrible smell.

I scrambled to my feet, gagging at the scent, just as Kira came running down the stairs. She seemed fine, apart from a bit of blood on her face and hands. It was someone else’s blood. Panting, she said, “There are more revenants, I don’t know—”

She froze, seeing the body behind me.

“Is he really…” Kira swallowed roughly, looking between me and the body on the floor. “Is this real?”

I looked back at Iñigo. The stake in his chest. The second I took it out, I knew he’d turn to dust.

The strongest vampire I’d ever known, killed by a girl that nobody wanted.

*At least for now.*

I looked at Kira, nodding. “Iñigo is dead.”

**Episode 1653**

MARTA

The silence between us was louder than anything I’d ever heard. Lilac broke it a moment later.

“Is it really such a tough question? Either you like someone or you don’t—which is it?” He sounded exasperated, and I gripped the wheel tighter, fighting to drive without hitting a tree.

“Oh my god, can you just stop? *Please?*” I demanded, hoping that the plea at the end would work.

It did not.

“I won’t,” he said, flippant. “Not until you give me an answer.”

“No wonder you’re still here,” I grumbled. “You’re just too stubborn to fully die, aren’t you?”

“Why do you say that like it’s a bad thing?” He scoffed. “Also, can you please answer my question now?”

I took a deep breath. “This is not the time to talk about your nonsense. We have the locket, and we have to figure out what to do next, not obsess over things that don’t—”

“Matter?” Lilac said, arching an eyebrow. “Is that what you think of talking about feelings?”

“I never said that,” I said.

“I think you’re trying to change the subject,” said the horrible unfriendly ghost. “We’re obviously not going to do the séance in the car right now, or tonight in general. So let’s get back to my question.”

I realized that Lilac wasn’t going to drop this. How *did* I really feel about him, though?

The answer was unfortunately obvious, because I knew I liked him. I liked him a lot. *A lot*, a lot. But admitting that would make me feel vulnerable. After surviving all those years with Bert, I knew that I needed to keep my armor on. I had to focus on protecting myself in every way possible, and it was going to take more than a crush on a chatty, kissing-obsessed ghost boy to change that.

And who was to say that this was even a real crush?

Maybe it was just, I don’t know, a random feeling of irritation that occasionally got very intense. Kind of like the flu. I had been overly exposed to Lilac, and the slight curl over his forehead, and his dimples, and his boyish, irritating charm…

I could feel myself blushing as I glanced over at him. Instantly, I opened the window, trying to cool my heated cheeks. I hoped to hell that Lilac hadn’t noticed my blush.

“What are you doing?” he asked the second I lowered the window.

“I just need some fresh air,” I said defensively.

Lilac’s eyebrows shot up his forehead. “It’s freezing outside. Not that I care, but it is.”

“Well, I like the feeling of the wind—it reminds me of the outdoors,” I said stubbornly.

I was actually freezing. But I wasn’t about to let Lilac know that. *Hah!* Of course not. Just then, the pack house came into view, and I was relieved. At least I wouldn’t have to deal with Lilac while driving at the same time. He was the worst distraction, and I was not the best at multitasking.

“You still haven’t answered my question,” Lilac said as we got out of the car.

I shushed him, pointing at the quiet house. “Stop talking, everybody’s sleeping.”

I tiptoed upstairs, trying not to wake anyone. I was exhausted and freezing. I needed a good night’s sleep so I could be on my A-game tomorrow, if we did go through with the spell.

Closing the door quietly behind me, I made a beeline for the bed. Groaning softly, I kicked off my shoes, fell onto the mattress, and sighed. I grabbed a throw blanket and wrapped myself in it, trying to warm up.

Only seconds later, Lilac was standing next to me, by the bed. He crossed his arms over his chest and frowned. “Why did you lie to me?”

I groaned. “About what?”

“You’re obviously freezing. You didn’t roll down the window because you liked it, you did it to avoid talking to me.”

“That’s ridiculous,” I said, fighting a shiver at the same time.

“You literally risked catching pneumonia in order to avoid talking about your feelings. I’d admire your dedication if you weren’t so ridiculous,” he said dryly.

“You got a lot of nerve, calling someone else ridiculous,” I said.

Rolling his eyes, he lay down next to me on the mattress. “I’m going to hug you now to warm you up, and you won’t be horrible about it. Okay?”

“Okay,” I grumbled.

His cool touch actually felt warm. How was that even possible? How could I feel warmer with a ghost’s arm wrapped around me? Still, there was part of me that missed his more physical touch than this ghostly one. But there was only one way that would happen, and I was *not* going to kiss him.

“Do you want me to let go?” he asked in a soft voice.

I huffed. “No. Stay where you are.”

“Oh. So you’re okay with cuddling, but you won’t even tell me if you like me.”

I glared at him over my shoulder and shoved him away. I couldn’t actually feel him, not fully, but he got the memo. Especially when I hissed, “Since I’m bothering you so much, you should let go!”

He sighed. “Marta—”

“I said, get away from me,” I declared.

Lilac pressed his lips together. “*Fine*.”

He stomped away from the bed and sat down in a chair in the corner of the room. He let out a deep, drawn-out breath, and I realized that I’d hurt his feelings. He actually seemed sad. For real. I didn’t like seeing him like that. It just didn’t feel right to me—not when seeing him smile felt so good.

“Are you seriously upset right now?” I asked, huffing.

He looked away from me. “It’s fine,” he said, in the most passive aggressive way possible. Goodness gracious.

“I’m sorry, okay?” I said softly. “I really am tired. Why don’t you come sit next to me? You look so sad over there.”

Lilac glanced at me, thrusting his chin up. “I’m not feeling very welcome over there. You made that clear.”

I rolled my eyes. “Are you for real?”

He didn’t say a word. Still looking away from me, he shifted his body and angled himself away from me, settling into the corner, looking very offended and sad and pitiful and…

He was obviously doing this on purpose.

*What. A. Brat.*

I couldn’t believe a ghost was shaming me.

“Stop being such a brat!” I exclaimed and jumped up from the bed, walking over to him. “I’m being serious right now!” I held my hand out, but he just turned away, crossing his arms.

“I don’t think I can deal with you right now,” he deadpanned. “I’m devastated. Broken beyond repair. I can’t do this anymore.”

He was such a drama queen, so I had to pull out the big guns here.

“Come on,” I muttered, pretend to shiver. “I’m really cold. Come sit by me and warm me up. Please?”

Lilac looked at me finally, the force of his puppy eyes hitting me dead on. “You mean it?” He sounded so hopeful that my heart kind of broke.

I took a deep breath, nodding. “Come on.”

I could feel him staring cautiously as he followed me back to the bed. I crawled in, and he lay beside me. Not five seconds had passed before he turned on his side and faced me, raising an eyebrow. “So, you *do* like me.”

Good lord, this guy was insufferable.

“Seriously? Not this again!” I huffed, exasperated.

He shrugged. “Just admit it and I’ll stop bothering you.”

I pressed my lips together. “You promise?”

He nodded seriously.

I was so exhausted, and I really wanted this night to end, so I finally bit out, “Okay, sure. You’re a likeable guy. Sort of. Mostly annoying.”

Lilac’s handsome face split into a wide grin. “I knew it!”

I rolled over, embarrassed, and covered my eyes. “You said you’d leave me alone if I told you!”

“I lied,” he said, so casually that I gasped. He shrugged, still smirking. “I’m a ghost. Truth is a difficult concept for spirits.”

I huffed. “That’s bullshit, and you know it!”

He kept grinning like the cat that got the cream. “All I’m hearing is that you like me. Are you going to kiss me now?”

I blinked. He was truly out of control. “Why on earth would you think that?”

He looked so pleased with himself that I would’ve killed him if he weren’t already dead. “Because you finally admitted the truth,” he said happily. “And you like kissing me. Right?”

I glared at him, my eye twitching. “I won’t be admitting anything else today. So don’t get any ideas.”

“You like kissing me,” he said with certainty. “And who could blame you, really?”

He was infuriatingly cute, I had to give him that. But I also needed to let him know another piece of truth. “I’m not really sure how I feel about kissing you again, though. And that’s not a joke.”

He looked confused. “Does it not feel good?”

I shook my head, blushing again. “It’s not about that. You’re a ghost, I’m not, and… there are so many questions.”

He leaned a little closer, his gaze moving from my eyes to my mouth. There was an intensity there that made my heart race.

“Why don’t we start answering them?” he whispered.

**Episode 1654**

GREYSON

It felt like I was walking through a numbing fog. My movements were slow, but the pain in my leg was gone. That was cause for worry. Pain made me feel real.

Was any of this real?

Was this man really Silas? And who was the child beside him? How did any of this make any sense? Could it be the three witches? Could they be doing this, teasing me and torturing me for their own amusement? Could they be so cruel?

No. This had to be my father’s work.

But the truth of the matter was that I couldn’t be sure about anything. Not anymore.

I stopped several yards away, not wanting to get too close to Silas or the young boy. The kid, though, stared at me with piercing eyes and tugged on Silas’s arm. He leaned down, and the boy gripped his hand tightly. He whispered something in Silas’s ear, and I felt a shiver go down my spine. Something was telling me the two of them together wasn’t a good pairing for anyone.

My father smiled, and it was as terrifying as ever. It sent another cold chill down my back. I would never get used to his smile. It was such a fake expression on an evil face. It never brought me any kind of happiness, just pain and misery. *Always*.

“Why don’t you ask him yourself?” Silas told the boy, and pointed at me.

My stomach clenched with anxiety. What was going on exactly? The boy, looking shy, hid behind Silas. When he spoke, his voice was soft, but it still carried so much weight that I felt it right on my shoulders. “Are you afraid of me, Dad?”

What? *Dad?*

There was no way. Had I heard this kid correctly? I couldn’t have.

The boy was calling me his father. There was no way that was possible.

“Who are you?” I asked, not really thinking about the question. It was a natural reaction on my part, the only reaction that would make sense under these circumstances, no matter how magical and messed up they were. But the boy flinched, as if my words had hurt him gravely.

“I’m your son,” he said. His lower lip was trembling. He looked up at Silas. “Why doesn’t he remember me? Doesn’t he love me anymore?”

This was madness. My head was pounding hard enough that I had to clutch at it, to rub my forehead to ease the pain. “I don’t have a son,” I said, shaking.

The kid looked like he was about to burst into tears, but Silas laughed, as if all this misery was a treat. “A father who doesn’t recognize his own son. And a son who refuses to accept his own father.”

He was talking about me not accepting him—as if there had ever been a debate about that. As if I hadn’t told him time and time again that we were done. That we would always be done, no matter the circumstances. Regardless of whether he was dead, or alive, or somewhere in between, I was not his son.

The little boy, though… What was his role in all this? Why did he look so sad?

My head had started to hurt uncontrollably. I had to be dreaming. Didn’t I?

The boy stared at me with huge, watery eyes, walking up to me. He reached out his tiny hand and said, “Come on, Daddy. Take my hand.”

When I spoke again, I gritted my teeth. “I’m not your goddamn father!”

The kid flinched, sniffling before tears began to fall. His lower lip was still jutting out, trembling, his little shoulders shaking. He wiped his tears slowly, standing before me, an image that felt close to torture.

“Did I do something wrong?” the kid whispered, looking raw. “Whatever I did, I’m sorry…” He stared at me as if I were precious, as if he needed me. As if he really was my son, and being loved by me was the most important thing in the world to him.

I felt sick to my stomach.

Silas stepped closer. “Don’t fight this, Greyson. You know what you have to do.” He gestured at the boy. “Take his hand.”

I turned my palm into a fist. The kid was devastated, but there was something so wrong about this moment. I couldn’t trust anyone other than myself and my instincts, and what they said was to stay away from both Silas and the child.

But, seemingly against my will, I did extend my arm.

I was about to touch the boy, the boy who was still crying and looking up at me with so much love and longing and hurt that I didn’t know what the hell to do, when suddenly…

I was yanked backward.

I spun around only to see Xavier staring at me, looking baffled. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

I shook my head, confused, disoriented.

“What the hell is going on?” I asked my brother. “Why are you here?”

“You’re seriously losing your mind, aren’t you?” Xavier demanded. “What were you staring at out there?”

My heart racing, I turned and faced the dark, empty woods. Silas was gone, and so was the kid. That kid who called himself my son. Swallowing roughly, I faced my brother again. “Where are they?”

Xavier raised his eyebrows. “There’s nobody here, Greyson.”

I took a deep breath. The fog was lifting from my mind, but my head was still hurting. My leg began to throb, hard enough to make me dizzy. I stepped toward my brother, ready to rest my hand on his shoulder, to keep myself standing, when he barked, “You’d better stop right there!”

I stared at him, shocked. “What’s wrong with you?” I asked, breathless.

Xavier looked astonished. “You think there’s something wrong with *me*? You’re a fucking revenant.”

I winced. “What the hell are you talking about? Do I look like a revenant? Am I trying to fucking eat you right now?”

“You’re not, at least not right now. But you did have an orange light in your eyes, just before,” Xavier said, his gaze narrowed. “More like a glaze. An orange glaze. Like on a donut.”

I was so beyond confused right now. “Why are we talking about donuts?”

Xavier kept his expression deadpan, even though he was the one who’d brought up donuts. “I’m not sure. It could have been the reflection of the pack house lights, I suppose…” He looked me up and down. “But just to be safe, keep your distance from me.”

I rolled my eyes. “And people call me dramatic.”

He ignored my tone. “Do you even know what you’re doing out here, babbling to yourself?”

I frowned. “I wasn’t talking to myself. Silas was here.”

Xavier inhaled sharply. “You saw him?”

I nodded, the pain in my head and leg growing. I was having trouble focusing, staying upright.

“Are you sure you weren’t imagining it? Maybe you were sleepwalking?” Xavier suggested, looking thoughtful.

I snorted. “Since when do I sleep walk? Silas was here. I mean it, Xavier!”

“But what the hell did he want?” Xavier demanded.

“I have no idea,” I said. I told Xavier about the little boy who insisted he was my son.

Xavier looked sick and worried at the same. “Did the kid even look like you?”

“I can’t remember,” I said, shaking my head.

I thought of the dreams I used to have—the child Cali and I had had… Had the little boy looked like Cali?

As hard as I tried to remember, the memory did not return, even though the vision had happened just seconds ago. And what was left in me right now was the need to see Cali. I had to make sure she was okay, especially if both my brother and I were out of the house. Danger was hiding in every corner.

“I need to see Cali,” I told my brother, taking a step toward the house. But then pain shot through me. My leg felt like it was on fire, the sensation pounding and horrifying. I stumbled, but my brother caught me.

“Where are you even going?” he asked, grabbing me by the shoulders.

If he wanted me to stay away from Cali, he had another thing coming. I pushed him off, shaking my head. “I’m going to the house to see Cali.”

He blocked my way. “You can’t do that.”

Who was this kid, thinking he could tell me what to do?

“You’d better watch the way you talk to your Alpha,” I snapped. “Get the fuck out of my way, I need to see Cali.”

I tried to move past him, but he shoved me. I stumbled back, grimacing as pain shot through me once more. I struggled to keep my balance while Xavier stared at me, his chest heaving with every panting breath.

“This isn’t normal, Greyson. You’re not acting like a goddamn Alpha,” he said. “It’s time for a new Alpha*.* Right now.”

**Episode 1655**

CHARLIE

Sophie kept staring at me, waiting for an answer. Meanwhile, I was doing my best not to freak out. I knew that she deserved the truth—she had already risked herself to help me—but answering her question would mean exposing Violet. And I couldn’t take that chance.

“I’m—I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I blurted awkwardly. “See you at the drills tomorrow!” I stepped back into my room and moved to close the door, but then Sophie blocked it with her foot.

That was a little aggressive, wasn’t it?

“Is Daisy Blackburn your mate?” Sophie asked, crossing her arms.

My eyes went wide as I looked around behind her. “Oh my god, be quiet,” I whispered, stepping back out into the hall. “What if the others overheard you?”

Sophie looked like she didn’t even register my words. “So? Is it true?”

I made sure to stare at her without blinking. I had heard somewhere that not blinking was a sign of honesty, or whatever. “Of course not. Why would I risk my”—I looked around—“*mate’s* safety. Why would I bring her here? To hunter camp?” I laughed nervously. “That would be crazy, right? Do you think I’m crazy? Haha!”

A really bad liar was what I was, but anyway.

Sophie chewed on her lip. She seemed thoughtful, and in the end, she said, “I’m not sure whether to believe you or not.”

It seemed like my abnormal staring hadn’t convinced her. Damn it.

I forced a yawn as a last resort. “I get that you want to discuss this, but it’s getting late, and it’s been a really long day. Can we talk about it some other time?”

Sophie gave me one more curious look before she nodded. “Sure.”

“Great—I mean good night, thank you,” I blurted all at once and closed the door, catching her disappointed look just before she turned away.

Groaning, I leaned against the wall, feeling like shit. Did she believe me? Did I want her to believe me? Hell yeah, I definitely did, especially now that she’d said that she liked me! As in LIKED me, liked me.

This was such a fucking mess.

“Everything cool with you and Sophie?” Zachery asked, sitting up in his bed. He was the last thing I needed right now.

My head still spinning, I said, “She was just checking to see if I was okay.”

Zachery raised an eyebrow. “It sounded more like a booty call, but whatever.”

It felt like my whole face had caught fire. Laughing awkwardly, I headed to the bathroom and closed the door behind me. Staring at my reflection in the mirror, I fought to even out my breathing.

What the hell had Violet been dragged into?

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I had barely slept all night. My stomach was in knots as I walked to the field the next morning. I saw Violet standing with some of the other campers, chatting casually about food or something else that seemed relatively harmless.

“Hey,” I said, walking up to her after her party headed off to get some water.

She gave me a big smile and looked down at my hands, as if she shared my urge to grab my mate and never let go. “How did you sleep?” she asked, leaning forward slightly. She smelled so incredible that I had to bite the inside of my cheek to distract myself.

I could feel people looking at us—especially Sophie, her expression obviously curious.

“Fine,” I muttered.

I forced myself to look away from Violet. I was certain that the longer I looked at her, the longer I interacted with her, the more obvious my feelings would be, and then everybody would figure out how I felt about her. I was basically a billboard with “SHE’S MY MATE, I LOVE HER!” plastered across my forehead, and neon lights surrounding the entire thing.

In general, I just had to be cool. Which was not my strength. At least not when it came to Violet. I felt the back of her hand brush mine, and I almost jumped away.

“Relax,” she murmured, smirking.

She needed to stop it with the smirking, because it just made me want to kiss her even more.

“Good morning everyone!” Sergeant Pepperdine barked. “Get your asses in line!”

He began our usual warm-up routine, walking among us and examining every detail. Violet was on my right, looking at me now and then, until, a full minute later, she mind linked with me.

*What’s the plan? You know I can’t just stay here.*

*The plan?* I replied.

I was starting to panic here. I hadn’t had the time to think of a real plan, actually. I just knew that thanks to my mother, things had gotten a lot more complicated. She may have saved Violet’s life, but she’d also put my mate in extreme danger. Violet could be exposed at any minute. The thought of someone like Chad finding out that she was a werewolf made me nauseous.

*Yeah, a plan about what we do next*, Violet repeated.

*Right, of course, I have a plan*,I lied. *We should discuss this after the drills, though. Stay focused for now and do your best to blend in, okay?*

She gave me a nod. *Okay. Thank you, Charlie.*

I had no idea what she was thanking me for, because I felt like a useless asshole.

“This is it!” Sergeant Pepperdine yelled, after he led us to a new obstacle course. “Look at this beauty!”

All I could see was mud to roll and crawl through. Not fun at all.

“I expect you all to work in teams, so let me pair you up!” He started walking around and barking who would work with who. When he stopped in front of Violet and me, he paused. “New girl, you go with Charlie. Good luck!”

Was the old man being sarcastic? And had he matched me up with Violet on purpose, or was it luck?

*Yay!* Violet mind linked. *We’re together, how exciting!*

Debatable.

I didn’t have the time to respond, or to figure out what Pepperdine’s angle had been. The drill had already begun, with the whistle going off as loudly as ever.

“That’s it! Get your ass moving, Charlie!” Chad yelled at me from the side, his arm still in a sling.

“Shut up, Bowman,” I snapped back.

Violet glared at him and huffed, immediately racing ahead, easily passing by Sophie and a few of the others.

*Oh, shit.*

As I ran past Sophie to catch up to Violet, she raised an eyebrow at me. “Your new friend seems pretty competitive.”

I gave her an awkward smile and raced forward, but my mate was already over the first wall. Damn. I came up to her just as she started to climb the rope ladder and grabbed her arm to pull her back.

“What are you doing?” Violet asked, looking flushed and confused.

I could hear the others catching up, climbing the wall, so I decided to mind link instead of speak. *You have to slow down.*

She scowled. *Why? I’m not going to let these hunters think they’re better than us! Did you hear what that idiot with the sling said?*

I shook my head. *You have to ignore Chad.* *He’s a hunter like the rest of them, and you are a werewolf. You have to purposefully ease up on your skills, or you’re going to stand out, and they’re going to suspect.*

Violet looked very annoyed. *You want me to sabotage myself?*

*You have to, Violet. It’s the only way*, I said, remembering what Romilly had told me. *Don’t stand out in any way.*

Violet grabbed at the rope a little too tightly as Sophie and the others caught up. I pretended to help Violet with the ladder, ignoring the look that Sophie shot at us.

“Not so good with ropes, is she?” Sophie said under her breath, but I heard her. Violet had heard her as well, and she looked more irritated than I’d ever seen her.

*I never had you pegged as a competitive person*, I mind linked, after we got third place in the race.

*This is a matter of principle!* Violet said, crossing her arms. I would have laughed at how fucking cute she was, if the circumstances had been different. Meaning, if both our lives hadn’t been in danger.

“Oh, boohoo, Charlie! Third place? That’s for losers!” Chad mocked from the sidelines.

*He’d better shut up before I break his other hand as well*, Violet said, looking seriously pissed off.

I sighed, looking up at the sky. I needed to resolve this Violet situation, sooner rather than later. Definitely before she talked to Chad when her competitiveness got the best of her. I was still not over that part. Violet had been all flushed, her arms crossed, her lips pursed together. It was kind of sexy, actually, I wondered how—

*No.*

I couldn’t afford to think about any of that BS. I needed to stay focused here. I had to figure out a way to help my mate. Which meant that I was going to have to talk to my mother, of all people.

She was going to have to help my mate get out of this before it was too late.

**Episode 1656**

I snuggled next to Xavier, taking in his scent. I felt so safe in his arms, every inch of me relaxed and cozy. I kissed his neck, his chest, sliding my hand up and down his arm. Every inch of him was made of muscle, and I loved feeling all that power under my fingertips.

I could tell that Xavier was falling asleep now that he’d come back to the room, but he made this beautiful sound of contentment as I caressed his body. I felt sticky with sweat, a little thirsty after our love making, so I leaned forward and whispered in his ear. “I’m going to go downstairs to get a drink of water. Do you want one?”

He opened just one eye, smirking at me. “I’m good. Don’t take too long.”

I smiled, kissing his cheek then his lips before I got out of bed and wrapped myself in a robe. Xavier kept his eyes closed, spread out on the bed, his forearm flung over his forehead and a sheet covering his lower body. The sight of him made me grin. I felt lucky to be here with him.

Still smiling to myself, I headed downstairs, making sure not to make any noise. But suddenly, there was noise everywhere.

There was the sound of children laughing and running around.

*What the hell?* I thought. *It’s the middle of the night! Why am I hearing creepy-ass children?*

I had watched enough horror movies to know that this was not a good sign. There was a light in the kitchen, and instead of going upstairs and calling for my mate, I decided to do what you did in a horror movie. Walk toward it.

I was literally walking toward the light.

But what I saw when I reached the kitchen looked nothing like a thriller. Greyson, gorgeous as ever, was sitting at the table, spoon-feeding a baby boy while a young girl drank from a sippy cup in a chair beside them.

*What’s happening here…?*

I gasped, and Greyson looked up instantly. He smiled. “The kids wanted a midnight snack. Care to join us?” He pointed at me. “Look kids, Mommy’s here!”

The toddler girl waved at me, calling, “Mommy!” while the infant gave me a precious toothless smile, because shockingly enough, babies did recognize their mothers. I was beyond disturbed by both the cuteness and the impossibility of what was happening.

*Okay, but why do I have children?* I wondered.

I cautiously approached, and the baby girl raised her arms at me, making grabby hands. Again, she repeated, “Mommy!”

I had no idea what to do. Why did she keep calling me Mommy? I’d heard her the first time and freaked out then. Did she need me to freak out even more?

I was so, so, SO CONFUSED.

“The kids and I were talking about having another sibling,” Greyson told me with a smirk. “What do you say, love? Are you ready for another?”

I was shaking at this point. What was going on? “Another child? A real one?”

Greyson laughed, looking like the model he was, even while feeding a baby boy something that looked like applesauce. “Well,” he said, pointing at the toddler girl. “Her vote’s yes.” He pointed at the baby boy. “But he’s undecided.”

“Bah!” the baby boy exclaimed, grinning up at me as he flung the puke around. I mean, his food.

“See?” Greyson said. “He can’t decide. And nobody can agree on whether it should be a boy or a girl.”

I had been trying to wrap my head around what was happening for the past few minutes, and now Greyson was acting like a sales associate on commission, trying to get me pregnant again.

“Are you…” I swallowed roughly. “Are you real?”

Greyson raised an eyebrow. Without any further ado, he stood up, pulled me into a hug, and crashed his mouth against mine—in front of the children, no less! In the background, I heard the little girl clap and the baby boy babble gibberish, but soon enough, everything else faded. It was just me, Greyson’s hard grip on me, and his soft lips against mine.

“Does that feel fake?” he said against my mouth, and I shivered. “Of course I’m real, love.”

“But the kids?” I stammered.

He tucked my hair behind my ear. “They’re beautiful, just like their mother.”

*My god.* How the fuck was I supposed to answer that?

Feeling like I was melting, I let Greyson herd me to the table. “Come join us for a snack.”

I sat down, looking around at the children as Greyson started whistling and preparing something. The little boy was frowning at his empty bowl, which was definitely my vibe, but I could see Greyson’s chin dimple on the kid. As for the little girl—who was now squashing grapes on the table—she had huge grey eyes, really similar to Greyson’s, especially with those eyelashes.

*But this can’t be real, Cali!* I told myself. *Could it be a dream? Are the three witches doing this?*

Because if that was the case, I needed to remind myself that none of this mattered. That it would stop existing when I woke up.

Suddenly, the baby boy reached out to me, his tiny stubby fingers brushing over my hand. “Mama!”

The baby’s hand was ice cold, and I recoiled. The kid noticed my reaction. I could see his expression change in seconds. He had looked excited, so happy to see me, so eager for contact, for a hug, and now his little round-cheeked face burst into miserable tears.

*Well, this is horrible*,I thought. *Witches, you can stop this at any time, thanks!*

“No, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—”

The baby just wailed harder.

“What happened?” Greyson asked me.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Is he sick?”

Greyson looked instantly alarmed. “What? Why?”

I stared at my hand. The cold touch had lingered, causing a chill to spread through me. It was so powerful, such an odd, horrible sensation that made me shudder, made me feel like the life was being drained out of me bit by bit. And then a vicious thought popped into my head, loud and sharp.

*Our son has the touch of death.*

I stepped back, knocking the sippy cup to the floor as both kids started crying, so loud and mournful that I had no idea what to do. I backed away, full of shock and fear, while Greyson stared at me.

But even his voice sounded eerie. “What’s wrong, love?”

I opened my mouth to speak, my pulse speeding up. But before a word could come out of my mouth, the children’s cries got louder, and their eyes…

Their eyes glowed orange.

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I bolted awake, shaking, covered in cold sweat.

*It* was *a dream*, I thought, my heart racing. Thank god it was a dream!

Xavier woke up right after me, squeezing my shoulder. “What’s wrong?” he asked anxiously.

I was still gasping for breath. I fought to shove the image of the orange-eyed children out of my mind… Greyson’s and my children.

“I… I don’t know,” I choked out, feeling the urge to cry.

Xavier wrapped his arms around me. “It’s okay. You were just having a nightmare. It wasn’t real.”

It had felt real, though. All of it. Both the sweet and the terrifying parts.

*Had Greyson seen the same thing?* I wondered. The thought rattled me.

“I need…” I took a deep breath. “I need to go check on Greyson. See how he’s doing.”

Before I could move, Xavier said, “I don’t think you should do that.”

I scoffed. “I’m not doing this right now.” I pushed his hand away, definitely not in the mood for pettiness or jealousy after what I’d just seen. “I’m checking on Greyson, and you can’t stop me.”

I grabbed a robe and headed out of the room with Xavier in tow.

“I’m going with you,” he declared.

I looked up at him, about to roll my eyes, but then I realized that his expression was not one of spite. Xavier looked worried, actually. Really fucking worried.

*Huh?*

This wasn’t just jealousy. But then what was it?

I knocked and opened Greyson’s door after he told me to come in.

Greyson was in bed, but he looked exhausted. His eyes widened when he saw me.

I sat by his side. “Are you okay?” I placed my hand on his forehead. Why the hell did he feel warm?

“Xavier, I think he’s got a fever,” I said, but Xavier just shook his head.

Xavier stared at Greyson. “Is there anything you want to say to Cali, Greyson?”

Greyson leveled Xavier with a stare. “No.”

This didn’t make any fucking sense, and I needed these brothers to stop being so damn difficult.

“Okay, what’s going on?” I demanded. “Both of you, out with it!”

Xavier dragged his eyes away from Greyson and stared at me. “Greyson has to tell everyone that there’s a new Alpha.”

I choked in shock. “What? *Who?*”

Xavier’s voice was even. “Me.”

**Episode 1657**

XAVIER

Cali blinked at me in shock. “What? What are you talking about? What the hell is going on?”

“It’s simple,” I said, prepared to hold my ground. “Greyson is in no condition to run a bakery, let alone a pack house.”

Cali frowned, looking confused. She turned to Greyson. “You want to run a bakery?”

Greyson, the jackass, shrugged. “Why not?”

Cali nodded. “I mean, Torin would definitely help you, and—”

“God, you two, this isn’t a joke!” I snapped. “Cali, he’s pulling your leg right now. He doesn’t want to open a bakery—that was just a figure of speech!”

Cali gasped. “You LIED to me?”

I should have expected that the mention of anything related to baked goods would throw Cali completely off fucking track. A rookie mistake on my part.

“Cali, it’s fine—”

“He can’t run a pack, you said,” Cali told me, poking my shoulder. “But why?” She peered at Greyson. “Is it your leg?”

Greyson, looking tired but still pretty deadpan, the fucker, swung his bare legs to the floor. He pointed at the witch mark. “I don’t know what he’s talking about. The wound has healed.”

Cali looked more confused than ever. She gazed between me and Greyson, her eyebrows pulled together. “But then why is Xavier saying that you’re in no condition to lead?”

I was growing pretty fucking annoyed here. Greyson needed to admit exactly why he wasn’t fit. What I’d come across myself.

“This is not a debate,” I said.

“It is, because I said so.” Greyson arched the eyebrow. “Because I’m the Alpha.”

I was about to snap someone’s neck—Greyson’s, ideally—so I grabbed Cali by the arm instead, making her face me. “Cali, you’re on my side on this, right? Don’t you want me to be the Alpha?”

She looked up at me, her mouth opening and closing like a fish’s. And then she took a step back, freeing herself from my grip.

“Cali?” I asked, waiting. I had no fucking idea what was going on in her head right now.

She swallowed visibly, looking between Greyson and me. “Is this… Is this because of last night?”

Greyson and I looked at each other, but Cali had already started. “Oh my *god*, I’m sick and tired of you two fighting over me like I’m a piece of meat! If you can’t stick with the agreement, then—”

“It’s not about that,” I said, loudly enough to make Cali pause.

She looked beyond weirded out now. “Then what the hell is going on?”

“Xavier is just exaggerating, as ever,” Greyson said dryly. “He’s trying to exploit the situation to his benefit.”

Cali gasped. I clenched my jaw. From between my teeth, I said, “I found Greyson in the yard, in the middle of the night, talking to himself. He said he saw Silas. He was clearly out of his fucking mind and in extreme pain.”

Cali paused. Greyson glared at me.

*You’re gonna pay for ratting me out*, Greyson mind linked.

*I should have left you out in the cold, let you add frostbite to your never-ending list of problems, asshole! I* replied.

Greyson huffed, looking away, as Cali took his hand.

“Is this true?” she whispered.

I couldn’t believe this. “Of course it’s true! Do you think I made it up?”

Cali shot me a glare. “Xavier.”

“What?” I snapped. “That’s what happened!”

Greyson shrugged. The liar. “Like I said before, Xavier’s exaggerating.”

I scoffed, just as Cali repeated, “Greyson, I asked you something. Is this true?”

For a long moment, nobody spoke. And then, with his gaze still fixed on their joined hands, Greyson spoke up. “Yes, but—”

Cali gasped, and I realized that this was my in. I stepped forward, cutting Greyson off. “The pack is in enough trouble already without adding your BS, Greyson. They don’t need an Alpha who’s delusional, can’t fight, and can’t think straight. It’s time for a change.”

The words had come out of my mouth without me filtering them first. I sounded cynical, almost cruel, but I was speaking the truth. Greyson, though, remained in denial.

“And you’re the solution?” He scoffed. He was acting like he hadn’t asked me to step up if he became a revenant. He was acting like he hadn’t asked me to literally kill him in order to protect Cali and the pack. But that was supposed to be a secret between us, and I knew that I had to be careful here.

I couldn’t move forward without some serious fucking back-up, not when Greyson was still semi… not entirely out of control. Would Cali support me, though? Would the pack support me?

“Bottom line,” I said, “the one thing you can’t deny is that right now, I’m the better, more fit Alpha. And that’s what the pack needs.”

Greyson shot me a bitter look. “This is all about the pack? Ha. Last night, you said I shouldn’t be Alpha, and I made it pretty clear how I felt about that.” He rose to his full height, coming to stand before me, his gaze hard on mine. “But no matter what the fuck you say, Xavier, nothing has changed. I’m still Alpha, and I plan to *remain* Alpha.”

The night before came rushing back.

“You tried to brush off what happened last night, but I know what I saw,” I declared.

Greyson shook his head, his tone bitter, his anger rising. “You saw what you always want to see—a chance to undermine me and take over the pack.”

“Greyson, seriously?” I snapped. “This isn’t some sneaky takeover or whatever the fuck—I’m worried about you. And the pack. I thought it wouldn’t come down to this, you know I thought it wouldn’t after our conversation the other night, but after seeing you basically losing your mind out there, what the hell do you *want* me to do?”

“I never said—”

“You never said *what*? You know the witch mark is dangerous—you admitted that to me,” I snapped. “Maybe you’re the one who’s seeing what he wants to see, and you’re making a serious mistake that could cost all of us our lives.” I pointed at Cali, who had been looking between us and holding her breath. “Everyone’s lives—including Cali’s.”

Greyson’s eyes narrowed. His voice was cold. “I will never put Cali’s life in danger.”

My jaw was set. “You already have. And no matter how much you fucking deny it, no matter how many lies you tell to yourself, you know that I’m telling the truth about all this.” I pointed at my chest. “You know I’m right.”

I took one last look at a wide-eyed Cali before storming out.

I couldn’t deal with my brother when he was like this—stubborn and in denial. I marched back into my room and slammed the door behind me, shaking.

I was shaking all over, and I had to wonder why.

Why the fuck hadn’t I just challenged Greyson right then and there?

This had been building for months, so what the hell had held me back?

*Cali.*

Of course. The reason was Cali. I couldn’t risk challenging Greyson—not when Cali could blame me for it, and think I was doing it out of jealousy. I was really worried here, about the pack, about her—this had nothing to do with fucking jealousy!

*Did it?*

“Xavier?” Cali’s soft voice made me shiver.

I turned to see her standing by the doorway, her hair mussed in that sexy way I loved. *Fuck*. Why did we have to be arguing?

She closed the door behind her, taking a deep breath. “What was all that about?”

I couldn’t believe I needed to keep explaining myself when the truth was obvious.

“Greyson is being selfish—that’s what it’s about,” I said. “He *knows* he’s a threat to the pack.”

Cali paused, staring at me. She was uncharacteristically somber. “He thinks you’re doing the same thing.”

I shook my head. “It’s really not the same. Greyson’s holding onto his crown while everything is falling apart around him. I’m trying to build things, here!”

Cali sighed. “Xavier—”

I walked up to her, almost desperate now. “Why won’t you believe me? Greyson was completely out of it last night, might even be a revenant—are we willing to risk that?”

Cali swallowed roughly, pressing her lips together. “I don’t know what to believe. I wasn’t there. But I know that if something was seriously wrong, Greyson would be the first to admit it.”

I used to think that way too, after my meeting with him the other night, where he’d asked me to step up as Alpha if the need arose. But now I realized all that had been bullshit. And Cali…

“So that’s how it is, huh?” I asked.

She frowned. “How what is?”

“You don’t want me to be Alpha,” I said bitterly.

Her eyes widened in hurt. “Xavier, no. It’s not that.”

I saw the pain in her expression, and it soothed me. It gave me hope. But I still demanded, “Then why won’t you back me on this?”

“The pack needs to stick together during this revenant situation, and a sudden change in leadership could split them into factions. Is this really the time for you to make your move?” Cali demanded, clearly frustrated.

“It’s not a move,” I declared, exasperated. “It’s a necessity!”

Cali shook his head, looking aghast. “Not now, Xavier. Promise me…” She gripped both my hands, squeezing. Her gaze was intense on mine. “Can you promise me you’ll stop trying to take over as Alpha? Just for now?”

**Episode 1658**

Xavier stared at me, unblinking. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” he said quietly.

“Xavier—”

“You can’t be serious right now.”

“I am,” I insisted. “Of course I’m serious. Can’t you see what your move to become Alpha would do to the pack? Right now? When everyone is so nervous and scared? Think about this, *please*!”

Xavier gave me a long look. “You know, I wonder if you’re more concerned about what my becoming Alpha would do to Greyson, because clearly you’re choosing his side.”

“I’m *not*!” I exclaimed. “That’s not what I’m doing. You know I’m not. I don’t even want you to talk like that. You know what would happen if I chose either one of you—it would be fatal.” Xavier didn’t flinch. “I’m not choosing anyone. I just want you to think about how you would feel if the roles were reversed. Think about it. How would you feel if you were Alpha right now, and Greyson came to you and asked you to step aside?”

“I would do it in a heartbeat if I thought the pack would be better for it,” Xavier snapped. “Greyson’s too proud to admit it, but he’s putting us all at risk.”

I bit my lip. I wasn’t sure how to keep arguing my point. I could see that Xavier was a volcano, ready to explode, and that I was already walking a thin line with this conversation. I took a deep breath and tried for a compromise. “Can’t you just wait for a little while? Just until things settle down? Xavier, I know you want to be Alpha—you’ve made that clear—”

“And you would be my Luna,” Xavier interjected, his eyes blazing. He took a step toward me and caught my hand in his. “Isn’t that what you want? The two of us—Alpha and Luna of the Redwood pack?”

I looked down at his hand holding mine, my heart beating fast. I wasn’t sure how to answer that question. I *had* wanted to be Xavier’s Luna, but that had been… *before*. Before I’d realized Greyson was also my mate. So much had changed since then. When I looked up, I found Xavier staring at me, waiting expectantly for an answer, so I opened my mouth to speak, but no sound came out. I just didn’t know what to say.

Xavier’s eyes searched mine, and I saw the confusion in them—and then the pain. He shook his head and dropped my hand. Then, turning on his heel, he wrenched open the door and walked out of the room.

I started to follow, reaching for him to catch his hand, but then I stopped myself. What was I going to say? What *could* I say? God, had I just made a huge mess of this?

A wave of guilt washed over me. I felt like I’d let Xavier down, but I didn’t know what else I could have done or said. It was an impossible situation.

I rubbed my forehead, feeling a headache starting to build.

I needed to check on Greyson. Xavier’s concerns about his fitness to be Alpha were troubling me, and if Greyson was sick or out of it, I wanted to see it for myself. I stepped into the hall and looked quickly around, checking to see that it was empty. I knew if Xavier saw me going to check on Greyson, it would only add fuel to the fire and make him more upset, but what could I do? It wasn’t like I could just ignore my other mate.

I knew what I had to do, so I headed toward Greyson’s room.

But before I reached it, a door opened, and Lola poked her head out of her room. “Cali?”

I stopped and stared. “LOLA?” After a shocked moment, I rushed over.

Lola opened her door and threw her arms around me, yanking me into a hug. “Hey, girl! I was just coming to look for you!”

“Lola! You’re here!” I gasped. “I’m so glad to see you! I’m so glad you’re okay!”

“Me too!” Lola rocked me back and forth for a moment, then she pulled away and grinned. “But you’d better be careful, or I might just be tempted to have you for a snack.” Her grin showed off her new—lethally sharp—fangs.

I knew she was joking, but—remembering the last time she’d lost her head—my laugh was still a little tense. “So, you’ve got that all under control, right?”

“I think so.” Lola shrugged. “But I did have to leave Tottenville a little earlier than I’d planned. You know, because of the revenant-vampires and everything.”

“Oh my god,” I said, rolling my eyes. “Please never do that to me again.”

“What?’

I gave her shoulder a shove. “Call me for help and then drop the freaking phone. I was terrified. I almost peed my pants.”

“It’s not like I planned it,” Lola said huffily. “Things just got a little out of hand. But! The good news is I’m back with Jay and all of you now!”

I grinned. “That *is* good. But what about that vampire heat thing?”

“Oh, that.” Lola gave me a mischievous little grin. “Well, that shouldn’t be a problem anymore, now that I’m back with Jay. He’s more than up to the challenge.”

I laughed. That was classic Lola, and I was glad she was happy, but I was also a little confused. Jay had been Lola’s mate before, too, when she’d started having these problems, so what was the big difference now? But whatever. If Lola felt better now, then that was all that mattered to me. Besides, I was just glad to have Lola back—especially now, when everything at the pack house was so messed up.

I looked up as Jay stumbled into view behind Lola, rubbing his sleepy eye. “Good morning, Jay.”

“Morning, Cali,” he slurred. He grinned crookedly. “I think I need some coffee.”

“Hang on,” Lola said, stepping toward him and adjusting his eye patch, which was askew. “I can make you a cup—”

“NO!” Jay shouted, looking suddenly alert.

Lola rolled her eyes. “I’m getting better at making it.”

Jay shook his head, smiling. “It’s okay, I’ll do it. It’s no bother.”

I chuckled as I watched Jay stumbling down the hall toward the stairs. “Why is he so exhausted? Was it the vampire fight?”

Lola shrugged. “Maybe a bit.” Then she smiled, her eyes twinkling. “But I think I might have worn him out.”

“Ugh, Lola.” I wrinkled my nose. “Too much info.”

She shrugged again, breezily. “You asked. I’m just stating facts.” She stepped past me toward the stairs. “Jay! I’m coming, sweetie pie,” she sang out.

I shook my head but smiled as I looked after her. For someone who’d just gone through what had sounded like a pretty harrowing vampire battle, Lola sure was chipper this morning. But that was Lola. She’d always been good at letting the bad stuff just roll off her back.

With a sigh, I turned back toward Greyson’s room. I had almost reached it when I heard someone call my name. When I turned, I found Ava standing behind me, staring at me in the dim hallway.

Great. What was she doing here? And what the hell did she want with me?

I didn’t like the look on her face, and I looked past her, wishing Lola and Jay hadn’t gone downstairs. But I tried not to let on. I didn’t want to give her the satisfaction of seeing that she scared the shit out of me.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded. “I thought you’d run off with Kira.”

Ava eyed me for a moment, then put her hands on her hips. “I did. And now I’m back.”

“Why?” I asked, trying to infuse my voice with derision instead of fear. “It’s not like anyone here missed you.”

Ava stepped toward me, and my heart beat harder with every step she took. There was something different about her this morning. She had a strange confidence that was making me feel very uneasy.

“I did what was asked of me,” she said, her voice low. “I killed Iñigo, and now Xavier knows he can trust me.”

I swallowed hard. “That’s great,” I said sarcastically.

She didn’t seem to hear me. “By killing Iñigo, I fulfilled my promise to Xavier and to this pack. And now I’m back, and there’s nothing you or anyone else can do about it.”

She was probably right about that, and it made me feel even more uneasy. I shrugged, trying to appear casual. “And?”

Ava smiled, a cold, sinister smile that sent a shiver up my spine. “*And*, now that the test of my loyalty is taken care of, there’s nothing standing in my way, Cali.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, confused. “Nothing standing in your way from what?”

“Standing in my way from getting Xavier back.” She tilted her head. “Nothing except you.”

**Episode 1659**

MARTA

I rolled over, pulling the arm wrapped around me a little closer, enjoying the warmth and the security it gave me. I’d gone to sleep feeling nervous and worried, and it was just like Sylvia to cuddle me—we always did this when we were afraid or lonely. It was all we could do here at the foster home—we were all we had—and we had to look out for each other. We had to shield each other from a world that often forgot we even existed.

But… something was different. My sleepy, sluggish mind struggled to make sense of things. I turned to face my friend and blinked drowsily. My vision was still blurry, but even then, I could see that it wasn’t Sylvia’s face next to mine on the pillow, and I drew back with a gasp. Of course it wasn’t—Sylvia was dead. She had been dead for years. No, the face next to mine was Lilac’s.

I pushed away from him with a gasp, but I was tangled in the sheets. I fought—too hard—and rolled off the bed, crashing unceremoniously to the floor. I lay, panting, for a moment, and Lilac leaned over the edge of the bed, grinning.

“That was… graceful. Tell me that didn’t have anything to do with my morning breath.”

I glared up at him. “Just shut up,” I hissed. I kicked free of the sheet and staggered to my feet, rubbing my stinging elbow. I must have banged it on the floor when I’d landed.

“So.” Lilac propped himself up on one elbow and raised an eyebrow. “Was last night as good for you as it was for me?”

I took a swipe at him before I could help myself, forgetting that he was a ghost, and caught nothing but air.

Lilac laughed.

“Why are you always so annoying?” I demanded, stamping a bare foot. “I’d like to remind you that *nothing* happened last night, except that I took pity on you and let you sleep in my bed.”

Lilac shrugged airily. “Okay. If that’s what you want to tell yourself. But…” He winked. “I *know*.”

I stared at him. “Know what?”

He leaned toward me. “I know that you like me.”

I crossed my arms. “And how do you know that?”

He grinned. “Did you know that you talk in your sleep?”

“W-What? No I don’t!” I spluttered, my face flushing. But… *did I*? Doubt crept into the back of my mind. I had no idea. I gave my head a hard shake. “You just stay right here. I’m going to take a shower.”

“You don’t need any help, do you? Someone to scrub your back?”

I spun around and pointed an accusing finger at him. “If you try anything, Lilac, I will banish you to the spirit world so fast it’ll make your immortal head spin, you hear me?”

“Um, you can’t actually do that. Remember? The portal’s still not open.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Oh, for you, I’ll find a way to open it. Trust me.” And then I yanked open the bathroom door and slammed it behind me. I grabbed the hem of my T-shirt but stopped and looked around suspiciously. “You better not be in here!”

Showered and dressed, I headed downstairs twenty minutes later with damp hair and Lilac’s locket swinging around my neck.

“Is that shampoo orange blossom?” Lilac asked from just behind me on the stairs. He leaned closer to my hair and took a deep breath. “I really like it.”

“A little space, please,” I said, batting him away. “And your ghost senses aren’t so keen. It’s lemon verbena. Get your citrus right.”

Lilac rolled his eyes. “Imagine my embarrassment.”

When I reached the bottom of the stairs, I was surprised to see Big Mac in the living room with Kira. I’d thought Kira had left the pack house, but there she was, looking pale and tired, but ready to go.

Big Mac looked up as I walked in. “Marta, how are you? Are you still up for this séance?”

My heart beat fast, but I swallowed and touched my fingers to the locket around my neck. The feel of it was strange—it made me feel a little uneasy, because it was the anchor and a reminder that I was actually going to perform this incredibly difficult séance, but it also made me feel strangely comforted. Something about knowing it had once belonged to Lilac made me feel safer, somehow. The thought of that made me flush, and I gave myself a little shake, annoyed.

“I’m ready,” I said firmly.

“What’s that?” Big Mac said, eyeing the locket.

“It’s my anchor. Rain suggested I get it. It’s supposed to ground me in the mortal world while I reach into the immortal realm.”

“Where did you get it?” Big Mac asked.

My heart fluttered a little. “It belonged to Lilac.”

Kira walked over and bent to take a closer look at the locket. “It’s nice,” she murmured. “Are you sure it was his?”

“It still *is*,” Lilac snapped.

“Shut up,” I hissed.

Kira straightened and looked at me, her eyebrows raised, but didn’t say anything.

“Well then, I guess we should get going. I suggest we all bundle up. It’s cold outside, and we have to get pretty far away from the house to do this,” Big Mac said briskly.

I frowned. “Why can’t we do it inside?”

Big Mac and Kira exchanged a speaking look.

“It’s just a precaution,” Big Mac said vaguely. “You never really know how things might go when you’re contacting the dead.” She cleared her throat. “I’ll go get the others.”

Out on the grounds, I pulled my parka tight around me. The wind was bitter and icy against my still-damp hair. I looked around—Greyson, Cali, Xavier, Jay, Lola, Tom, Orla, Artemis, Rishika, Mrs. Smith, Torin, Astrid, Ravi, Ava, Sage, and Zainab were all gathered in a wide circle, along with Mace and a bunch of Blue Blood pack members. Everyone Big Mac had been able to find in the pack house. In the center of the circle was a small fire that smoked more than it burned. Kira was standing near it, throwing in bundles of dried herbs, and the smell was making my nose itch.

Big Mac waved me over, and I stepped out of the circle and toward the witch, who was holding Cali’s hand, squeezing the finger she’d just pricked for a drop of blood.

“This is fun,” Lilac said, stepping up next to me. He looked around at all the somber faces and the sad, tiny fire, barely able to keep a flame alive in the cruel wind. “It’s like a campfire, but without marshmallows.”

Ignoring him, I stepped between Kira and Big Mac.

“Everyone should join hands,” Kira said, looking around.

“What about me?” Lilac asked, looking huffy as I reached for Kira’s hand. “I want to hold your hand.”

“No!” I snapped. “Just stand still and keep your mouth shut. If that’s even possible.”

“We’re ready,” Big Mac said, looking at the fire. She glared at everyone. “And I’m going to take this opportunity to remind you all to do exactly as you’re told.”

I noticed that Big Mac’s gaze rested on Cali as she said this. Cali was standing between Greyson and Xavier, holding hands with both of her mates. I looked carefully at them. Was there more tension between the three of them than usual? Given the situation and the cold wind, it was hard to tell.

On either side of me, Big Mac and Kira dropped their heads and began to murmur words I couldn’t quite make out. The sound was strange—maybe a foreign language—but after a moment, I stopped trying to understand. It was like listening to hypnotists work. I wasn’t sleepy, but my whole body relaxed, and my eyelids drooped to half-mast.

Kira let go of my hand for a moment and stepped forward. She pulled a bundle of herbs from her bag and dropped it onto the fire. The fire hissed and sputtered, and a moment later the smoke turned sky blue.

I gasped as it rose up into the sky. It was so beautiful. I looked around, but no one else seemed to notice.

Kira threw in another bundle, and the smoke changed again, this time to a brilliant emerald green. The smoke rose higher and higher—undisturbed by the sharp wind—as though it was reaching for the heavens.

The locket around my neck began to vibrate, and the metal—freezing cold a moment ago—began to warm against my skin. The wind blew harder, lifting my hair, and a surge of energy pulsed around me, like invisible lightning.

Then there were voices—a blur of them, indiscernible from one another, the sound a growing cacophony. My head pulsed with pain as another surge of energy passed through me. What was happening? This wasn’t how séances usually went.

With a great effort, I turned my head, looking to see if Kira or Big Mac looked concerned, but they were both still looking down. Why wasn’t anyone else noticing this? It was so damn loud!

The witches were still murmuring their spell, though I could no longer hear them over the voices screaming around me. But they were expecting me to be the bridge, so I tried to rally. I closed my eyes, trying to concentrate, to connect with Deidamia.

*Deidamia.*

*Deidamia.*

*Deidamia.*

As I called out to her, the locket began to vibrate with even greater intensity, and then it started to emit a high-pitched sound that evolved into a voice.

*Deidamia, Deidamia, Deidamia, Deidamia.*

I couldn’t breathe. I let go of Kira’s and Big Mac’s hands as I lurched forward. I was dizzy and nauseous. Someone grabbed my hand—it was a hot grip, and it tugged, hard.

A sudden surge of energy nearly rocked me off my feet. The fire went out like a light being switched off, and the ground rushed up to meet me.

**Episode 1660**

GREYSON

Coughing hard, I waved a hand in front of my face, trying to see through the cloud of thick black smoke that had engulfed us all. When a gust of wind finally blew it away, I heard Cali gasp at what was revealed.

Marta lay unconscious on the smoke-blackened ground next to the extinguished fire, and kneeling next to her was a white, dark-haired woman I’d never seen before. Who the hell was this woman? Was it Deidamia or someone else? Where the hell had she come from? And why the hell was she completely naked?

No one moved. Even the wind died down for a moment as we all stood perfectly still, watching the strange woman as she bent over to look at Marta. She reached out her slender hand to gently touch Marta’s pale face.

Stunned, I looked over at Big Mac, who was staring at the woman, wide-eyed with shock. “What the *hell* is going on?” I demanded.

Looking uncharacteristically nervous, Big Mac swallowed hard and took a step toward the woman. “Who are you?” she asked, a slight tremor in her voice.

The dark-haired woman looked up, startled, as though she’d only just noticed she was surrounded by a ring of people. Her dark eyes darted around, and she got gracefully to her feet.

“Where am I? Where is this place?” she asked, looking past the astonished faces at the dark green evergreen trees.

“Oregon,” Cali offered, as Sabine broke from the circle and went to kneel next to Marta.

This information did not seem to mean anything to the woman, who looked more confused than ever. She looked around, more frantically. “Where is Letifer?”

My blood ran suddenly cold at the sound of this name, and I stepped in front of the woman, looking directly into her onyx-black eyes. “Are you Deidamia?”

She stared at me for a moment, and when a gust of wind blew around her, she shivered. I unzipped my coat and swung it around her shoulders.

She clutched it to herself tightly, gratefully, and nodded. “Yes, I am she. Deidamia.”

There was a horrified gasp from the surrounding pack members, and whispers broke out as everyone turned to each other, wondering what the hell was happening.

Deidamia looked around at them, nervously, then back at me. “But I do not understand. You are not Letifer.”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “I’m not.”

“How… How can I be here? I am dead, am I not?” She looked around desperately. “How did I arrive here?”

“We summoned you,” Big Mac explained.

“We just didn’t expect you to appear in the flesh,” Kira said. She gestured vaguely. “Especially not, like, *all* flesh.”

I stared at the woman, my mind reeling. *How can this be happening? What could this mean? How is this possible?*

Artemis moved to stand next to me, her eyes on Deidamia. She looked transfixed by the woman and reached out to touch her, but Cali grabbed her arm and yanked her back.

“Stop, Artemis! Don’t touch her! We don’t know what she’s capable of.”

Deidamia looked wildly at Artemis, then back up to me. “Do you know if Letifer is expecting me? I do not wish to keep him waiting.” She shivered again and drew my coat more tightly around herself.

“Let’s take this discussion inside,” I said, glancing at Big Mac. “She’s obviously confused; she doesn’t need to be freezing on top of that too.” I looked over at Marta, who was sitting up, supported by my mother and Orla, though her eyes were still closed. She looked pale and sick. “Everyone inside!”

Kira guided Deidamia toward the pack house, and my mother and Orla supported Marta, but I held Big Mac back as everyone else hurried back toward the warmth of the house.

“What is *happening*?” I demanded.

She shook her head. “Hell if I know,” she said ruefully. “It looks like Marta did almost too good a job. I thought we were just going to talk to Deidamia—you know, hear her voice or something—but Marta damn well pulled the whole woman into our world.”

“So she’s just as real as you or me?” I asked in disbelief. “She’s really here?”

Big Mac shrugged. “I suppose so, but we’re going to have to be really careful.”

“What do you mean?”

She shook her head. “No one ever listens to me around here. If I’ve said it once, I’ve said it a thousand times—when you’re talking about the spirit world, things aren’t always as they seem.”

I felt like my head was going to explode. “I just don’t understand how this was even possible. I thought the portal was shut.”

“Well I don’t know what to tell you. Clearly something allowed it to open,” Big Mac snapped. “At least just enough to allow that gal to pass through.”

I tried to process that information. If that really *was* Deidamia—and who else could she be?—what could this mean? Could she really help us stop Letifer and Silas and the Orb? Would she even want to?

I ran a hand through my hair, thinking hard. The pain in my leg was ever-present, but it seemed so trivial now—even my conflict with Xavier seemed to pale in comparison to the implications of what had just happened.

“What the fuck is going on?”

I looked up. Xavier too had hung back and was looking between Big Mac and me with irritation. I knew what he was doing there. He was trying to assert himself, trying to show that he was Alpha material. I considered telling him that this didn’t concern him, but I knew that response would only make things worse.

I glanced over his shoulder. Cali was behind him, looking tense, and I didn’t want to make her more worried than she already was, so I took a deep breath and told Xavier everything I knew.

He listened hard, his eyes widening in shock.

“So,” he said when I’d finished, “what are you going to do to protect the pack from this spirit if she turns out to be less than friendly?”

“Not now, Xavier,” I muttered. I was still processing all this information, and I wasn’t ready to give Xavier a PowerPoint presentation on how I was planning to deal with it.

He gave a derisive snort. “If you’re not careful—”

I snapped. I was sick of his attitude and sick of him. I got right in his face. “*Not. Now*.” Then I shoved past him and headed toward the pack house, very aware of Cali’s eyes following me. She had seen everything.

Damn.

Inside, I found Deidamia in the living room. Someone had wrapped her in a blanket and seated her in a chair by the fire. Both packs were seated around her, like they were waiting for a *Grateful Dead* concert. Standing the doorway of the living room, I realized I needed to question her, but I didn’t need two packs as an audience to do so.

“Okay, everyone out!” I commanded.

This was met with a general grumble, but almost everyone got up and filed out of the room. Finally, the only people left were Artemis, Cali, and Xavier. I was about to argue, but I knew that there was no way Cali would leave without a fight, and I was in no mood for that. When I glanced over at Xavier, standing in the doorway, he crossed his arms and leaned against the doorframe, his expression practically *daring* me to try to throw him out.

I sighed. I knew why he was there—Cali. Well, she was *one* reason. There was something about the dangerous glitter of his eye that told me he was still watching me closely. He still doubted that I could handle being Alpha. I sighed as I turned back.

Would this shit ever end?

As for Artemis—there was no good reason for her to be here. I was about to tell her that when she stepped forward and walked over to Deidamia. She still had that glazed, mesmerized look in her eyes, like a worshipful pilgrim approaching a saint.

Deidamia looked up as Artemis approached. “Yes?” She frowned at Artemis. “Have we met?” Artemis shook her head, and Deidamia’s frown deepened. “You remind me of someone.”

Artemis opened her mouth to speak, but it looked as though words had failed her. She tried again, made a strangled sound, burst into tears, and sprinted from the room.

I looked after her, baffled. “What the hell was that all about?”

“Excuse me,” Cali murmured, rising to her feet and hurrying after Artemis.

Xavier’s gaze followed her from the room, then turned to me. “Well,” he said sharply, “I guess it’s just you and me.”

His tone set my teeth on edge. “Stay if you want to, but shut the hell up,” I warned. Then I walked over to where Deidamia sat before the fire.

Her dark eyes glinted in the flickering light as she looked up at me. “Yes?”

I took a deep breath. “I need you to tell me everything you know about the person you mentioned earlier,” I said. “Letifer.”

**Episode 1661**

I raced up the stairs, trying to follow Artemis, but she was too fast. I heard the door to her room slam before I even reached the top of the stairs. When I pushed through her door, I found her facedown on her bed, sobbing. Rishika was there, her arms around her, looking confused and terrified.

“What is it?” Rishika was whispering over the noise of Artemis’s cries. I guessed their pull to each other was a lot stronger than whatever they were going through. “What’s happened? Tell me.”

But Artemis didn’t tell her anything. She just kept sobbing, louder than ever.

Rishika looked up at me, her eyes wide and scared. Rishika was hard to rattle, but she looked rattled. “What’s going on? She won’t tell me anything. I don’t know what to do!”

I stepped into the room and sat down on the bed, prying my sister’s hand out from where it was curled beneath her chest. “It’s okay, Artemis. It’s okay. I’m right here. So is Rishika. You just need to take a deep breath.”

But Artemis didn’t even seem to realize I was there. She was sobbing so hard, she was nearly hyperventilating. Was she just crying, or was she having some kind of panic attack? And what the hell had caused it? It had come on so suddenly.

“Artemis,” I said, squeezing her hand, trying to get her to look at me. “Tell me what’s going on. What’s wrong? What’s got you so upset?”

Finally, she looked over at me, her face red and her eyes swollen. She was gasping for breath. “I don’t know,” she said, her voice jumpy. “I’ve never felt anything like this. It’s just all so overwhelming.”

I shot a glance at Rishika, but she only shrugged, looking thoroughly confused.

“What’s overwhelming?” I asked.

“*Everything*,” Artemis wailed, tears leaking from her eyes. “All the dark magic, the revenants, Silas, the ghost portals, and now having Didi appear like this—”

“*Didi?*” I asked.

Artemis dashed the tears from her cheeks with the heel of her hand. “Deidamia takes too long to say, doesn’t it?”

“I guess—”

“And who’s to say why Didi’s even here? She was only supposed to appear as a spirit. That’s what Big Mac and Kira said. But she’s not a spirit at all. She’s *real*!” Artemis started to cry again.

“I know this is hard,” I said, taking her hand, “but you’re not alone, right? We’re all here. Together.”

I was trying to reassure her, but honestly, I didn’t even know what to say. She was right—it *was* really overwhelming. I’d been feeling the same things, and now—seeing Didi appear like this—I was feeling pretty shaken myself. But this whole breakdown was so unlike Artemis. She was never this emotional. Just the opposite. She was usually so walled-off. I didn’t even think I’d ever even seen her cry before. So what was it about Didi that had set her off?

Artemis had been thinking too, and now she furrowed her brow. “So if Didi’s here, could Letifer have come, too? Wouldn’t he have wanted to… to be with his love? Or… did he kill her? And if he did, will he try to kill her again?”

“Whoa, slow down,” Rishika said nervously. “You’re getting ahead of yourself, Artemis. You shouldn’t worry about that stuff right now.”

“Rishika’s right,” I said. “I don’t know what Didi’s story is, but Greyson is downstairs with her right now, and the witches can’t be far away. Hopefully, we’re going to get some answers.” I looked up at Rishika. “Can you keep your eye on her?”

Rishika nodded. “Of course.”

So I headed back downstairs. I had to find out more about Didi. But before I reached the living room, I ran into Xavier and Greyson in the hallway, in the middle of a very tense conversation.

“—and *I’m* telling *you*,” Xavier was saying, shoving his finger into Greyson’s face, “you don’t know what the fuck you’re doing, and it shows. You’re asking all the wrong questions—”

“I don’t remember actually inviting you in the first place, brother,” Greyson spat back, his grey eyes stormy. “If you don’t like the way things are going, you’re free to just fuck all the way off.”

I stopped mid-stride and stared at them. I’d been gone less than five minutes, and they were practically ripping each other’s throats out. Looking past them, I saw Big Mac and Kira in the hallway as well, looking tense.

“What happened?” I asked, directing my questions to the women.

Kira shot a look at Greyson and Xavier, who’d looked over at me in surprise. “Ask them. We showed up, and they started yelling at each other.”

“Did you get any information out of Didi?” I demanded, hands on my hips.

“Didi?” Xavier asked, looking over at me.

I shrugged. “Did you learn anything? What about Letifer?”

Big Mac shook her head. “I think we may have come on too strong,” she said drily, shooting a nasty look at Xavier and Greyson. “These two probably scared the shit out of *Didi*.”

“The poor woman just got ripped from the spirit world and landed in a werewolf pack house,” Kira said, crossing her arms. “Then these two wanted to play good cop bad cop, only both of them wanted to be the bad cop.”

I rolled my eyes. “Unbelievable.” Except I *did* believe it. I wasn’t really that surprised that the two of them had nearly come to blows. Things had been tense between them for days.

“I just can’t believe we brought that poor woman here to face *this*,” Kira said, shooting a glance over her shoulder at the living room.

“Just let me talk to her,” Xavier snapped. “The rest of you just give me some space, and—”

“Oh, grow up,” Greyson said, shaking his head. “If you think I’m going to step back and let you take over—”

“Scared I’m going to do a better job than you?” Xavier taunted.

“Get real,” Greyson growled.

“Shut up, both of you!” I yelled, stepping between them. They both looked surprised, and Xavier glowered down at me. I could tell he was still upset with me, but that was just too bad. He was going to have to deal with that. Right now, I had much bigger issues to deal with. “I have an idea. Why don’t you let *me* talk to Didi?”

Greyson and Xavier both shook their heads, twin expressions of disapproval on their faces.

I sighed. It was extraordinary. They couldn’t agree on a single damn thing except telling me *no* when I wanted to try something. “Listen, it’s got to be better than your plan—because you don’t have one. All I’m going to do is try to talk to her.” I narrowed my eyes as I looked back and forth between them. “And I dare either of you to try to stop me.”

Without waiting for them to try, I strode toward the living room, hoping to hell I hadn’t just overplayed my hand. But to my everlasting surprise, no one called out to stop me, and no one followed me into the living room. Maybe they were finally starting to listen to me?

I doubted that, but I would take what I could get.

In the living room, I found Didi slumped in her chair, staring into the fire. I pulled another chair close, so I could sit beside her. She didn’t even seem to notice that I’d walked into the room.

I cleared my throat. “I know you might find this hard to believe, but I can imagine what you’re going through right now. I went through something sort of similar when I first came to this house.” I looked around, remembering how it had felt to arrive here, young and inexperienced, and to meet Xavier Evers for the first time. “Everything was such a shock to me. I didn’t even know that werewo—” I cut myself off.

Didi had just come back from the dead… She was still getting her bearings, wasn’t she? Would hearing about werewolves being real be a little too much right now? The last thing I wanted to do was freak her out. It had certainly taken me enough time to come around to the idea.

I needed to take a different approach.

“I didn’t even know,” I said, trying to recover, “there were guys this hot.”

Didi looked confused. Great.

“Xavier and Greyson are both really hot,” I continued as if I couldn’t shut up. “It took me a while to realize there are people this attractive out there. It took a while to get used to, but they mean well… but they aren’t always the easiest to talk to. It happens, I think, when you’re so… hot like them?”

Shit, I was really messing this up.

Didi turned to look at me, and I was struck by how incredibly beautiful she was. Her skin was like burnished gold, and her eyes and hair shone like ebony. The angles of her face where high and sharp, and she radiated a regal aura I couldn’t have reproduced in a million years. “Why are you telling me this?” she asked.

“I-I just want you to know that you’re not alone,” I stammered, trying to marshal my thoughts. “And that if you ever want someone to talk to… You can talk to me.”

Didi continued to look at me, but after a moment, her gaze seemed to soften just a bit, and a little of the fear she’d shown at the fire outside shone through. “They kept asking me about Letifer.”

My heart beat hard, but I kept my expression neutral. “Why didn’t you tell them anything?”

“I was frightened,” Didi whispered.

I could understand that. Two brothers standing over you, *arguing*, probably wasn’t the most comfortable experience in the world.

I reached out and took Didi’s hand. “Well, will you talk to me?”

**Episode 1662**

LOLA

“We’re just so happy to have you back. I missed seeing your face around here,” Orla said, smiling at me over the top of her teacup.

“That’s right. How about some more pancakes?” Tom asked, pushing another stack toward me across the kitchen island.

“Thanks,” I said, accepting it gratefully. I was so hungry I felt like a bottomless pit, and I buttered them liberally, doused them with syrup, and dove in. I was really missing Tottenville’s blood syrup though, I had to say.

Tom watched me warily. “I don’t know if you were getting enough to eat at that school, Lola. I’ll start another batch.”

“How *was* school?” Orla asked. “Tottenville? Is that what Cali told me it was called?

“Yeah. It was… fine,” I said awkwardly, swallowing a bite of syrup-loaded pancakes. How could I explain Tottenville without making it sound completely insane? I didn’t want to go into any of the gritty details. Not now, anyway. “It was fun.” I grinned. “You know, school is fun! Dorms, the dining hall, making new friends, meeting new professors. It was fun!”

I left out the part about those professors running underground experiments, and all my “new friends” turning into revenants and trying to eat me alive.

“I know Cali must be especially glad to have you back,” Tom said over his shoulder as he flipped another batch of pancakes. “I know she was missing you.”

“I’m sure she is,” Orla said, smiling at me. “You two have always been so close.”

“I’m glad to see her, too. And I’m glad to be back with Jay.” I swirled the last bite of pancake on my plate and shoved it into my mouth, then looked around. “Have you seen him?”

“I heard him say he was tired, and that he was going to take a nap,” Orla said, taking my plate and walking it to the sink.

“Oh, great. I’m just going to go check on him. Thanks for the pancakes!” I called as I jogged out of the kitchen.

I bounced up the stairs, high on the sugar from the maple syrup and giddy about being back home with my mate. It felt amazing to be back at the pack house, without all the vampire drama—and without all the restrictive school rules.

And—even though he’d probably just been trying to help—it was probably for the best that I was getting a break from Emmett, too.

Was he okay though? I supposed I felt a little bad leaving him behind when he could be in danger…

Upstairs, I opened the door to my room softly and found Jay sprawled out on the bed, asleep. He was wearing a pair of grey sweatpants and was shirtless, with one arm thrown up over his head. I closed the door quietly and stood for a moment, just looking at him, letting my eyes take in his chiseled chest and muscled abs as he breathed softly in sleep. He was so beautiful, and I was so glad to be with him again. My body was already fiery with heat, and it burned hotter at the sight of him, so I stepped out of my clothes and slipped into bed beside him. I slid down next to him and let my fingers caress his face, tapping softly until his eye fluttered.

He stirred. “Hmm? Lola? What are you doing?”

“Whatever you want,” I whispered back.

He groaned. “I just wanna sleep.”

“What?” I asked, pulling back in surprise. “Are you kidding me? Didn’t you miss me?”

He opened his eye to peer at me. “Of course I did, Lola,” he sighed. “But we made up for a lot of lost time when we got back last night. I’m exhausted. I need to recover.”

This was *not* what I wanted to hear. I could feel the vampire heat sizzling inside me, and I slid my body along his. “I refuse to accept that you, with superhuman healing powers, need time to recover. I am your *mate*,” I reminded him. “Don’t you want me?”

He sighed. “Of course I do. I want you more than anything in the world,” he said, with long-suffering patience. “But I am also tired.”

“Tired of *me*?”

“No!” Jay looked at me, wide awake now. “Actually, physically tired. Are you kidding me? How are you confused by this? You were insatiable last night. Just give me a little break, Lola.”

I flopped back onto the pillows, pouting. I wanted to be understanding, but it was hard. The vampire heat made it hard to think clearly. It was stirring inside me. Raging. Burning.

Jay looked over at me. “I do have to admit, you’re sexy as hell when you pout.” He rolled toward me and kissed me.

I grabbed for him and held on, hard. He laced his fingers into my hair and slid his tongue against mine. He was starting slow—almost gently—but I was in no mood for gentle. I bit down on his bottom lip and wrapped my legs around his waist, rolling him on top of me, letting him grind himself into me. The pressure of him against me was insane, and I was starting to pant, almost ready to climax from that alone when Jay rolled off me with a groan.

“I’m sorry, Lola.”

“What are you doing?” I asked breathlessly.

“I just can’t,” he said, closing his eye again. “Let me nap. I can’t believe I’m saying this,” he murmured, his voice already slurred with sleep.

I stared at him, my frustration nearly boiling over. “You’ve got to be kidding me!”

“I’m sorry,” he said sleepily. “I’ll do whatever you want, once I’m recharged.”

“Ugh! You’d better! Because if not…” I bared my fangs. “I won’t be responsible for what happens to you!”

Jay opened his eye and grinned. “Cross my heart.” Then he closed his eye again. A moment later his breathing slowed, and he was asleep.

I watched him for a moment longer—partly to make sure he wasn’t faking, and partly because he was just so damn cute when he slept. But I was too restless to stay still for too long, so I jumped up, filled with energy. The vampire heat made me horny as hell, but it also gave me this crazy, buzzing energy that made me feel like I was going to jump out of my skin. I had hoped that being with Jay the night before would quench some of the heat, but it was almost the opposite. The heat felt worse today. I bounced on the balls of my feet for a moment, thinking. Maybe it would calm down in a few days. Maybe it was just the excitement of being back at the pack house, and back with Jay.

I looked around for my phone—where was it?

Then I remembered. I’d been so desperate to jump Jay’s bones that I’d left it in the car. Jay’s breathing had turned into a light snore, which meant he was well and truly out, so I got dressed and slipped out of the room.

I slid my hand over the smooth oak of the banister as I skipped down the stairs. It was good to be back—and especially in the old pack house. Xavier’s house. It was like nothing had changed. As I reached the bottom of the stairs, I saw Greyson and Xavier standing near the living room, glaring at each other. Classic. Just like old times.

Mrs. Smith breezed by on her way to the kitchen. “Good to have you back, Lola. I’ll whip up a white chocolate mocha for you later!”

White chocolate mocha! My mouth watered at the thought. Tottenville’s weak-ass cafeteria coffee hadn’t even come close, no matter how much creamer I’d poured into it.

I knew I needed to find Cali at some point, but as I stepped outside into the cold November wind, all other thoughts were blown away. I dropped my head back and took a deep breath, filling my lungs with the biting air. I wished I still had my wolf—I would’ve howled at the top of my lungs. I just felt so energized, so *alive*. I was so glad to be back.

And I couldn’t wait to go back upstairs and make Jay stick to the promise he’d just made me.

With that thought in mind, I practically skipped to Jay’s car to look for my phone. In the harsh light of day, I could see that it looked pretty banged up after last night. The passenger side window was smashed out, the headlights were broken, there were dents all over the roof, and long, deep gashes in the paint. I walked around it, shaking my head. It was a miracle we’d gotten out of that place alive.

What with the smashed windows and all, Jay hadn’t bothered with the locks, so I yanked open the passenger door and leaned in, looking around for my phone.

There was a strange rustle from the back of the car, and I looked up just in time to see Jacqueline, rising slowly from the back seat.

**Episode 1663**

XAVIER

“You’ve *got* to be kidding me,” I spat, anger flaring in my chest. “Are you seriously trying to blame me for this? Didi was *never* going to talk to you, man.”

“She might have,” Greyson growled, “if you hadn’t been in there, glowering at her. Who even asked you to come in, Xavier? I don’t know why you feel the need to insert yourself into every situation. I was handling Didi. If you hadn’t been there, I would have gotten her to open up.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Oh, you were *handling* her? Just barking questions at her while she stared into space? That’s your version of *handling* things? Also, are you for real? You *really* can’t figure out why I might feel the need to supervise your little chat with Letifer’s girlfriend?”

Greyson’s jaw worked in that way it did when he was especially pissed off. “It doesn’t matter what you believe, Xavier. I’m still the Alpha.”

“You were a fucking raving mess last night,” I reminded him. “Maybe you still are. The only reason you haven’t already given me Alpha is because it’s me who’s asking. You know you need to do it because you’re fucking dangerous and it’s the right thing to do, you orange-eyed dick.”

His nostrils flared. “I’m doing what’s best for the pack, and right now, *I’m* what’s best for the pack. Case closed.” He turned away.

“And what about Cali?” I called after him.

He froze. “What about her?” he shot back, looking over his shoulder.

“Every moment you lie to yourself—pretending like everything is just fine, which we both know is total bullshit—you’re putting her in danger.”

“Maybe you should just shut up and go deal with Ava,” Greyson snarled, his eyes narrowed to slits.

“Is that a request, or an order?” I asked coldly.

Greyson turned to give me a long, hard stare. “You deal with her, and I’ll deal with everything else.”

Every muscle in my body was coiled like a fucking spring, but I forced myself to turn. “Whatever,” I muttered. If he wanted to be a dead man walking, then fine. But then I thought of Cali. His actions weren’t only affecting himself, but Cali, me, and the pack as well.

Angrily, I turned back. “You’re a fucking liability, Greyson. You know that, right? Get your shit together,” I snapped, and stormed away.

The fact that Greyson knew what was going on with him and that damned witch mark and still refused to step down was driving me insane. I shook my head. Fucking Greyson. What was he *doing*?

Whatever. I needed to check on Cali. He should never have let her go in there to talk to Didi by herself. Anything could happen.

I headed for the living room, but before I reached the door, Big Mac stepped into my path, solid as a brick wall.

“Get out of my way,” I growled. I was in no mood to deal with this witch.

But Big Mac didn’t move. She glared at me. “You need to pull your head out of your ass, Xavier,” she said, her tone cold.

She clearly hadn’t spoken to Greyson lately, had she?

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

She narrowed her eyes. “Hasn’t your Alpha ego bullshit done enough damage already?”

I could feel my blood pulsing in my ears. Fury was making it hard to breathe. Gritting my teeth, I turned on my heel and walked in the other direction. If she wasn’t going to move, I might as well go look for Ava.

As it happened, I found her sooner than I expected. I ran into her. Literally.

Just as I rounded a corner near the downstairs bathroom, she came from the other direction and slammed into me, bouncing off my chest.

Caught off-guard, she stumbled back a few steps but caught herself and looked up. She smiled ruefully. “Funny running into you here. I’ve been looking for you. You’re a hard man to find, X.”

“Shut up, Ava,” I growled. I wasn’t in the mood for her bullshit, not today.

She tilted her head, her eyes taunting me. “Is Xavier going to pout? Should I come back later?”

“I do not *pout*!” I snapped. Then I gave my head a shake. Why did I keep letting her get to me like this? “What do you want? Why are you even here?”

Ava raised her eyebrows. “Maybe it’s my turn to pout. Your little mate just asked me the same thing. Maybe I should take the hint. Seems like I’m not welcome around here.” She gave me a searching look and leaned close. “Cali *is* still your mate, right? Or is she Greyson’s? It’s getting so hard to tell, these days—”

Without another thought, I grabbed her by the shoulders and shoved her against the wall. “Don’t push it, Ava,” I growled. “I’m not in the mood.” I looked down at her face, now so close to mine. “Why the hell did you even bother coming back here?”

Her mouth quirked up into a smile. “I have some news that should change your mood, and I wanted to deliver it in person.”

“I doubt that. Any news from you is bad news.”

Ava glanced down, taking in my hands on her arms and my body pressed against hers. She looked back up, smirking. “So, are you going to keep touching me like this, or what? Not that I mind…”

I let her go, pushing away with a derisive snort.

“I’m surprised Kira didn’t tell you what happened,” she said, crossing her arms.

I pushed my hair out of my eyes. “Kira didn’t tell me anything. I have no clue what you’re talking about, Ava, so just get to the fucking point.”

She leaned against the wall. “I did what you and Greyson wanted.”

I shook my head. “That’s not possible. You’re still here.”

She rolled her eyes. “I killed Iñigo.”

I gave a wry chuckle. “Okay. Sure you did. Nice try.”

She frowned. “I did. Kira and I hunted him down, and I killed him. If you don’t believe me—”

“I really don’t.”

“—then ask Kira!” she finished, her dark eyes flashing angrily.

I stared at her for a moment, not sure what to think. Her anger surprised me. She seemed almost… indignant. I’d known Ava for a long time, and on the one hand, she was a hell of a liar. But on the other, I had no doubt she was capable of killing anyone if she set her mind to it. I just never thought she’d actually go through with killing Iñigo.

“Where’s the proof?” I demanded suspiciously.

She flipped her long hair over her shoulder, looking irritated. “I wanted to bring his head back with me—for you—but we were under siege. Revenant-vampires. Kira and I had to run, or it would have been our asses.”

“Revenants?” I asked, alarm bells clanging. “More of them? Revenant-*vampires*? Why didn’t you tell me that before? You should have found me the minute you got back here. You know what we’re dealing with here! Dammit, Ava. Could any of them have followed you back here?”

“No, I don’t think so. Kira used some spell to disguise our path, and we were really careful.”

“You’d better fucking hope you were,” I snapped. I leaned back against the opposite wall, thinking. This was a new development. “Well, if this is true, Ava, then you’re free to go.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” she said immediately.

“What?” I asked, confused.

“I’ve proven my loyalty, and the pack needs me. I’m staying,” she said firmly.

I laughed. “Since when do you care about this pack? Since when do you care about anyone but yourself, Ava? You’ve always looked out for yourself, exclusively. Everywhere, every time.”

She flushed, and it looked like she was biting back a sharp response. “Remember that I can see revenant auras,” she said, in a raw, throaty voice. She raised an eyebrow. “Don’t you think the pack could use that kind of specialized skill? And I’m not too shabby in a fight either, as you well know.”

I shook my head, rolling my eyes and looking away.

“Maybe this is something you need to talk over with your Alpha,” she suggested, a taunting glint in her dark eyes.

My hands clenched into tight fists as she smirked and pushed away from the wall. I gritted my teeth as she sauntered away. She just *had* to get that last dig in—to twist the knife in and remind me that Greyson was still Alpha. Of course she did. That was classic Ava.

I let the fuse of my anger burn out and thought over what she’d just told me—about Iñigo and the revenant-vampires, and her offer to be of help to the Redwood pack. Was it possible she was telling the truth? Ava *could* be an asset, if she chose to be. Was it possible that she was really willing to be loyal to the pack? Willing to help when the pack really needed her?

I looked down the hall, where she’d disappeared.

Was it possible I’d been wrong about Ava this whole time?

**Episode 1664**

CHARLIE

The whole camp spent the rest of the morning running drill after drill. Sergeant Pepperdine was never satisfied with our times and kept making us go again and again. It was a lot like lacrosse practice, but out in the woods instead of on a field. And instead of strategizing about taking out the other team’s defense, we talked about staking vampires.

I did my best to keep my eye on Violet as we sprinted through the trees, but I had to do it in a way that didn’t make it look too obvious that I was trying to keep an eye on her. It was okay, though, because she seemed to have gotten the hang of pulling back just enough to blend in with the crowd, even though it was driving her crazy.

*I just want to run! You know I could kick all of their hunter asses.*

*I know you could*, I thought, chuckling to myself. Zachery looked over at me, confused, but was panting too hard to ask me what was so funny.

*When are we getting the hell out of here?* Violet asked, later in the morning, when she was halfway through the ropes course. *I can see over the wall. Freedom is so close!*

*Soon, I hope*, I assured her. *Or you could just go now. Get out of here. Get somewhere safe.*

That was what I wanted most of all.

I could hear her sigh through our mind link.

*Stop, Charlie. You know I’m not going anywhere without you.*

I gritted my teeth as I pulled myself up my last rope. I did know. I would do the same for her.

When Pepperdine blew his whistle, Violet and I both flinched at the shrill sound—werewolf hearing was hyper-sensitive—and everyone else stopped what they were doing and looked over, panting and moaning with pain.

“That’s lunch,” he barked. “I want everyone back here at 1400 hours! And not a minute past, or your ass is grass!”

Ignoring the threat, everyone gave a weary cheer and turned in the direction of the dining hall. I saw Zachery, Reggie, Aisha, and Sophie walking toward me from one direction, and Violet from the other.

Zachery smiled as he saw Violet approaching. “Hey, Daisy. You should come eat with us.”

Violet looked surprised, and a little startled. “Oh, um…”

I stopped next to her. “Listen,” I said softly, so only she could hear, “I need to go talk to my mom, find a way for her to get us out of here. Will you be okay having lunch with the others?”

She nodded without looking up. “For sure,” she said loudly, smiling at Zachery. “I’d love to eat with you. Thanks.” She glanced up at me. “Of course I can handle it,” she said more softly. “You know me better than that.”

I smiled. “I know, I’m sorry. I’m just worried about you—I can’t help it.”

She nodded. “I get it, but don’t worry about me. And remember, I’m not going anywhere without you.”

I rolled my eyes. I didn’t want to have this argument with her again. “Just promise me you’ll be careful, okay?”

“Okay.”

Without thinking, I bent to kiss her, but stopped myself just in time.

Violet took a step away from me and gave me a rueful smile. “I miss you, too.”

“Come on!” Zachery called back to us. He and the others had walked on ahead. “If we don’t hurry up, they’ll run out of pudding! Again!”

Violet raised her eyebrows. “I’ll catch you later.”  
 I watched as she jogged to catch up with the group, hoping she’d be okay. And hoping to hell that Sophie wouldn’t say anything or be weird to her. On reflection, I probably could have handled the situation better last night.

Shaking my hair out of my eyes with a sigh, I turned and looked around. I needed to find my mom—and I hoped I’d be able to find her fast. I didn’t have much time.

Figuring she probably wasn’t in the dining hall or any of the dorms, I headed for the tiny administration building and found her in an empty office.

She looked up from the desk as I walked in. “Charlie, I’ve been expecting you. I was just working on my next lecture,” she said, putting down her pen and pushing away a legal pad.

I closed the door and turned to face her. “What’s the plan for *Daisy*?” I asked flatly. There was no point in beating around the bush.

My mom looked at me, her brow slightly furrowed. “I’m not sure I understand. What plan?”

I narrowed my eyes. “I don’t want her here, Mom.”

The crease between her eyebrows deepened. “I’m surprised to hear you say that, Charlie. I thought I was doing you a favor, getting her a place here. You two went to a lot of trouble getting her here in the first place, didn’t you? I mean, you lied to your mother so you could stay with her. And now you can. What’s the problem?”

I groaned. “Mom, stop twisting things around. You forced me to lie—”

“I didn’t *force* you to do anything,” she snapped. “You brought this on yourself.”

I looked at my mom, searching her face. “Why are you really doing this?” I asked slowly.

“What are you talking about?”

“You must have a reason. I find it very hard to believe that you actually did this so I could stay with my mate.”

She flinched. “Charlie! Must you *insist* on using that vulgar word?”

“Why are you doing this?” I demanded

She glared at me. “I’m saving you, Charlie. And at this point it’s far more suspicious if Daisy were to leave.”

I was baffled. “What?”

“Do you have any idea the danger you’ve put the entire Kim family in by allowing that… that…”

“Werewolf?” I supplied.

“Charlie—”

“Just say it,” I shot back. “You might as well get used to saying it, because your son is a werewolf, too.”

“Keep your voice down,” she hissed. She shot a look at the closed door. “We can’t afford to be careless. I know you think you have nothing to lose, but let me assure you—you do.”

I took a deep breath. “I’m sorry. I really am. I don’t want to put anyone in danger, Mom, but I need to make sure Violet is safe.”

My mom gave me a long look. After a moment, her dark eyes softened and she got to her feet. Coming around the desk, she pulled me into a hug. I was taller than she was, but she was strong, and her arms pinned mine to my sides. “That’s all I’ve ever wanted for you, too, Charlie. And I know how much you care about her, so I’ll do my best to make sure nothing happens to *Daisy*.”

“Thanks, Mom,” I said, a little dazedly. She’d caught me by surprise.

She let me go and looked up at me. “Now, you go on, and don’t go doing anything that draws attention.”

“I know,” I sighed. “You’re starting to sound just like Romilly.”

“Watch your mouth,” my mom said with a slight smile as she took her seat behind the desk again.

I felt a lot better as I headed up to the dining hall. I was excited to tell Violet that she didn’t have to be scared of my mom anymore—I knew she’d be relieved to hear it. I walked into the crowded hall, which was a cacophony of sound. People were talking and laughing and screaming, sitting at long tables that ranged along the walls. Almost everyone else had already eaten lunch, so I breezed through the line, grabbing a turkey sandwich and a carton of milk, then searched the crowd for Violet.

I didn’t see her, but Zachery waved me over.

“There you are,” he said through a mouthful of pudding as I sat down. “We wondered where you’d gone off to. Want a bite?” he asked, offering me a fresh spoonful.

“No, thanks,” I said, leaning away from the gelatinous vanilla mound on his spoon.

“You’re missing out, man,” he said, shoving the pudding into his mouth.

“Where’s everyone else?” I asked, looking down the table.

“Finished already,” Zachery said thickly.

“Oh. Did you see where Daisy went?” I asked, pivoting off the bench to go look for her.

“Oh!” Zachery’s eyes lit up. “That’s what I wanted to tell you!”

“What?”

He shook his head, grinning. “You’re not going to believe this. I asked her out!”

I stared at him. “You asked who out?”

“Daisy! The new girl! And she said yes!”

I froze. “What?”

Zachery wiped pudding from his chin, where he’d accidentally spat a little in his excitement. “Yeah! Can you believe it? I couldn’t. And it gets better!”

“How?” I asked dully.

“We’re going on a double date!”

“What? Who is?”

Zachery grinned at me. “*Us!* Me and Daisy and you and Sophie! Won’t that be awesome!”

No, no it wouldn’t be.

**Episode 1665**

I sat on the edge of my seat, waiting anxiously for Didi’s answer. But none came.

“If you’re afraid, I understand,” I said, trying to keep my voice low and soothing. “But I really do want to help you.”

She nodded her dark head. “I know, and I appreciate that, but I really don’t know what I could possibly tell you. I do not know what you wish to know.”

“Maybe you could tell me about Letifer,” I suggested tentatively.

Didi closed her dark eyes and shook her head, making her glossy black hair swing. “Why is everyone asking me about Letifer? Why?”

I swallowed hard. “We think Letifer might be… involved in some things that are affecting… this world.” I really needed to figure out how much, if anything, she knew about the supernatural world.

She looked at me quickly. “Is he here?” She leapt to her feet. “Where is he? Can I see him?”

“We don’t know where he is, or if he’s here,” I said. “But maybe if you tell me what you know about him, it might help us find him. Unless there’s some reason you don’t want to?”

Didi stopped darting her eyes around the room like Letifer was about to appear from behind the living room curtains and looked back at me. She slowly sat down again, and when she spoke her voice was thick with emotion. “I would be willing to die a hundred deaths just to see him again.”

My heart thumped, and I nodded. I knew how she felt. That was how I felt about both Xavier and Greyson, whenever I was forced to be separated from them. Maybe Didi and I had more in common than I could have imagined. “Tell me about him.”

Didi’s eyes sparkled like gems as she looked up, transported by joy. “Letifer is the most intelligent, beautiful, dedicated, giving man I have ever met. I knew it the moment I saw him—he was the only one for me.” She looked at me. “Tell me, have you ever felt such a thing? Where you looked at someone and just *knew*?”

I swallowed hard, my throat suddenly dry. How could I explain to this woman that I had two men in my life about whom I felt this way? I couldn’t find the words, so I just nodded.

She beamed at me. “Letifer practices khumos. He’s what you might call an alchemist. He is widely renowned for his magic. I love him because he is the only man I have ever met who truly understands me. Who truly listens…” She trailed off, and her gaze grew distant.

“Are you okay?” I asked after a moment.

Didi wiped a tear from the corner of her eye. “It happened on our wedding day.”

“What did?”

“I fell ill,” she whispered. “It was quick, which was merciful. He held my hand and wept as I left the world of the living. I will never forget that.”

“Oh, that must have been so hard.” I pressed her hand between mine. “I’m sorry.”

I wasn’t sure how to proceed. I didn’t know much more than I had when I’d started. I supposed it was helpful to know that Letifer had magic. It was always good to have a heads up on stuff like that. But… was there anything else I was going to be able to learn from this grief-stricken woman? Preferably *without* feeling like an ass for pumping her for information?

I cleared my throat. “What kind of magic was he into?”

Didi—tears still shining on her cheeks—looked up at me, a puzzled look on her face. “Into?”

I needed to proceed cautiously, so I went slowly, trying to gauge her expression as I spoke. “You know… Was he interested in necromancy?”

Didi’s eyes went wide. “Why would you ask that?  
 “There’s been talk—well, not talk. More like legends, that he—you know—dabbled in the dark arts.”

Didi frowned. “No, that’s not possible. Letifer only used his magic for good—only for the living.”

Yeesh. This was awkward. How much was I obligated to reveal here about how her boyfriend had changed after she’d died? And was she even telling the truth about him to begin with?

Didi bent forward and rubbed her temples. “I am very tired. If you have no more questions, I would like to rest.”

“Of course,” I said quickly. “I’m sure you must be exhausted, what with traveling through time and space and all that. You can take a nap in my room.” We both got to our feet. “But I do have one more question. Have you ever heard of something called the Orb?”

Didi shook her head. “The Orb? No. I’ve never heard of such a thing. What is it?”

My heart sank. I’d really been hoping *she* would be able to tell *me* what the Orb was. “We can talk about it later. You should rest now.”

I led her out of the living room and into the hallway, where Greyson, Big Mac, and Kira were waiting.

“Didi is exhausted,” I said. “She’s going to rest in my room.”

No one offered any objections, so I led Didi upstairs and showed her into my room.

“It is very nice,” she said, settling onto my bed. “Many thanks to you.”

“You’re welcome. Sleep for as long as you’d like,” I said, closing the curtains to shut out the grey light of the overcast day. “I’ll come check in on you later.”

Didi was asleep before I shut the door.

Greyson was waiting for me in the hall and pulled me down the hall toward his room, stopping just outside the door. “Did you learn anything from her? Did she talk?”

“A bit,” I said with a shrug. “She’s kind of in shock.” Greyson made an impatient sound, and I rolled my eyes. “You can’t blame her for that.”

“Does she know anything about Letifer?” he demanded.

I frowned at his apparent lack of empathy. “She told me he had magic. She was exhausted. I’ll talk to her again after she sleeps. She’ll be able to tell me more when she can think straight.” I looked down. “How’s your leg? Is it feeling better?”

“I’m fine,” he said shortly.

I frowned. I didn’t say so, but I was worried about Xavier’s concerns.

“Are you really fine, or are you just being your typical Alpha self and saying you’re fine when you’re really not?” I asked. Greyson didn’t answer. “I hope you know that whatever’s wrong, I can handle it, Greyson. I don’t need to be protected from anything—especially not from the truth. And not if it means you’re in danger.”

“That might be pushing it,” Greyson said, shaking his head. “I’m not in danger.”

“Greyson—”

“If I really thought I was in danger, I wouldn’t expose the pack,” he said sharply.

I crossed my arms. “Tell me what happened last night then.”

He blew out a breath and ran a hand through his hair. “I’m not totally sure what that was. I think I was sleepwalking.”

“What?” I gasped, horrified.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe. Or something like it. All I know is that I was having some kind of a dream. And Silas was in it.”

“I don’t like any of this,” I groaned, leaning against the wall. I was starting to feel dizzy.

“He had a boy with him.”

“A boy?” I asked, looking up.

Greyson nodded. “The boy said I was his father.”  
 “That sounds like something the witch sisters would do. Do you think they had something to do with this? Did they cause it?”

“I don’t know,” Greyson admitted. “But the important thing is that I’m fine now. It was just a dream. I know it freaked Xavier out, but he totally overreacted.” His face suddenly froze, and he looked past me, over my shoulder.

“Greyson?” I spun around to look behind me, but there was nothing there. “Greyson, what is it?”

He gave his head a shake. “Sorry. I got distracted by something. It was… a spider.”

I stared at him. “A spider?” Since when was Alpha Greyson afraid of a *spider*? I looked over my shoulder again, but there was no trace of a spider anywhere on the wall behind me. I looked back at Greyson, unnerved. I wanted to believe that he was fine, but he was acting strange.

Despite what Xavier liked to think, I did trust him, and I thought his judgement was sound—even when it came to Greyson. But I still didn’t want to jump to conclusions.

Some of what I was thinking must have shown on my face, because Greyson took a step toward me and lifted my chin so our eyes met.

“I swear I’m okay,” he said, his grey eyes calm, like the sea after a storm. “Do you believe me?” Without waiting for my answer, he bent down and pressed a gentle kiss to my lips. “You know you can always trust me, don’t you?”

**Episode 1666**

MARTA

When I opened my eyes, I found myself looking directly into Torin’s face.

“Oh my god!” I gasped, shooting back across the bed.

“Sorry!” Torin cried, his eyes widening. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Well, big failure there,” came a voice from next to the bed.

I looked up and saw Astrid on a chair pulled up alongside the mattress. She was leaning her elbows on the bed and looking over at us.

“What the hell’s going on?” I asked breathlessly.

“Sorry,” Torin repeated. “I was healing you. You know, trying to give some of your energy back. That spell you performed was just so intense.”

“Right, the spell,” I breathed, putting my hand to my forehead. I’d forgotten all about it.

“How are you feeling now?” Astrid asked.

I moved to sit up but stopped when I felt a cool hand on my back. I shot a glance over my shoulder and saw Lilac behind me. He nodded at me, just to let me know he was there, and I nodded back, then turned my attention to Astrid and Torin.

“I’m fine,” I said. “Good, even.”

Torin let out a big sigh. “That’s so good to hear.”

“How long have I been out?” I asked, peering out the window at the grey sky. “What happened with that spell?”

Astrid and Torin exchanged an awkward glance but didn’t answer.

“What?” I asked. “What happened.”

“That woman—Deidamia—came back,” Lilac said quietly.

I sat up quickly, staring at him. “*What?*”

“What?” Astrid and Torin asked, looking startled.

I looked back over at them. “Deidamia came *back*?”

“Well…” Torin was looking down at his hands, twisting his fingers nervously. He cleared his throat. “The thing is…”

“*What?*” I demanded when he didn’t go on. “What’s the thing? Did she or didn’t she?”

Astrid sighed. “Yes? Sort of?” She shook her head. “We aren’t witches. We don’t really understand what happened out there, but there is a woman downstairs who appeared at the fire after she was summoned, and she is very afraid.”

“And very naked,” Torin added.

I stared at the two of them, astonished. Then I looked over at Lilac, for confirmation.

He nodded. “I think you brought her back to life.”

“I’m sorry—*WHAT?* Necromancy? I did *necromancy*?”

Astrid, Torin, and Lilac all managed to answer at once, in an identical, nervous tone. “Yes?”

I pulled my knees into my chest and rested my head on them. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

My head was spinning, and my stomach felt tight with nerves. “The spell wasn’t supposed to do that. It was supposed to *contact* Deidamia, not bring her back to this world.”

Torin looked over at Astrid. “Maybe we should… you know.” He tipped his head toward the door. “Give her some space to have her nervous breakdown in private.”

“That’s a good idea,” Astrid said, getting to her feet. She put a comforting hand on my shoulder. “Just call if you need anything, okay?”

I nodded mutely. But just as they reached the door, I looked up. “Hey, would you send Big Mac and Kira up here? I have to talk to them.”

“You sure you don’t just want to rest?” Astrid asked cautiously.

I nodded. “I have a lot of questions, and only they can answer them.”

Finally, Astrid nodded. “Sure. I’ll send them up as soon as I see them.”

I dropped my head as the door shut behind them. “What have I done this time?”

“Marta—” Lilac began, but I wasn’t listening.

“This was just supposed to be a séance. I wasn’t supposed to bring dead spirits back to this world—and I don’t even like that I was able to do it at all.” I gave my head a disgusted shake.

Lilac frowned at me. “Excuse me, why are you making that face? Why are you saying that like dead spirits are bad?”

“Lilac—”

“Do you think *I’m* bad?”

I rolled my eyes. “Of course not, but I don’t think that this is an objectively good thing.” I rubbed my head, thinking hard. “Maybe my power is just too much. What if I just start randomly bringing ghosts back? What if I can’t stop? How am I supposed to control it? What if people start trying to use me? What if *spirits* start trying to use me?” I dropped my head into my hands. “Maybe I should run away—just get away before anyone—”

“Marta,” Lilac said, putting a hand on my back. “You’re spiraling. Take a deep breath. No one is coming after you. Yeah, you brought a spirit back from the immortal realm, but it was probably just a one-time thing. And it’s not like you did it all on your own. You needed the witches to do the spell to make it work, right?”

“That’s true,” I admitted, trying to breathe, though my chest felt tight.

“So just avoid doing witchcraft, mediumship or whatever, and you should be fine, right? But like, *really* think about avoiding witchcraft. Because, like, I don’t want to freak you out, but that shit was weird, and bringing spirits here from the other side probably isn’t a good thing.”

I looked up at him. “Lilac, was that supposed to make me feel even slightly better? Because it didn’t. At all.”

Before he could answer, there was a knock on the door, and Big Mac walked in without waiting for a response.

Kira trailed in behind her and smiled when she saw me. “How are you, Marta?”

“I’m okay,” I said. “A little tired. A lot freaked out.”

“Well,” Big Mac said with a shrug, “you should be.”

I stared at her. “*What?*”

She took a deep breath. “Well, it’s obvious now that you’re much more powerful than I first assumed. There’s no way to know just what you’re capable of.”

“We think that—for now—we should just…” Kira shrugged awkwardly. “Sort of… forget that any of this happened. Keep it between us.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked in disbelief. “Why?”

“There are people—and supernaturals, too—who would want to exploit you,” Big Mac said.

I rolled my eyes. “Well, I hope you don’t think I’m going to be advertising this.”

“I did warn you that there could be complications when doing this kind of magic,” Big Mac reminded me.

“Yeah,” I said slowly. “What does that mean?”

“That means that we’re not doing this anymore. For your sake, and for everyone else’s,” Kira said, her expression dark.

“Are we clear on this?” Big Mac’s voice was sharp.

I nodded, feeling tears well up in my eyes. “Yes, we’re clear.” I swallowed roughly. “You know, I never wanted to be a medium in the first place. I certainly didn’t *ask* to be haunted by the dead. I didn’t ask for any of this. But you said you needed help, and I wanted to help—”

“Don’t worry,” Big Mac said gruffly, but her expression had softened. “You’re okay. That’s what’s important. And as long as Deidamia is here, maybe we’ll learn something about Letifer. Don’t be too worried about it, okay?”

I nodded, but as soon as the witches left the room and shut the door behind them, I fell face down onto the coverlet and sobbed. “I wish I’d never come here!”

A cool hand rested on the small of my back.

“Hey,” Lilac said softly. “How about a ghost massage?”

Just knowing that he was trying to comfort me somehow made everything feel ten times worse, and I crumbled, sobbing hard into the blankets. “Everything is such a mess!”

“Stop, Marta,” he said soothingly. “It’s not your fault. None of it is. You *were* only trying to help. And you did. Deidamia is here, and she’s going to help. Besides, no one was hurt.” He pushed gently on my shoulder until I turned over. “Look at me,” he said softly.

Sniffing, I looked up at him. “What?”

He smiled down at me. “It’s going to be okay. It really is.”

Maybe it was just that I wanted to believe him so much, but I really *did* believe him. I sat up, my eyes locked onto his. I felt more drawn to him in this moment than I ever had before. He—more than anyone else—understood what I was feeling. I reached out my hand and drew my fingers down his face. He closed his eyes as I touched him, and—while his eyes were still closed—I leaned in and pressed my lips to his.

Lilac kissed me once, then again, then again, until I was so hungry for him that I was leaning into him, pressing myself against him. His cool hands were everywhere, on my arms and sliding up my back, and I wrapped my own arms around his neck, holding him tight. Lilac kissed me harder and deeper, and my need for him grew so urgent that I forgot where I was, and I forgot the pain in my head and in my chest, and I even forgot all the very good reasons I’d come up with for why kissing Lilac wasn’t a good idea.

Clambering up onto my knees, I moved closer, *needing* to be nearer to him, and was nearly in his lap when he pulled away from me.

“Marta,” he said breathlessly. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

**Episode 1667**

GREYSON

I brushed my lips lightly against Cali’s, and I felt a shiver run through her, making her whole body tremble in my arms.

“I’ll stop if you want to stop,” I murmured, my lips against hers.

She smiled and clutched me tighter but said nothing, so I brushed a kiss against her mouth, then the highest point of her cheekbone, then her jaw.

“Just say the word,” I whispered, “and I’ll stop.”

Another kiss on the thin, sensitive skin of her neck, then the hollow of her throat.

*Mine*.

“Greyson,” she moaned, but the sound was cut off when I covered her mouth with mine.

Then, from down the hall, I heard the sound of someone clearing their throat and a very distinctive voice saying, “*Ew*.”

I looked up quickly and saw the kid. Again. The one from my dream last night. The one who’d called me Dad. I stared into the dimness of the hall, where the kid stood, staring at me. What the fuck was he doing here? And—more importantly—why was I seeing him?

The kid made a disgusted face. “Why are you kissing *her*?” he asked, looking at Cali. “She’s not my mommy.”

“Greyson? What’s wrong? Are you okay?” Cali’s voice had taken on a worried edge. “*Greyson?*”

I blinked hard, hoping the kid would go away. He didn’t.

“Greyson!” Cali grabbed my shoulders and shook me. “Look at me! What’s happening?”

The kid’s face crumpled, and tears began to fall. “I want my mommy!” he wailed. “Where’s my mommy?”

“Greyson!”

I grabbed Cali’s arms and pulled her into my room. When I turned back, the kid was standing in the hallway, like he’d followed me. He was staring at me, his eyes wide, tears flowing down his face. I slammed the door and leaned against it, breathing hard.

And when I looked up, Cali was staring at me, too.

“What?” I asked, my heart beating painfully hard.

“Greyson, what’s going on? You told me you were okay,” she said, her voice half-accusing, half-terrified.

I pushed away from the door and straightened, trying to pull myself together and look like I *wasn’t* on the edge of a breakdown, but it was hard. My mind was racing. Who the hell *was* that kid? And whowas his mother?

Cali was at my side, putting her arms firmly around me. “Greyson, stay with me. Talk to me. Can you hear me?”

I nodded.

“Just tell me what’s happening,” she urged.

But how could I? I couldn’t even start. I felt a creeping sensation up the back of my neck and—on impulse—pulled away from her and swung the door open and stared into the hallway. I looked in each direction, but the hall was empty. Well, except for Torin, who had just come out of the bathroom, whistling to himself.

He smiled when he saw me. “Hey, Greyson,” he said, waving cheerily. “How’s it going?”

I laughed in answer, the sound high and unnatural, which made Torin’s smile falter. Was I losing my mind? I closed the door and turned around slowly. Cali was looking at me, her eyes wide with trepidation, but she didn’t resist as I took her in my arms.

“I’m sorry, love,” I said. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Greyson, *what* is going on?” she asked, her voice full of urgency. “Tell me.”

But I didn’t know what to tell her. I didn’t want to scare her—but I didn’t want to lie, either. I moved to sit on the bed, thinking hard.

“Okay, listen,” I said, looking up at her, “I saw that boy again.”

Cali’s eyes widened. “*Here?* In the house?”

I nodded. “Yeah. In the hallway. Just now.”

“The same one—”

“The same one I saw when I was sleepwalking. The one who called me Dad.” I swallowed hard. Cali’s eyes were wide with surprise and—unnervingly—fear. I could only hope she wouldn’t suddenly decide to side with Xavier and start pressuring me to step down as Alpha.

“Do you think this is the witch sisters’ work, or…” Cali trailed off, apparently reluctant to go on.

I held out my hand, and she walked over to me. “You can say whatever’s on your mind, love.”

She took a deep breath. “Or do you think it’s because of Marta? Because of what happened? Do you think now that Didi is here…” She stopped again and pressed her lips into a thin, worried line.

I traced my finger along them. I hated to see her so tense, and I hated that I was the one who was making her feel this way. “It was just a dream. It wasn’t real.”

“I know, but—”

“You’ve seen these things, too, Cali. You know how real they can feel sometimes, but they’re not.” She nodded. “I know the timing is bad, with everything else going on, but it doesn’t mean the world is coming to an end.”

She looked at me for a long moment, then stepped forward and threw her arms around me, holding me tight. With me sitting and her standing, we were nearly the same height.

“I just don’t want anything to happen to you,” she said, her voice muffled against my shoulder. She pulled back suddenly, a look of grave concern on her face. “Show me your leg,” she ordered.

“Now?”

“Yes, now.”

“Cali—”

“Show it to me,” she insisted. “I want to make sure the witch mark isn’t any worse.”

I sighed but showed the wound to her. “See?”  
 Cali bent and looked closely. “Hmm.”

“Not worse.”

“No,” she admitted slowly. “It’s not worse.” She stood and looked me in the eye. “But you have to promise that you’ll tell me if it does get worse. Promise.”

“Are you leaving?” I asked, reaching for her again. I didn’t want her to go.

She nodded. “I want to check on Artemis. But you still need to promise. If anything happens, you’ll tell me,” she said warningly.

It was a little like being threatened by a kitten, but I nodded. “I promise,” I said, brushing a kiss across her lips. “You’ll be the first to know.”

When the door closed behind her, I dropped back onto the bed with a gusty sigh. I’d told Cali everything she wanted to know, so why did it feel like I was still holding something back? I rubbed my eyes, trying to break up the headache building behind them.

Then it hit me: the boy’s reaction to seeing me kiss Cali. *Why are you kissing her? She’s not my mommy.*

What did that *mean*?

And why hadn’t I told Cali about it?

Maybe because I was worried it would feed her fears, which were already growing, helped along by Xavier’s continued attempts to undermine me.

But maybe there was more to it than just that. Maybe I hadn’t told Cali because I was starting to get scared, too. Maybe because—deep down—I was beginning to question my own sanity. Blackouts, vivid dreams, sleepwalking… What the hell was happening to me? If this had been happening to anyone else—to Xavier, for example—I knew I would’ve been jumping to some pretty dark conclusions.

Dull pain throbbed through my leg, and I thought about the witch mark. Was that just another symptom of all of this—or was it the cause?

I closed my eyes and pressed the heels of my palms against them. Why couldn’t this all just go away?

“It *can* go away.”

The sound of Silas’s voice jolted me upright. I whipped around, my heart thumping.

Silas was sitting casually in a chair in the corner, the boy at his side.

The boy’s chubby finger was pointing at me. “Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, Daddy…” he whispered, his eyes boring into mine.

I covered my ears with my hands, something I hadn’t done since I was a toddler. “Tell him to stop,” I growled.

Silas smiled at me. “He’s your son,” he said, his voice gently chiding.

“No, he’s not,” I snarled.

The boy hadn’t moved. His finger kept pointing at me, his eyes kept staring, and he kept whispering, “Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, Daddy…”

Silas shrugged lightly. “You should stop fighting the new reality, Greyson. It really won’t do you any good. You cannot change what has already been, son.”

“Stop it,” I snapped, my voice a warning. I couldn’t ignore the cold bout of fear that was settling into my gut. “This isn’t real. None of it.”

Silas’s smile grew. “If it’s not real, then why are you bothering to talk to me?”

The pressure in my head was growing—building in intensity as I struggled to make sense of everything. His voice was just so *loud*. “Just… stop. You stop, and make that kid stop. NOW!”

Silas gave me a long, appraising look. He got to his feet and stepped toward me. “Son, it can all go away.”

“How?” I asked desperately. I would do anything to make this stop. To never see this boy’s hollow face again.

Silas’s eyes glittered. “Just bring me the girl.”

**Episode 1668**

MARTA

I sat back, gasping for breath. Seriously? Lilac kisses me senseless and then decides that he needs to talk to me? My lips were still tingling from his kiss, and all I could think about was picking up exactly where we’d left off.

And so that was exactly what I did.

Curling my fingers into the collar of his shirt, I pulled him back in for more. Our lips moved together in a rhythm that had my heart racing, that made me feel like my entire body was catching fire in the best way possible.

I lightly bit down on Lilac’s bottom lip, and he pulled me against him with a gasp and a groan, deepening the kiss. I drank in that sweet sound, pressing myself against his frame, seeking contact anywhere I could.

*Yes*. This was what I wanted. What I needed. No talking, no worries about life and death and the bridge between. Just me and Lilac and all the delicious sensations the two of us could make together.

Suddenly, he pulled back with another gasp. His lips were swollen, his cheeks flushed. He’d never looked more alive to me than he did in this moment. Real and gorgeous and—ugh! Why was he interrupting us again? It was just getting good!

“We can’t,” he said, breathless.

I blinked. “What do you mean we can’t? What’s wrong?”

Oh my god. It was my kissing skills, wasn’t it? He probably thought I was way too rusty. It wasn’t like I’d had a chance to practice in the last fifty years…

Lilac grimaced and stepped away, and I took the opportunity to check my breath while his back was turned. It smelled… neutral? Like… hot mouth? It wasn’t minty fresh, but it didn’t smell like I’d just woken up, or like I’d eaten too much garlic bread or anything like that. That was good, right? Or, at least, it wasn’t *bad*.

I looked up at Lilac, who was still standing with his back to me.

“What’s wrong?” I pressed.

His shoulders lifted and dipped with his sigh. “Maybe we should slow down.”

*Really*? He was a ghost who only came alive whenever we kissed—which wasn’t often. He was the one who kept begging to kiss me, and I was refusing. I honestly didn’t see how things could go any slower.

“What are you afraid of?” I asked.

Lilac turned to face me with a huff. “I’m not afraid. I risked my life to save you from that fire, remember?”

I cocked my head to the side. “How, exactly, can a ghost risk their life?”

“That’s not the point.”

“Okay, so what *is* the point? Do you want to make out or not?”

“Yes, of course I do. I love kissing you. And I like to think I’m pretty good at it—no, I’m an *amazing* make-outer…”

“Uh huh. So what are you rambling about, then?” I couldn’t help the sense of foreboding that was creeping in. Sure, a human making out with a temporarily corporeal ghost was new territory for both of us, but he’d never seemed bothered by it before. If anything, *I* was the one who’d been slowing things down for the longest time. So why was he acting so weird about it now?

“It’s just… I’m worried about you. I don’t want to hurt your feelings.”

My lips twitched. So *now* he was concerned about my feelings? “Okay, duly noted. But I don’t think you need to worry. I know we’re not making any kind of long-term commitment, here…”

As if on cue, Lilac’s body began to fade around the edges. He looked down at himself and groaned. “Okay, you need to kiss me.”

I scowled. “What? I thought you didn’t want to? I thought you wanted to ‘slow down.’” My fingers made air quotes.

“I only have three minutes between kisses to be corporeal,” he reminded me. Like it was even possible that I’d forget the rules of our messed-up arrangement. “I need a recharge.”

“Why does it even matter? We can still talk, whether you’re in the flesh or not.”

He blushed to the roots of his hair. “But… I want to be corporeal when I say this to you.”

I blew out a breath. “Okay, then come here.”

Lilac slowly approached me, watching me with an expression that I couldn’t quite place. I made a concentrated effort not to laugh. He was acting like such a dork right now. It was hard to believe the guy who was determined to win me over and wanted to kiss nonstop was the same guy who was now looking at me like I was going to lose control and try to eat him.

He stopped right in front of me. His body was almost completely faded now, but he still looked hesitant. His eyes dropped down to my lips, and I felt my stomach tighten in anticipation.

*Time for a recharge, indeed.*

Resting my hands on his chest for balance, I leaned in and brushed my lips against his. Kissing a ghost wasn’t all that bad, really—not terribly different from kissing him when he was corporeal. His lips felt cooler, lighter somehow. His body was slightly less firm, but he was still there beneath my fingers.

And as we kissed, as his lips moved against mine, his fingers slipped through my hair to cradle my head and angle my mouth right where he wanted it, and I felt his body become more real beneath my touch. His mouth gradually got firmer, his breath fanning over my face in a wash of heat, his fingers offering ten points of pressure where they pressed into my scalp.

Kissing Lilac when he was a ghost was nice—way nicer than anyone would’ve expected. But this? Kissing him while he was real and tangible and warm and firm? This was absolutely intoxicating.

My hands slid from his chest to twine around the back of his neck, and I pressed myself against him, chest to chest. For a split second, I could’ve sworn I could feel his heart racing against mine. When we were like this, it was so easy to forget that he was a ghost. He felt so real, so good, that my body couldn’t tell the difference—and my brain wasn’t inclined to linger on that inconvenient fact, either.

Because this was a hell of a lot more fun.

I kissed him deeper, my lips moving faster against his as I pressed myself against him, until he was moving backward and taking me with him. Three steps and we’d arrived at my bed. Three steps and—

Lilac went ramrod straight and pushed me back. He broke away from my mouth with a groan. “Marta, I’ve never had sex!”

I froze. Like, my limbs and my brain and my heart and my lungs went still. I blinked once. Twice. Opened my mouth to speak, and then realized I didn’t have even the slightest clue what to say. “Umm… Okay?”

He stepped back. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing!” I held up my hands. “Just… I thought teenagers in this era were more free. I just kind of assumed that you…”

He grimaced, and his face went an adorable shade of red. An awkward silence settled over us. I didn’t know what to say, what do to. And I didn’t want to make this already terrible situation even worse.

“They are,” he conceded. “I mean, *we* are. I just didn’t want to. And this werewolf pack is like, *really* sexually charged, so it wasn’t easy. But I was only seventeen when I died. I never even had a girlfriend.”

“I didn’t exactly have a boyfriend, but that didn’t stop me,” I admitted. At the time, it would have been the height of a scandal—having sex with a man I wasn’t committed to. He’d been just some guy I sort of knew. Friend of a friend. And it just sort of… happened one night. But now… “What do you want to do? Or, what do you *not* want to do, I guess? If you’re uncomfortable.”

He shook his head. “It’s not that I don’t *want* to have sex.”

“So, you do. Just not with me?”

*Ouch. Talk about rejection. Not even the dead guy wants to sleep with me.*

“*No*, that’s not it. I do.” He sighed and rubbed his face. “But not like this.”

“Okay, can you just spit it out? Whatever it is, just tell me.” I was absolutely willing to respect his boundaries, but I had no interest in getting jerked around.

His body was starting to fade again. “I’m just… God, this is so embarrassing. I’ve always taken this really seriously, and I don’t want us to take that next step while I’m a fucking *ghost*. And I don’t want any of this to be seen as an excuse to convince you to help me become corporeal. I… I always imagined my first time would be special.” He lifted his gaze to mine. “And I know I’m dead, and I should probably be thankful for any facsimile of life I can get at this point, but if we’re going to cross that line, I want it to be real.”

My heart dropped. “Oh, so you’re saying you’d just be using me, so that I’ll agree to help you become fully human again? Thanks for reminding me.” I blew out a breath. “Maybe you should go. Give me some space.”

“First of all, I can’t. We’re tethered. But more importantly, I want you to understand that I don’t want you to ever think that I’m using you. The truth is, I like you. A lot.”

I scoffed. “You’re doing it again. You tell me you don’t want to use me, and then you say something like that! Just… figure out what you want, okay?”

I could barely look at him. I felt completely overwhelmed by the bomb he’d just dropped on me, by our situation in general. I felt nauseous, lightheaded. I couldn’t talk about this anymore.

I started for the door, but when I reached for the doorknob, I froze.

A sickly, rotting color was spreading down my hand from the tips of my fingers.

**Episode 1669**

Even though my feet were carrying me toward Artemis’s room, mentally, I was still with Greyson. There was just so much to process there—the dream kid, his wounded leg, the blackouts and the lingering threat of the witches still hanging over him. To say nothing of the *due destini* curse that we just couldn’t seem to escape.

It was too much. All of it.

And Greyson… It broke my heart to see him like this.

It reminded me of when the Orb had been influencing the pack—all kinds of weird things had happened then that were beyond everyone’s control. And now it felt like we were right back to that point, only instead of an entire pack’s worth of strange things, everything was centered on my mate.

I did wonder how much of this was due to the three witches, but I was skeptical about just how much influence they wielded over what Greyson was going through. Whatever was going on went beyond Greyson and me, and the what-ifs of our future.

*Does Marta bringing Didi back to life have anything to do with this?*

It didn’t seem outside the realms of possibility. Whether she’d done it on purpose or not, Marta bringing Didi back to life had probably messed with the rules of some pretty strict magic. Maybe that huge shift was causing a ripple effect of sorts? And Greyson was catching the brunt of it?

*Maybe I should go talk to Big Mac and see if she knows anything about magical visions.*

“Cali, there you are!”

I stopped in my tracks. Mom and Dad were standing in the hallway ahead of me.

“We’ve been looking for you,” my dad said.

“Oh?” I perked up at that. “What’s going on? Are you okay?” I scanned them both quickly, but they looked fine.

“Oh, we’re good.” Mom held her hands up in front of her. “We just wanted to check in with you. It seems like so much has been happening around the pack house lately.”

*Understatement.*

“You must be so glad to have Lola back,” Dad said. “Even if she is a vampire now.”

“I am, actually. Especially if she’s got her bloodlust under control.” I laughed, though it felt a little forced. It was still a little too easy to remember exactly what it had felt like when Lola’s freshly minted vampire fangs had sunk into my neck. “Either way, I’m sure Jay will help her with that. He’s a really good mate.”

My parents exchanged a look, and I suddenly felt like I’d just walked into a trap.

“Speaking of mates,” Mom began, “how are things with the boys?”

I tried not to grimace, but on the inside I was letting out one long groan. And probably slouching and swinging my arms around in despair for good measure. Did they really want to go there again? It was bad enough talking about my situation—you know, being literally cursed and having the lives of the two men I loved most hanging in the balance—with my friends, but to talk to my parents about it?

UGH.

I forced a polite smile. How did the saying go? You can take the girl out of the Midwest…

“Things are fine,” I said. “But what about you two? Why are you still here at the pack house?”

My parents’ eyebrows rose in unison. Like they’d practiced it, or something.

I quickly added, “Not that I’m not enjoying it, having you guys around, but, like, what’s your plan?”

Dad nodded. He looked somewhat appeased by my white lie, my mom less so. “We’ve been talking about that, and we’ve decided that we’ll make a decision after the full moon.”

I blinked, and then my brain short circuited as I realized the implications of what my dad was saying. “You mean, after you turn, or don’t?”

“Right,” he said. “We’re planning to talk to Greyson, since he’s the Alpha of the pack, to make sure it’s okay.”

Oh my god. If my dad did turn out to be a werewolf, would he join the pack? That would be *so* awkward. Like, somehow more awkward than this terrible conversation.

“You know, Greyson’s a little busy right now. But I bet he’ll love to hear you out after the full moon.” I gave them another flat smile. “But um, yeah! That would be… So fun! I’m just going to check on Artemis real quick.”

I brushed past them before they could reply, or worse, invite themselves along. And on the way to Artemis’s room, I fought off terrifying visions of spending the rest of my life living in the same pack house as my mom and dad.

*There’s a reason why children leave home.*

I loved my parents. I really did. They were wonderful, saintly people who had been through hell for each other (and because of each other), and for me (and because of me), and the fact that they were here at all, still loving and supporting me despite the crazy turn my life had taken was evidence of just how amazing they were, and that I probably did not deserve them. All of that was the god’s honest truth, and I was so grateful for them and everything they’d done for me.

But holy hell, my life was one more complication away from being a total shitshow, and having my parents around *forever* would only make that worse!

It was hard enough keeping my private life from the rest of the pack—nearly impossible, actually, especially with gossipy Torin and Astrid around—but having my parents actually be pack members rather than just polite perma-guests? That would be *so* awkward. Like, so unbearably awkward I’d probably have to move away to the other side of the planet and live as a hermit so that I would never have to relive any of the horrifically embarrassing things that *would absolutely happen* if my parents were part of the pack.

But not all hope was lost. Dad might not turn out to be a werewolf. There was still a chance that the full moon would come and go, and that my parents would eventually go home.

*Fingers crossed. Minnesota’s only a phone call away.*

I stopped at Artemis’s bedroom door, took a deep breath, shoved all of my parent-related anxiety aside, and knocked on the door.

“Come in,” Artemis called.

I stepped inside. “Hey, I just wanted to check on you.”

Artemis was sitting at the foot of her bed with Rishika. Despite how absolutely beside herself my sister had been earlier, she seemed totally fine now.

“I’m so sorry.” Artemis grimaced. “I don’t know what came over me.”

“Oh, no problem.” I smiled. “I’m just glad you’re feeling better.”

I glanced at Rishika, giving her a meaningful look. She nodded and turned to Artemis. “I’ll give you two a moment alone.”

When she left, Artemis turned to me. “How’s Deidamia doing? Is there any new information there?”

I shrugged and took Rishika’s seat. “I don’t know, honestly. She seemed pretty out of it. She’s aware of certain things, but she doesn’t know about others.”

“That doesn’t sound good.”

“I want to talk to her more, when she’s feeling better. She’s resting now, but hopefully we can speak to her later and learn something useful about Letifer.”

Artemis nodded, her expression solemn. “We can only hope.”

I watched my sister’s face carefully. She’d been so, so upset when Deidamia had appeared. I’d never seen her so upset before, honestly. It was the kind of emotional reaction that went way beyond stress or PMS. It was almost like… Artemis cared about Deidamia? I didn’t know how that could be possible, but I couldn’t see what else would have brought on such a strong reaction.

“Deidamia seems nice, as far as ancient lady standards go?” I began. “I can only imagine how jarring all of this must be to her, but all things considered, she’s handling it very well. She’s actually pretty easy to talk to.”

“That’s good.”

I couldn’t read my sister’s face. Her expression was placid, almost empty. Like she was making a concentrated effort to come across as neutral. Even though, for whatever reason, her reaction to Deidamia had seemed anything but. I wondered how much that had to do with Artemis’s own history with dark magic. Had seeing Deidamia rising from the dead reminded her of the time she’d spent possessed by the Orb?

“Would you feel better if we both talked to Deidamia?” I offered. “Maybe… Maybe it will help you understand, um, some things.”

“Like why I lost my shit when I saw her?” Artemis suggested wryly.

“Mmm.” I hummed noncommittally. “Let’s give her some time to rest and then we can go talk to her—”

The door opened suddenly—no knock—and Big Mac stepped in. Her eyes riveted onto Artemis. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I would prefer that you knock. You don’t know what I could have been doing in here.”

Big Mac waved her off. “It wouldn’t be anything I haven’t seen before. So, you’re feeling better?”

Artemis sighed. “Yeah, I am.”

“We’re going to go talk to Deidamia when she wakes up,” I offered.

The witch’s expression darkened. “Absolutely not.”

I opened my mouth to argue, and Big Mac speared me with a look. “No.”

I shook my head. “It’s just to get a few things cleared up with Artemis, to show her that the dark magic that took her over isn’t what Deidamia is—”

“No, you don’t understand. We have to be careful around Deidamia,” Big Mac said. “She’s a dark magic witch.”

**Episode 1670**

LOLA

I screamed and lurched back as Jacqueline popped up from the back seat. My head smacked into the roof of the car, and I fell right on my ass on the cold cement driveway.

“Stay back!” I warned, scrambling backward to put as much space between me and the psychotic mean girl of a revenant-vampire that had apparently followed me home. “One more scream, and I can have an entire pack of werewolves ripping you to shreds!”

Oh, god. This was like, *worst-case* scenario. I’d left Tottenville to save my life and Jay’s—not to pull my entire pack into the danger I was trying to escape.

Jacqueline’s eyes narrowed as she gracefully exited the car. “Lola—”

“I said *stay back*!”

She shut the door and dared to take a step forward.

Never let it be said that I hadn’t warned her.

Jacqueline rolled her eyes. “You’re not going to—”

I lunged for her, fangs bared, and slammed her into the car. The metal exterior groaned under the pressure. My fingers wrapped tight around Jacqueline’s wrists, and I pinned them to the car. “What, was torturing me at Tottenville not enough for you? You have to follow me home and threaten my *pack*—”

“I’m not here to hurt you, or anyone else!” she insisted. Her voice had taken on that haughty tone, as if I’d somehow offended her by assuming she was going to try to kill me again, like she had so many times back at school.

I was getting ready to mind link with Jay, to tell him that I needed help and to bring *everyone.*

“Lola, please.”

I froze. I’d never heard Jacqueline use the p-word before. Honestly, I hadn’t even thought she *knew* that word. Was this some kind of trap?

Words spilled out of her mouth in a rush. “I’m telling the truth. I’m not here to hurt anyone. I’m here to escape. I need help.”

I didn’t peel my hands away from her wrists. This felt like a trap. Like, I’d say, “Help with what?” and then she’d give me an evil grin and say something horrible and corny like, “Help finding my next meal.” And then she’d attack while my guard was down, and in the end I’d be nothing but a bloody smear on the driveway.

“Earth to Lola!”

I blinked, then shook myself. “Explain.”

“I had to get away from Tottenville. It’s infested with those orange-eyed vampires.”

“You mean the revenants that attacked me and Jay?” I asked. “One of those orange things you *were*?”

She nodded. “They’re terrifying. And they’ve taken over the school. I pretended to be one of them, then hid under your car to escape.” She grimaced. “It wasn’t easy. Your boyfriend is a really shitty driver.”

“My mate,” I corrected automatically. “And he’s a good driver.”

It was then that I noticed she was spattered with mud, and there were even some tiny rocks in her hair. She looked pretty bad. Not undead revenant bad, but “I just clung to the underside of a car for a few hundred miles” bad.

Huh. Maybe she was actually telling the truth?

Jacqueline huffed. “Good driver or bad, that’s not the point. I need your help.”

“I don’t think you understand the situation here. This is a *werewolf* pack house, and for future reference, werewolves generally don’t like vampires. Of course,” I added, “I’m an exception to that rule. But my point still stands.”

The front door of the pack house creaked as it swung open, and I quickly opened the door to the back seat with one hand and shoved Jacqueline inside with the other.

“It’s really not safe for you to be seen here!” I whisper-yelled at her.

She quickly righted herself, sitting up in the back seat. “Be careful!” she whisper-yelled right back. “You almost broke it!”

“Broke what?”

“If you can back the fuck off for a second, I’ll show you!”

“Oh my god, will you *please* keep your voice down?”

The vampire rolled her eyes as she dug into her coat pocket and produced a handful of vials. “I stole these from Professor Laurence’s lab,” she said in a thankfully softer voice.

My eyes widened. “Wait, that’s the serum Emmett used on you, to help you overcome the pull from the revenant.”

She nodded. “I thought it might come in handy. Now, are you going to help me, or what?”

I blinked. “Well…”

Honestly, I didn’t know what to do. It wasn’t like Jacqueline and I were besties. Whether she was on a revenant-induced rampage or just being her normal self, she’d worked very hard to make my time at Tottenville a living nightmare. And now she’d stowed away in Jay’s car and was asking—no, demanding—*my* help?

There was a not-so-small part of me that had zero interest in helping her out. Plus, how would the rest of the pack feel if they knew I’d smuggled a vampire into the pack house? I couldn’t imagine Greyson being super thrilled. The only reason *I* was allowed to be here was because they all knew and loved me from when I’d been a werewolf. It was like I was prequalified. Grandfathered in. My history with the pack was my saving grace, because I sure as hell wasn’t a werewolf anymore.

But Jacqueline was an unknown vampire, with no real ties to the pack. There was no telling what they’d do to her if they caught her here.

If we’d been back at Tottenville, I would’ve been sorely tempted to relish this leverage over Jacqueline, to wield it like a club. But looking at her now, all muddy and worn down, I did feel for her in some small way.

And if the situation were reversed, I would hope that someone would help *me*.

*Ugh. I’m going to have to help her, aren’t I?*

“Lola?” Jay’s voice called out into the night.

Shit! I closed the door to the back seat with a hiss. “Stay down and be quiet!”

My mind raced with new worst-case scenarios and half-assed explanations as Jay approached with Ravi in tow. My luck was just getting worse. Jay was bad enough, but Ravi didn’t know Jacqueline, or what it meant that she’d stowed away to escape Tottenville.

*Maybe I should just hop in the car and drive away? Or try to divert them back toward the house? Maybe as long as no one ever comes near this car again, and we park it somewhere shady, Jacqueline can just live in the back seat forever?*

“Did you find your phone?” Jay asked.

“Oh.” Right. My phone. The whole reason I’d come out here in the first place. I’d completely forgotten. “Um, no. I didn’t, but that’s not important. Everyone I want to talk to is right here!” I let out a deranged-sounding laugh.

Jay frowned. “What about your dads? Do you want help looking?”

“Oh. Um… maybe later—”

Ravi sniffed deeply, then grimaced. “It smells like death out here.”

*Fuck me.* He was smelling Jacqueline.

“Oh sorry!” Another deranged laugh. “I haven’t showered yet. It’s been a helluva day. Maybe we should go inside?”

“What about your phone?” Jay asked.

“It’s probably inside.”

“Did you check between the seats?” Ravi asked, opening the passenger side door and leaning in.

I tried to stop him. “Oh, no, that’s not—”

He stumbled back with a cry. “There’s a vampire in here!” He immediately shifted, and Jacqueline, still in the back seat, let out a scream.

Jay’s gaze snapped from Ravi’s wolf to the vampire in the back seat. “*Jacqueline?*”

I jumped in between them. “It’s okay! Don’t hurt her!”

Jay grabbed Ravi around his chest and pulled him back. “It’s okay. We know this vampire. She’s… Well, she’s not a friend. But she’s not dangerous.”

After a beat, Ravi shifted back, and Jacqueline’s jaw dropped.

“He’s naked,” she said, her eyes wide.

“Why is there a vampire in your back seat?” Ravi growled.

“She’s a refugee!” I blurted out, then quickly explained the situation at Tottenville and why Jacqueline felt she needed to escape. “She needs our help.”

“But she’s a vamp—” Ravi stopped himself, looking sheepishly at me. “Sorry.”

“I’m not going to hurt anyone,” Jacqueline insisted. Then she swallowed roughly, looking Ravi’s naked body up and down.

“Why don’t you go find some clothes?” I suggested. “Not everyone here is used to naked guys walking around all the time.”

Ravi shook his head. “I get that, but I’m not going anywhere until we figure this out. I’m supposed to be part of the security team here.”

“You’re not going to report Jacqueline, are you?” I asked. “She really isn’t going to hurt anyone. She’s not a threat.”

He sighed. “I’ll have to let Greyson know.”

“Who’s Greyson?” Jacqueline asked.

“Our Alpha. The pack leader,” I explained, then turned to Jay. “What do we do now? Even if Greyson lets her stay, that doesn’t mean the rest of the pack is going to be happy about it. How am I supposed to *hide* a vampire from a bunch of werewolves?”

**Episode 1671**

XAVIER

I raced through the woods in my wolf form, my breath puffing into white clouds in the brisk November air. My lungs burned, along with my legs. I hadn’t really paid attention to the number of miles I’d gone, but the telltale ache in my limbs told me it was more than a few.

It was nice, actually. Running wasn’t something I always made time for, but when I did, it helped me keep myself under control. To take a moment, to breathe, to focus on nothing but the air rushing in and out of my lungs and the rhythmic movement of my body as I darted through the forest.

A while back, I’d watched a YouTube video on how to breathe and relax in a meditative stance. I’d tried it once or twice—my temper had never been particularly long, and I’d figured it wouldn’t hurt to get things under control before I did something I regretted—but the breathing exercises had only made me more tense. I’d been so fixated on the rise and fall of my chest that in the end I’d felt like I was slowly suffocating.

Not exactly relaxing, that.

Fortunately, it hadn’t been long after that I’d figured out running was as close to meditation as I was going to get. It helped me burn off excess emotion and all the frenetic energy that came with it. It helped me find that headspace of cool, dispassionate logic. And it had probably saved a few lives along the way—all those people whose heads I would have cracked, had I not found a better way to cope.

But today, running just wasn’t doing it for me. Today, no matter how far I ran, no matter how much I breathed and tried to lose myself in this simple, mindless act, I couldn’t get my mind to stop spinning around one topic—one person.

*Greyson*.

Sometimes, I was convinced we’d be the death of each other.

Not that I wanted to crack his skull or rip his head off—though I supposed neither of those options were fully off the table—but lately it seemed like we couldn’t be more in opposition. The pack. Cali. What the hell we were going to do about that witch mark on his leg.

Greyson was a lot of things, and being who I was, I could wax poetic on his many failings for any amount of time. But if I was being honest, my brother usually thought with his head. He was logical, under normal circumstances. Reasonable. I had to give him that.

But right now, he was being a fucking idiot. After all the speeches he’d given me about what was best for the pack, and how to protect the pack, how to be a good Alpha, blah, blah, blah, how could he not see that *he* was the danger now?

I knew what I’d seen. Greyson’s eyes had been orange. They might not have been prominent, Vegas billboard-bright, but the color had still been there. If I thought back, I could still see the dull shade. Like a pumpkin left out to rot.

And sure, it could have been a reflection. Just a trick of the light. But what if it wasn’t? And what about the witch mark? It was practically crippling Greyson physically, so was it such a leap to believe it was capable of warping his mind and clouding his judgment?

Being physically unwell was one thing, and I understood his instinct to try to hide that sign of weakness from the pack. But a mentally unstable Alpha was a ticking time bomb. And whatever the hell was going on with him, if we couldn’t get it under control, Greyson was going to blow the entire pack to pieces.

I imagined Cali being caught in that crossfire, staring down at revenant-Greyson, with haunting orange eyes. Would she run away? Or would she stay, risk herself to try to save him?

The answer was immediate, and it sent my pulse skyrocketing.

*If anything happens to Cali because of Greyson’s inability to accept what’s happening to him, I will never forgive him.*

*I’ll kill him myself.*

I imagined my jaws closing around my brother’s throat, his blood hot and thick in my mouth. And because I was forever fucked up, I couldn’t imagine tearing someone’s throat out without thinking of Ava.

Now there was another person I wasn’t ready to forgive. Had she really killed Iñigo? If she was telling the truth—and that was a fucking huge *if*—did that mean that I was wrong about her?

And if so, did it change anything between us?

I struggled with that idea. On the one hand, it was all too easy to remember all the shitty things she’d done to me personally—to say nothing of the damage she’d done to the pack, to Cali, and to literally everyone else.

But the bad parts, unfortunately, weren’t all I remembered about her. If I thought back further, to when we were younger, I remembered Ava being the love of my life. We’d been happy. The real kind. And we’d thought we would unite two packs by becoming Alpha and Luna. There were so many memories of that time, and while I believed Ava to be a pathological liar, I knew deep in my bones that the happy memories we’d shared weren’t fake. She hadn’t been lying back then.

What we’d had so long ago had been real—the kind of love and companionship that humans wrote books and made movies about. Even if it was ruined and broken now.

*What if the Ava I used to love is still alive, somewhere deep down inside the Ava I know now?*

The thought made my breathing hitch, and I gulped down a few lungfuls of air, trying to shove that feeling down.

It didn’t matter anyway. I didn’t want to go back to that. Cali was my mate now. My only mate.

But could there still be some good left in Ava?

If Silas hadn’t instigated the pack wars, how would things have turned out? Would she have killed my mother? Would any of this have ever happened?

I shoved the thought away.

Tempting as it was to try to trace some meaning onto all the terrible shit that had happened, I knew there was no use playing it out. Some alternate-universe fantasy wouldn’t change the world we were living in now. It wouldn’t change what had happened. What Ava had done.

No, I needed to deal with what was real. What was happening now.

Footsteps echoed through the forest, and I saw Rishika’s wolf running up ahead. She stilled when she saw me approach, and then shifted back to human. I followed suit.

“I thought I was the only one out running,” she said, by way of greeting. She met my eyes for a split second, then looked away. She seemed distracted by something.

“How’s Artemis?” I asked.

“She’s with Cali right now, so I took advantage of the opportunity to get some exercise. I can’t allow myself to get soft.”

I noticed she hadn’t answered my question, but I let it slide. “It’s great that you’re helping her out. I know Cali appreciates it.”

She laughed, though it sounded a little forced.

Silence settled between us, though I didn’t know if it was because our roles had shifted from two pack members with a clear place in the hierarchy to… What even were we now? Was Rishika still dating Artemis? That’d been a pretty loud “it’s over”—it’d practically resonated through the entire pack house. If they were dating, would Rishika be my sister-in-law to be-ish?

*Whoa, did I just think about* marriage*?*

Another thought to shove away. “Um, I’m heading back in…”

“I’ll go with you. It’s getting cold out here anyway.”

We headed back toward the house, and as we broke through the tree line and into the yard, I noticed Ava coming out of the house.

*Great.*

Rishika followed my gaze. “So, what’s the deal with Ava?”

I sighed. “I wish I knew. I’m still trying to figure her out.”

She laughed. “I know how that is. It must be hard having her around all the time,” she said. “I get why she’s here and all, but still.”

“I’m managing,” I said. I didn’t actually want to talk about it.

“I once had an ex I kept running into,” she continued. “When I was a martial arts instructor, I started dating this ballet dancer who did conditioning at the same gym.”

“A ballet dancer? Nice.”

Rishika laughed again. “Not after we broke up and she kept coming to the gym. It got hard… and weird.”

I shrugged. “Yeah, that about sums it up.”

“I heard she killed Iñigo—is it true?”

“I’m trying to figure that out too. I need to talk to Kira and see if she can back up Ava's story.”

“I heard my name!” Ava called as she strode over to meet us. “What’s going on here?”

I brushed past her, heading toward the driveway. After all the work I’d put into trying to relax, two seconds of hearing her voice had knotted my body with tension again.

“Um.” Rishika paused. “I’m going to check on Artemis. Talk to you later, Xavier.”

She hurried off, leaving me alone with Ava. Traitor. I turned back to my ex-mate, ready to tell her to leave me alone, but then she grabbed my arm and pointed at Jay’s car. “What’s going on over there?”

I looked over and saw Lola, Jay, and Ravi talking to a young woman I didn’t recognize. A whiff of something rotten passed by on the air, and I tensed.

“A vampire? What the hell is a vampire doing here?” I asked.

Ava, still pointing, shook her head. “That’s no vampire. She has an orange aura. She’s a revenant!”

*Seriously?* Fuck.

I jerked my arm out of her grip and burst into action. In a blur of movement, I shifted and pounced on the screaming revenant.

**Episode 1672**

GREYSON

I was alone in my bedroom again—or maybe I’d been alone the entire time, but now I wasn’t being visited by the vision of Silas and that kid. I blew out a breath and slumped back on my mattress. As much as it was a huge fucking relief to not hear voices in my head attached to people who clearly weren’t actually there, I couldn’t help the sense of unease that slithered across my skin.

Silas wanted me to give up Cali. I scoffed. *What a fucking idiot.*

If my father knew anything about me at all—and this request just proved that he didn’t—he should know that there was no way in hell I’d give Cali up to him. That I would never put my mate at risk just to get rid of these creepy visions.

Seriously, how visionary could Silas actually be if he didn’t understand my feelings toward Cali by now? My mate being at the mercy of my father was a nightmare that, even after I’d ripped my father’s throat out, had never truly died. So imagining myself actually gift wrapping her and sending her off to him was so incomprehensible, it was almost funny.

Almost.

Maybe this was a sign that the visions didn’t necessarily mean anything. They weren’t the witches at work, or the precursor to some kind of dark, magical ritual.

Maybe I was just losing my mind.

The thought wasn’t as comforting as I’d hoped. I’d take imaginary Silas over the real kind any day, but that didn’t change how fucking *real* it felt every time dear old dad popped up in my life.

As for the kid, I still didn’t know what the hell to think about that. Clearly my Silas visions were connected to this kid somehow, but why? I could practically hear Xavier sneering in my head about that—saying that it was some Freudian thing about dad screwing up my childhood, and what I was really seeing was sad baby Greyson and his father, the big bad wolf.

I growled at the thought.

Either way, I needed to get my act together. Get these visions under control, or at least my reaction to them. If I couldn’t get a handle on this, then Xavier would just keep using this against me to try to take over as Alpha. And I couldn’t let him do that.

The day would come when we’d fight it out and Xavier would try to take my place as Alpha. But it wasn’t today. Not even close.

A part of me wondered if maybe Xavier was right. If I was putting the pack at more risk by remaining Alpha while I was cursed by the witch mark, and blacking out all the time. He had a point. A potentially slightly less than sane Alpha was not the Alpha any pack truly needed.

But was Xavier really the right choice for the pack right now? I couldn’t imagine that selfish hothead taking on that kind of responsibility, nor could I imagine the pack thriving under his leadership. Just the thought of stepping down and letting Xavier take the reins made my blood boil.

I may have occasionally let my feelings for Cali affect my decisions, but Xavier took that to a whole new level. The guy was completely ruled by his emotions, like a spoiled child. I could imagine giving up being Alpha one day, but not if it meant giving Xavier power that he had no idea what to do with.

“Daddy?”

That fucking kid was back. I took a deep breath and tried to ignore him.

“Daddy? Can’t you hear me?”

I bit back a groan and squeezed my eyes shut.

And who the fuck was this kid? If he wasn’t Cali’s child, then he couldn’t be our dream son. Maren and Fenrir might have been a mindfuck of epic proportions, but the DNA test had proven pretty damn definitively that I hadn’t fathered a kid with another woman. So whoever this kid was, I was *not* his father. Hell, he probably didn’t even have a father. Because he wasn’t real. Because I was probably losing my goddamn mind.

Either way, if he could just leave me the hell alone, that would be great.

“Daddy!”

My eyes snapped open and I sat up, fully expecting to see the kid over in the corner, where he’d been before with my father. But the room was empty, save for me.

And where frustration had been, dread and horror began to seep in. *Is this all in my head?*

*Maybe Cali isn’t the only one who has the potential go mad from the* due destini *curse.*

“Daddy!” the boy cried. “Why are you ignoring me? Don’t you love me?”

I threw myself back on the mattress, clutching my head. “Stop! I don’t even know who you are!”

I jolted back up when I felt a light touch on my shoulder.

The boy was there, standing before me, tears brimming in his eyes. “I’m Shaine. You and mommy named me, don’t you remember?”

Somehow, being able to see the boy, and all his hurt and fear, wasn’t any better than when I hadn’t been able see him at all.

I shook my head helplessly. I had no fucking clue who this “Shaine” kid was, or what he was talking about. “Who is your mother?”

Instead of answering the million-dollar question, the boy’s lower lip stuck out and he began to pout.

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I sighed. “What do you want from me?”

“Why are you protecting *her*?”

Despite every ounce of sense that told me this kid wasn’t real, that I shouldn’t engage with someone that wasn’t real, I felt pulled to the voice. I didn’t want to be, but I didn’t know how to stop that feeling. There was something dark and sinister about this boy. Talking to him was like passing a particularly grotesque car accident. It was horrific, yet I couldn’t look away. I couldn’t *not* listen to what he had to say.

“You always wanted a family, Daddy. And now you have me and Mommy,” Shaine said, his voice darkly sing-song. “You never wanted to be Alpha!”

How did this kid know all this?

*Easy, dummy. Because he’s a figment of your imagination!*

I covered my ears, but his voice didn’t get any quieter. Worse still was the fact that the boy—the voice, whatever the hell he was—wasn’t wrong. I’d never wanted to be Alpha, had I? I’d just stepped up and taken the position because it had been the best way to unite the pack against Silas. The best way to protect my younger brothers.

But now, it seemed like I was the only one still connected to Silas—so why was I holding onto the title of Alpha so hard? What good was it doing me now?

There was a knock at the door.

“Greyson?” Sabine’s voice slipped through the door.

I spun around to face her as she walked in.

My mother paused at the threshold of my room, eyeing me with concern. “Is this a bad time? You seem upset.”

I glanced over to the side of my bed. Of course Shaine wasn’t there anymore. My room was empty. It had been empty from the moment Cali had left to go check on Artemis. It was my own brain that had filled the space with nonsense.

I took a deep breath and cleared my throat. “Sorry, I… um, I must have dozed off. I’m just a little groggy.”

A crease appeared between her eyebrows, and she walked over and slowly took my hand. “Is everything okay?”

Not even a little bit.

I wished I could tell her, wished I could tell anyone. But the last thing I needed right now was for someone to question my sanity.

“Is it your leg?” she asked. “Do you want Big Mac to take another look at it?”

I shook my head. “No, I’m fine.”

“Okay…” It didn’t sound like she believed me. Maybe it was that sixth sense that moms had, even the ones who showed up twenty years too late. “Why don’t you come downstairs and have something to eat?”

“I will. Just give me a few minutes, okay?”

“Okay.” She gave me a soft smile. “I’ll have a mug of white chocolate mocha ready for you.”

She left, and I blew out a breath.

*That was hard.*

I really wanted to tell her the truth—she was my mother, after all—but I just wasn’t there yet. At least I’d been able to admit some of what I was going through to Cali. Maybe not all of it, but if anyone was capable of understanding what I was going through, it was her. I didn’t need to burden my mom.

I headed for the bathroom to wash up.

“Daddy.”

I whipped around with a growl. Shaine was back, and he looked frightened. He opened his mouth to speak, and then suddenly morphed into—

“Silas,” I whispered.

My father smirked. “So you accept that I’m real.”

I slowly shook my head. “I accept *nothing*.”

“Give me the girl, and this can end.”

“I will *never* give Cali to you,” I snarled.

Silas chuckled. “My boy, you’re mistaken. I don’t want the Fae. I want the medium. So tell me—to make all of this go away, why don’t you give Marta to me?”

**Episode 1673**

I reached out and grabbed Big Mac’s arm. “Deidamia’s a dark magic witch?” My mind spun with questions, and they poured out of my mouth almost as quick as I thought them. “How can you tell? What does that even mean? Is she evil? Is she in cahoots with Letifer? Is she going to hurt us?”

Big Mac stayed silent and just stared at me until my questions ran out. Then she looked down and gave my hands on her arm a meaningful look.

“Oh! Sorry.” I released her and sat back. “But seriously, where is all of this coming from? How do you know all this? Deidamia seems so… nice! How could someone who seems so gentle and harmless have dark magic?”

The witch snorted. “By now you should know better than to read too much into appearances. But just because a witch uses dark magic, that doesn’t mean she’s using it for bad things. Remember, I’ve used dark magic before too. Unfortunately, I’ve encountered plenty of witches who use seemingly good magic for selfish, corrupt deeds as well. Dark magic can be useful, but it comes with far greater risks. Even if you’re careful, the results can sometimes be unpredictable.” She gave me another pointed look. “Messing with witchcraft always has consequences.”

Next to me, Artemis snorted. “Don’t we know it.”

I ducked my head, suddenly feeling self-conscious. I knew Big Mac well enough by now to read between the lines: she was criticizing me and all the other non-witches for using witch spells.

To be fair, the various times I’d used magic for my own reasons, it mostly hadn’t gone well. But I stood by my choices—what else was I supposed to do when the resident magic user wasn’t interested in helping me?

I squared my shoulders. Taking things into my own hands had “consequences,” sure, but I honestly couldn’t say I wouldn’t do the same thing all over again if I had another chance. I didn’t have it in me to just stand by and do nothing, and if that meant being on the receiving end of Big Mac’s anger, then so be it.

And anyway, her little speech about not messing around with magic didn’t explain how Big Mac knew Deidamia had dark magic.

“What, can all witches sense each other or something?” Artemis asked, like she’d just read my mind. “Is that how you know she’s a dark magic witch?”

Big Mac nodded. “More or less.”

“But you said she has dark magic,” I piped up. “Did your witchy senses pick that up too?”

Her eyes narrowed slightly at my phrasing, but then she sighed in that long-suffering way she did whenever she talked to me. “Have you noticed Deidamia’s tattoo?”

I shook my head. “I, um, was a little distracted by the whole ‘raised from the dead’ thing.”

She rolled her eyes. “Of course you were. Well, Deidamia does have a tattoo, and it’s not quite the same as the witch mark, but it’s similar enough to warrant caution. It could indicate dark magic.”

“It *could*?” I repeated. “You don’t know for sure whether or not it really does?”

“I know enough to make an educated guess,” she said tersely. “Please, don’t push me on this. Deidamia might seem nice, but there’s a very real and likely chance that she’s dangerous.”

“Okay.” I nodded. “That’s fair. We were only trying to have a séance, after all, not acquire a new roommate. Still…” I thought back to the confused woman Marta had accidentally raised from the dead. “I can’t believe she’s a threat.”

“Don’t be careless around her, Cali,” Big Mac warned. And then, with one last pointed look, she left the room just as suddenly as she’d come in.

Artemis shook her head. “Has she ever had anything nice to say to you? And has she ever brought good news when she walked into a room?”

I racked my brain. “Other than when she was playing nice so that I’d help her with the séance? Not that I recall.” I sighed, suddenly frustrated. “She’s helped the pack—and me—quite a lot. I shouldn’t disregard that. But I think we see the world in very different ways. I mean, since when is being nice to someone careless? I can still keep an eye out for threats and not cast a huge shadow in the room.”

“I actually get where she’s coming from,” my sister said.

I turned to her with a gasp. “Traitor!”

“No, I just mean… Back in the Fae world, I had two choices: I could be nice and assume the best of everyone and hope that they weren’t going to slit my throat while I slept, or I could assume that everyone and everything wanted to murder me, and instead of spending all that energy being *nice*, I spent it getting the upper hand.”

“Okay, but that’s the Fae world. Everything in the Fae world wants to kill you. It’s like living in a magical Australia.”

She wrinkled her nose. “What’s Australia?”

I groaned. “My point is, there’s more than one way to approach a problem. And all those people who wanted to murder you? Maybe they’d have changed their minds if you’d treated them with kindness and respect instead of distrust.”

“It’s possible. And let’s be honest, if anyone can charm a murderer, it’s you.”

I blinked. “Is that a compliment?”

“It’s the truth.” She shrugged. “And as for Deidamia, we’ll have to pay more attention to her tattoo when we talk to her.”

I nodded. “Isn’t it strange that the tattoo looks like the witch mark? It could just be a coincidence, but it’s still weird.”

“We’ll add it to the list of topics for the ‘Nice Interrogation’ list.” She stood up. “I’m tired of being tired. I think I’m going to head downstairs and get something to eat. Where did Rishika wander off to?”

I bit back a smile. My sister was sounding more and more like herself. “Let’s go find out.”

I led her out of the room, and we hurried past Xavier’s room. I wasn’t ready to talk to him just yet. He was probably still pissed at me.

When we reached the bottom of the stairs, I hesitated. “Artemis, can you peek into the kitchen and see if Xavier’s in there?”

She raised a brow. “If he is in the kitchen, is that a bad thing? You’re acting weird.”

“Things aren’t great between us right now. He’s angry because I wouldn’t support him on… something.”

“Something?”

I hesitated again. If I told Artemis, she could tell Rishika, who could then tell Xavier, which would make everything worse. I wanted to confide in her—it was so great, having her back to her old self—but it wouldn’t be worth it if this got twisted and Xavier ended up even more furious at me.

I waved it off. “It’s really not worth getting into.”

“Except it *was*,” she pressed. “Last I knew, you were cozied up with both of the brothers. I assume that’s where you snuck off to last night—to be with one of them. Or…” She gave a scandalized gasp. “*Both* of them?”

“Can you keep your voice down?” I did *not* need my parents overhearing this conversation. “I wasn’t ‘cozying up.’ And if I was, it wouldn’t be with them both—they’re *brothers*!”

“Call it whatever you want. But my guess is that Xavier isn’t thrilled about sharing you.”

“Stop talking like that!” I groaned. “Mom’s already on my case about the situation.”

“Fine, but pretending a problem doesn’t exist won’t make it go away.” She led me into the empty kitchen. “All this talk of witches and dark magic is making me hungry.”

Artemis began digging through the fridge when I heard a howl from the yard.

*Xavier.*

I burst into motion, leaving my sister behind, racing through the house and down the porch stairs.

Lola, Jay, Ravi, Ava, and Xavier’s wolf were gathered by Jay’s car. I hurried over to see what was going on.

Xavier’s wolf had a young woman pinned beneath him while Lola was tugging at Xavier, and Jay was tugging at Lola. The young woman lifted her head to reveal vampire fangs.

*What the hell is going on? Is she going to bite Xavier?*

I looked around in panic and grabbed a shovel from where it was leaning against the house. I grabbed it by the neck and pointed the handle outward. “Back off my mate, or I’ll stake you, vampire!”

“Cali, chill out!” Lola called, trying to get between me and the new vampire girl. “This isn’t what it looks like.”

Ava grabbed my arm and pulled me back. “Stop! That vampire is a revenant!”

For a moment I was frozen. Was Ava trying to help me? I could’ve laughed, but instead I slapped her hand away. “Don’t touch me.” Then I pushed past her, heading toward the group.

*Why is Ava even here? It’s obvious this girl is a vampire, not a revenant. Why isn’t Jay doing something?*

I raised the shovel as I moved toward the group, but it threw off my balance and I tripped forward, driving the handle not into the vampire trying to bite my mate, but into Lola’s chest.

**Episode 1674**

CHARLIE

It had taken every ounce of control I possessed not to knock Zachery’s teeth out after he’d casually mentioned asking “Daisy” out on a date. A double date. Him with my mate, and me with Sophie, who had been a sore subject for said mate long before she’d ever shown up at hunter camp.

It was all I’d been able to do to just walk away and pretend he hadn’t said anything. All along imagining Violet on a date with him.

It was absolute torture, and I’d been trying to get Violet alone long enough for us to talk about it ever since. Unfortunately, that was easier said than done. I didn’t want to draw suspicion to her by monopolizing her time, and it seemed like it was getting harder and harder to get a few minutes alone with her.

My mom had warned me to be careful, to act casually, like Violet truly was just a family friend. She still thought that Violet and I were broken up, too. Just a warm acquaintance, not the other half of my heart and soul. And I understood that approach. I understood exactly why I needed to act like Violet didn’t mean everything to me. I understood that the best thing I could do to protect her was to keep my distance.

But this was too much. A *double fucking date*?

Sergeant Pepperdine had us running warmups before a weaponry training session, and Zachery ran up to greet me, a carefree smile stretched across his face.

I pretended not to see him and started running—slow enough that I didn’t outpace the group too much, but too fast for him to keep up with me easily. Certainly too fast for him to talk about Violet.

The mere concept of Zachery going on a date with Violet burned me up. I didn’t *want* to think about it, but ever since he’d mentioned his intention, it was suddenly all I could think of. I imagined him slinging an arm around Violet’s shoulders. I imagined him trying to smooth-talk her, trying to butter her up by telling her how beautiful she was. And I imagined other stuff too—the kind of stuff that was perfectly logical for healthy young people to do on a date.

Violet pressed up against him, their lips moving together—

*Argh!*

I took a slow, deep breath, willing my pace to slow as well. I was so angry, all I wanted to do was shift and go berserk on my friend—and apparent nemesis.

*Cool it, Charlie. You don’t wanna blow your cover. Remember, you’re not the only one at risk here.*

Violet’s voice slipped into my mind. *You okay?*

I glanced over my shoulder. She was running back with the rest of the group, Sophie on one side—

And of fucking course, Zachery was on the other.

*Meet me in the shed before class*, I replied. *We need to talk.*

*What’s wrong?* I could hear her confusion and worry.

*I’ll tell you in the shed.*

I kept my head down through the rest of the warmup, ignoring her attempts to talk to me. I needed to calm down, and listening to my mate’s sweet voice in my head while seeing her next to another guy—a guy who wanted to date her—wasn’t going to keep me from losing my shit.

After the warmups, everyone dispersed to get ready for the weaponry training. I hung back and then darted off toward the shed. I’d already seen Violet head off in that direction, so I knew she’d be waiting for me.

I peeked around the shed before going inside. The last thing I needed was for Romilly or Chad to see me meeting up with “Daisy” when we both should’ve been getting ready for class.

Violet grinned as I stepped inside and closed the door behind me. “Hey. It’s so good to see you. Really see you. I can’t stand being away from you.” She threw herself into my arms and kissed me deeply. Her lips were soft and warm, and her scent engulfed me with so much longing it almost knocked me off my feet.

I savored the sensation of having her in my arms, of her lips moving against mine, and the little sighs she made as I deepened the kiss. God, I’d missed this. But… wait.

I tensed. I was supposed to be mad at her, not kissing her senseless.

I drew back, holding onto her shoulders to keep her at arm’s length. “A *double date*? With Zachery and Sophie? What were you thinking?”

Her eyes widened. “It’s not what you think!”

“I should certainly hope so, because my brain has got some pretty fucking maddening ideas right now.”

She winced. “Zachery asked me out.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” I huffed. “Like, for instance, why you said yes!”

She pushed me back. “Can you please let me explain?”

“By all means!”

“I didn’t plan for any of that to happen!” she insisted. “It was sort of an accident. He put me on the spot, and I don’t think he really asked me, but I didn’t exactly understand what he was getting at, and everything got misconstrued, and everyone was watching, and obviously I’m supposed to be *Daisy*, who isn’t romantically tied to anyone, and I didn’t want to make it a thing by saying no, and I panicked! What else was I supposed to do?”

*Tell him not a chance*, my mind screamed. But I took another deep breath and tried to see things from her perspective. Unfortunately, this situation had triggered something animalistic inside me, something that didn’t respond well to things like logic and empathy.

Violet must have picked up on my internal struggle, because her face fell. “Are you *mad* at me?”

And just like that, all of my anger reversed course. “No.” I sighed. “I’m just frustrated. *I* want to go on a date with you, but I can’t. And the thought of seeing you with Zachery while I have to pretend nothing is going on… It just sucks.”

“It does. And I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have anything to be sorry about.”

“Still.” She reached out and twined our fingers together. “I’d love to go on a real date with you. It’s been a long time.”

Silence settled in, and I pulled her close. I threw my arms around her, kissing her forehead. “I wonder when we’ll be able to again.”

Her body relaxed in my embrace. “What kind of date would you like to go on?”

“Hmm… Something like picking you up in a convertible—”

She leaned back to meet my eyes. “Do you have a convertible?”

I shook my head. “Of course not. But I can dream, can’t I? Anyway, I pick you up, give you three dozen red roses and a box of chocolates, and then we take a long drive with the top down.”

“That so sounds romantic.” She smiled. “Where are we going on this fantasy dream date drive?”

I grinned. “There’s supposed to be a lookout point near the pack house. We could go there.”

“And what would we do there?”

“We could make out.” I tilted my head down and captured her lips in a deep kiss.

After far too short a time, Violet broke away. “We can’t. Not while we’re stuck in this hunter hell.”

“You’re right.” I sighed again. Much as I wanted nothing more than to stay here with her in this moment and forget every single one of the many reasons we couldn’t be together right now, I loved her too much to risk her getting caught. And I knew she felt the same way about me. “But I promise that when this is all over, we’re going on a proper date. Maybe Xavier will let me borrow one of his multiple cars.”

She gave me a small smile. “I hope so. I want to see this lookout.”

“Mm. We should probably get back to the dorm. People might start asking questions.” I opened the door of the shed and peeked outside. “The coast is clear.” I turned back to face her. “You should leave before me.”

She nodded and started to head out, then abruptly turned back, threw her arms around me, and kissed me. I kissed her back, pouring in every single one of my pent-up emotions. Again, she was the first to break the kiss.

“I want you to always remember that I love you,” she said. “No matter what.”

I smiled. “I will.”

Then she headed out of the shed and back to the dorm. I stayed in the shed, counting seconds so that when I followed the same route, it wouldn’t look like we were heading back together. While I waited, I drank in her scent, savoring this small piece of her.

I remembered the first time I’d seen Violet. I’d been hanging out with my friends, playing lacrosse, when I’d literally run into her with Lola. Violet had never even said a word. I hadn’t known she was my mate, then. I’d had no clue about the huge role she would play in my life. But I hadn’t forgotten her.

And now here I was, standing in a dusty old shed as her scent drifted away, pretending that she wasn’t the most important person in the world to me.

*This sucks. It’s not fair.*

Once I’d finally counted to thirty, I stepped outside. I purposely took a roundabout route, away from the shed, but as I stepped on the path back to the dorms, Chad suddenly fell into step at my side.

“Oh hey.” I racked my brain for something normal to talk about. “How’s your arm?”

He shrugged, then grinned. “How’s your girlfriend?”

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t have a girlfriend.” I wished I could have added, “I have a mate.” But that was probably the stupidest thing I could’ve done at this point.

*Why can’t he go bother someone else?*

Chad put a hand out to stop me, then leaned in close. “I know about your wolf girl.”

**Episode 1675**

Oh my god! Oh my god. Oh my god.

I’d just stabbed Lola. With a giant, blunt stake.

OH. MY. GOD.

Had I just accidentally murdered my best friend?!

Lola staggered backward, the handle of the shovel sticking out of her chest. Jay rushed to her, catching her before she could fall. She looked down at the shovel and then up at me, shock and horror written across her face. “You STABBED ME!”

My brain was still doing a constant loop of *ohmygod*, so the only response I could muster up was, “It was an accident!”

I eyed the handle again, and it suddenly looked much more like a ticking time bomb than part of a shovel. Was Lola going to turn to dust and disappear forever? Did this count as a good old-fashioned staking? I’d certainly meant it to when I’d had that handle pointed at the other vampire pinned to the ground.

But, no. Lola was still here. She hadn’t turned to dust. Yet. And that had to mean that there was still time to avoid the absolute worst-case scenario here.

“We need to get that shovel out,” I said.

“No shit, Cali!” Jay snapped, making me wince.

I reached for the handle, but Lola jerked away, striking Jay in the face with the shovel end of the handle. The shovel scoop made a deep *thunk* against his face, and he winced. “Ow.”

I tried again. Lola was panicking, and rightfully so. But I could help her. I could save her before this situation got even worse.

“Just hold still!” I said, and I tried to reach out again.

“Get *away* from me!” Lola snapped.

“You’re not helping!” Jay said.

“I’m sorry, Lola! It was an accident! Let me help you.”

She turned away from me again, nearly smacking Jay in the face a second time. He was quick, though, and this time he managed to avoid getting hit again.

“Yeah, a lot of ‘accidents’ happen with you! You’re so lucky it didn’t go all the way in!” Lola grabbed the handle with both hands and grimaced. With a drawn-out groan, she pulled the shovel handle out of her chest and tossed the whole thing onto the grass nearby. The wound didn’t look like it was closing very easily. Probably the wood…

“Lola, really, I’m *so sorry*.”

“Maybe warn a girl next time so I can avoid becoming collateral damage.”

There was a bloodstain on her shirt, and she grimaced in pain. “*Seriously?*”

Jay rubbed Lola’s arms. “Are you okay?”

Lola glared at me. “I am, no thanks to the Van Helsing wannabe over there.”

I blew out a breath as relief slammed into me. “Oh, thank god. I’m so glad you’re okay—”

“I probably need Torin to heal this,” she cut me off. “And what about my shirt? This is my favorite shirt!”

The guilt was going to eat me alive, wasn’t it? I pointed to the vampire, still held tight beneath Xavier’s paws. “What about her? She was attacking my mate!”

Lola scoffed. “You’re doing what you always do—assuming shit. And you know what they say about people who assume too much.”

“Well, if she’s not a threat, then what is she doing here?”

“That’s Jacqueline,” Lola said, like that would mean something to me. “She’s from Tottenville—and *your mate* attacked her. Not the other way around.” Lola’s gaze narrowed on Xavier. “She’s not going to hurt anyone, it’s okay. You can back off now.”

Xavier seemed to consider this for a moment before stepping off the vampire and shifting back to his human form.

Jacqueline raised a brow at this. “Does everyone just walk around naked here? Or is it just the guys?”

I wished he was dressed. I didn’t like the way this new vampire was eyeing my mate, like she wanted to turn him into a snack. And not in the bloodsucking way.

The vampire sat up and grimaced. “Does anyone have a napkin? There seems to be some wolf drool on me.”

“Be careful,” Ava warned the group. “She’s still a revenant!”

I threw her a confused-slash-annoyed look. The last time she’d come around she’d all but threatened me, so pardon me if I didn’t believe she was suddenly benevolent. Ignoring Ava, I asked Lola, “Okay, why is this vampire, revenant, whatever—why is she even here?”

Artemis appeared next to me. I hadn’t even heard her approach. “She doesn’t look like a revenant. Her eyes aren’t orange.”

“The revenant aura is glowing around her. I can see it,” Ava said, like we were just supposed to take her words at face value. Fat chance. We all knew firsthand that everything she said was a lie.

Xavier threw his hands up. “Okay, what the hell is going on here? Someone explain. Now.”

Ravi, Jay, and Lola all jumped in to explain, talking over each other so that nobody could be understood.

“Jay and I came outside and found Lola outside the car, this girl in the back seat,” Ravi started. “I had the same reaction as you, Xavier, but Lola said she was safe. We were trying to figure out what to do with her when you showed up.”

“She’s not really a real revenant,” Jay said. “Because she’s a vampire, the revenant magic seems to take them over, but they’re still… a vampire under there. Somewhere.”

“Exactly,” Lola chimed in. “Jacqueline may suck in a lot of ways, but the way the revenant stuff affects the vampires is really weird.”

That was true… I remembered our fight with Gregor and how erratic he’d been. And we’d killed him without another thought. Could we have saved him somehow?

Xavier held his hands up again. “Enough. I want to hear from her.” He pointed at Jacqueline. “You’re a strange vampire at a werewolf pack house. You have to know how dangerous that is, so what are you doing here?”

“I stowed away under Lola and Jay’s car when they fled Tottenville,” Jacqueline explained. “I was a student there too, but when it was overrun by revenant-vampires, I escaped. And I came here hoping that Lola would help me. Why else would I come to a dog house?”

Well okay, she was rude.

Ava scoffed. “Why should we believe her?”

Xavier speared her with a look. “Why should we believe *you*?You said she was a revenant, and I don’t see any orange anything.”

She crossed her arms. “A liar can spot a liar. Jacqueline is lying.”

My eyebrows rose. *Wow, that might be the first honest thing I’ve ever heard her say.*

“Excuse me?” Lola cut in. “I was almost *killed*. Are we going to talk about that?”

My stomach twisted. “Lola—”

“Go see Torin if you don’t heal soon,” Xavier said. He looked her over, seemingly unconcerned.

I couldn’t say I felt the same. Had I done permanent damage? I knew she’d lost her wolf, but I thought vampires could heal too? But maybe those powers didn’t work if a vampire was wounded so severely by wood…

*Is wood to a vampire like silver is to a werewolf? Oh my god. I am THE WORST friend! I’ll never forgive myself if she’s not okay.*

And not that I’d expected Lola to just brush this off, but I didn’t think I’d ever seen her so angry before. It really *had* been an accident. I’d never meant to hurt anyone, except maybe Jacqueline, and that was because I’d thought Xavier was in danger. My mate instincts had just kicked in.

*Maybe she’s right. Maybe I need to start thinking a little more before I just jump in.*

Jacqueline got up and dusted herself off. It didn’t seem to do a whole lot for the mud caked on her clothing and skin and hair. “You almost broke the vials,” she mumbled, almost like she was talking to herself. “Maybe it was a mistake to come here. These wolves are so uncivilized.”

Xavier frowned. “What do you mean, ‘the vials’?”

The vampire sighed. “How many times do I have to explain this?”

Xavier’s eyes narrowed. “As many times as I ask, unless you want me to decide here and now what to do with you.”

The threat couldn’t have been any clearer.

“Xavier, she needs our help,” Lola said.

“And the more cooperative she is, the more likely she is to receive that help,” he said. “So, about the vials. Spill.”

“As I’ve said before, this is what helped me when I was having problems with the revenant’s pull. It’s a serum developed by one of the professors at Tottenville, and it broke the revenant’s control over me.” Jacqueline gave Xavier a meaningful look. “Do you understand now, or do I need to go slower for you?”

My jaw dropped. *Oh my god! She’s* so *rude!*

“The serum can’t work all that well,” Ava said. “You still have a revenant aura.”

I looked from Ava to Jacqueline, then squinted, just in case it could help me see whatever Ava was claiming to see. It didn’t.

Ava scooped up the shovel handle. “Maybe we should just put an end to this right now.”

Xavier grabbed the shovel and tossed it farther away. “No one’s staking anybody.” He turned to Lola and Jay. “Do you guys know anything about this serum? Is it the real deal?”

Lola nodded. “It did seem to work on Jacqueline at Tottenville.”

“If you don’t believe me, just watch me, bitch.” Jacqueline reached into her coat and pulled out a bag of syringes, along with a few vials. I watched with morbid curiosity as she prepared a syringe with the serum.

*What is she doing?*

Then Jacqueline injected the serum into her arm, and my eyes went saucer-wide. I had an image of a Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde transformation unfolding. Except, which one was she now?

Jacqueline tucked the syringe and vials away and looked at Ava. “Okay, aura girl. Whatcha got?”

Ava’s eyebrows lifted. “It’s… It’s gone.”

Xavier looked at her skeptically. “Are you sure you can even do this?”

Ava snorted. “Unless you have someone else here who can see auras, you’ll just have to trust me. And I’m telling you, the aura went away.”

Setting aside the can of worms that was trusting anything Ava said, my heart leapt with hope. “Could this be an antidote for revenant possession?”

**Episode 1676**

XAVIER

I looked over at Cali. The hope was written on her face, clear as day. Had we found an antidote for revenant possession? God, I hoped so. I wondered the same thing, but I had about a thousand more reservations about this sudden miracle cure than Cali did.

Was Ava actually telling the truth about the aura? If nobody but Ava could see it, how could we be sure that it had even been there to begin with? Sometimes, I wondered in the back of my mind if she was physically capable of telling the truth. Like, whether saying even one true thing would make her melt, *Wizard of Oz* style. She had admitted she was a liar after all.

“Why the hell should we trust anything some random vampire says?” I asked, looking at Lola.

“Look I get it, Xavier, believe me,” she said. “But it’s what we told you already. The revenant stuff affects vampires differently. I’ve seen the serum work on Jacqueline before.”

“It stops the revenant part from taking over,” Jay said.

“Then she’s back to her cheery… self.”

I looked to the vampire, who flashed me a sarcastic smile.

We didn’t know this Jacqueline girl, and if Lola hadn’t been here protecting her, I would’ve personally made sure that the vamp girl had been torn to pieces before she’d even said a single word about this miracle serum.

I looked at Lola and Jay. “Can you call this professor guy so we can talk to him? I want to learn more about this serum.”

They exchanged a concerned look, and then Jay shook his head. “We’ve been trying to call him ever since we left, but he’s not answering. We honestly don’t even know if he’s alive.”

I blew out a breath. Okay, that was just fucking great. What was the next step, then?

“I saw the serum deactivate the revenant power in Jacqueline with my own eyes,” Lola offered. “It works. At least on revenant-*vampires*.”

“And he used it on another revenant-vampire who attacked us,” Jay added. “We should test it on another revenant so you can see it for yourself.”

“Okay, but where can we find one?” Lola asked.

*We might have one right upstairs: Greyson.*

But of course, that terrible news wasn’t mine to share, especially not with Cali here. I’d never told her about seeing his eyes turn orange, and I couldn’t predict how she would react if I offered up her other mate as a science experiment.

Maybe I should have told her. If Greyson truly was going dark side, then she deserved to know. But I knew I couldn’t just blurt it out in front of everyone. Greyson’s situation was a delicate matter that needed to be handled carefully. He was still the Alpha; everyone was still looking to him for leadership and security, and morale was already in the shitter right now.

“I’ll be right back,” I said, and headed for the house.

Of course, I didn’t make it three steps before Cali was by my side, grabbing my hand to stop me.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

I bit my lip. I could tell her. Greyson was her mate, and she deserved to know what might be in store for him. But that would open a whole other can of worms, and I had no way of knowing how fast that would spiral out of control. Right now, the Greyson situation was more or less contained, and with everything else in the pack threatening to go to hell, it was nice to have just one thing that I could leave alone for a little while and trust that it wouldn’t blow up while I was taking care of other matters.

Plus, since we still had no idea if this serum would work on *all* revenants, it seemed like getting an answer to that question was an important first step before I dragged Cali into all this. But I was also trying to turn over a new leaf and be more honest with her, and make fewer executive decisions that affected her without getting her input first.

But the other side to all of this wasn’t even about keeping her safe and (relatively) worry-free. If she knew about Greyson becoming a revenant, wasn’t there a chance that she’d accept that I was the best choice for her? Hell, she might even support me taking over as Alpha. I knew she loved Greyson—even if I couldn’t imagine why—but she had to recognize that if Greyson went full revenant, he wouldn’t be the man she loved anymore. He’d be a liability. A danger to everyone around him.

Not exactly an ideal characteristic for the Alpha to have.

But if I took over as Alpha, that would mean taking on a hell of a lot of responsibility. Maybe even more than I was ready for. And the transition and possible upheaval could make the pack even more disenchanted and vulnerable than it was already. I wasn’t going to put anyone at risk until I knew definitively what was going on.

I gently pulled my arm free of Cali’s grip. “Everything is fine. I’ll be right back. Don’t worry.”

“Easier said than done,” she called as I made my way into the house.

Once inside, I slowly headed up the stairs to Greyson’s room. I tried to linger on the image of Cali’s worried face as I ascended the stairs. I knew I’d probably rubbed her the wrong way, but I had to be careful how I proceeded with all of this.

If this serum was the real deal, and I cured Greyson, then I could be the hero and things could go back to how they’d been before—*due destini*, the maddeningly impossible resolution to share my mate with another man, and all.

I winced at the thought. I would endure any number of things for my mate, but that didn’t mean that I actually *wanted* to keep this up. Not to sound like a fucking broken record, but every time I saw her swooning over my brother, it felt like my heart was being dragged through broken glass. I fucking hated it. And I honestly didn’t know how long I’d be able to keep this up.

But there was another possible approach to all of this. If I didn’t tell Greyson about the serum, or if the serum didn’t work on him, then my brother would likely eventually succumb to that weird-ass mark and become a full-on revenant. And from there, the choice would be easy for everyone.

But would that be the same thing as actively killing my brother? I didn’t want to do the same thing I’d done in the zoo in the Fae world. I didn’t *want* to abandon my brother, and my feelings for Cali and my resentment over sharing her had gotten so twisted up in everything I felt for Greyson one-on-one that I honestly didn’t know how I viewed him anymore. Was he a threat? Was he an ally? Was he someone I cared about? Someone I could *maybe* see myself having a decent relationship with someday? Or was he just the villain who kept trying to ruin my happily ever after?

But there was one thing I did know: just like in that dream with Silas, I wanted to do this on *my* terms.

I blew out a breath. *But first, let’s find out if the serum works.*

I was right outside Greyson’s door and about to knock, but I held back. I still hadn’t decided whether or not to tell him about the serum.

And then I pictured Cali’s worried face. If I let nature take its course, she could finally be all mine. Completely. Just like when we’d first met. Just like she was always meant to be. We would be true mates, and I would be the Alpha, and this long-ass detour Greyson had sent us on all the way back at the Lupo Finale could just be some bad dream.

But then the image of her face turned angry, hurt. *Xavier, how could you?* I heard her cry.

And I realized that I didn’t want Cali that way. Not like this. I wanted to prove that I deserved her *and* the pack. I wanted her to make the choice of her own free will, and I wanted her to *choose* me. Not just default to me because Greyson was gone.

And I knew she would choose me eventually, which was why it would be beyond stupid for me to do anything to risk that. If she knew I’d done harm to Greyson, actively or passively, she might never forgive me. I could lose her forever.

She deserved to make a choice, and I had to make sure she had that chance.

Taking a deep breath, I opened the door.

Greyson immediately sat up. He looked like hell. “What are you doing here?”

“I’ve come to save your ass,” I deadpanned. “Come with me.”

“Hold on. Something’s come up.”

My eyebrows lifted. “What do you mean?”

My brother’s face was resolute. “I think you’re right. You should be Alpha.”

**Episode 1677**

ARTEMIS

I loved jumping rope. The rhythm of it, the way it kept my heart racing, my lungs puffing, the mesmerizing swoop of the rope arcing over me, and the snap it made on the basement floor with each revolution.

Something about it reminded me of bounty hunting in the Fae world, of using my net to capture my prizes. There was a similar movement, a similar feeling of quiet power. This was definitely the best new thing Rishika had taught me. Apparently, they taught the skill to children in this world. Who knew?

I eyed my girlfriend, who was over in the corner of the room, lifting some heavily laden weights. Her werewolf abilities made her strong, but she seemed strong even for a werewolf. I watched her squat down, grip the bar—which was equipped to weigh more than she did—and then lift straight up, hold it, and drop it back down.

The exercise was called “deadlifting.” I’d done my fair share of real deadlifting in my time, but it had been nowhere near that regimented. It was more like whenever the Kollector had disposed of someone and I had to take care of it.

Rishika paused suddenly, then put down the weight bar. “What?”

I immediately stopped jumping rope, then winced when it lashed out and smacked the back of my calves. Much like my Fae world net, the jump rope could be capricious if not handled properly. “Huh? Oh, nothing.”

She shrugged. “You were staring. I thought something was up. That maybe you wanted to talk, or something?”

I frowned. “No?”

Something heavy and unspoken settled between us, and I didn’t like it. The stiffness in the air, the sudden tightness in my stomach as she stared at me like she was trying to read my mind…

“Okay,” she finally said, though her tone told me she didn’t necessarily believe me. Why wouldn’t she believe me?

Rishika resumed her deadlifts, and after a beat, I started jumping rope again. Despite the tension, I couldn’t help but admire my girlfriend while she worked out.

*She’s so strong and beautiful. A true warrior.*

Her eyes skipped over to mine more than once, probably wondering again why I was staring at her, and what it meant, but she didn’t stop. After she completed another set of lifts, I set down my jump rope and walked over to her.

“You amaze me,” I said, and leaned in for a kiss.

Where I’d been hoping for a deep kiss, something to show just how affected I was by her, Rishika’s lips remained firm and sealed, and the kiss ended up being a chaste brush of lips that was over almost before it could really begin.

Then she physically stepped back, her eyebrows drawn tight together. “What was that for?”

I blinked. “Do I need a reason to kiss my girlfriend?”

She shrugged. “I guess not. If we’re still together, that is.”

“What? Of course we are.”

“That’s not what ‘it’s over’ usually means,” she said. She leaned forward to grab the weight bar again. Was she really going to continue her workout like this? I bit my lip.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” I said.

“Okay. It’s fine then.”

Huh? I should’ve been thrilled. My girlfriend and I weren’t broken up, but something was wrong. I didn’t know what, exactly, but that unspoken thing between us now felt suffocating, like it was taking all the joy and oxygen out of the room and replacing it with something that made my stomach twist.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “Did I… Did I do something wrong? Are you mad at me?”

Rishika sighed heavily. “No, you didn’t do anything.”

“But you’re acting really weird with me. I want to make things right. I’m sorry for what I said,” I said. “I really am. And if I did something to upset you, I need you to tell me, because I don’t understand what’s happening here.”

Rishika raised an eyebrow but uncrossed her arms. She was listening. Good.

“We… We haven’t been girlfriends for very long,” I continued, feeling the sweat drip down my back, “and I don’t exactly have a lot of experience with this. So, if I did something—something beyond my panicked and idiotic ‘it’s over’—I want you to tell me. *Please*, Rishika.”

Worry gnawed at my insides. Losing Rishika was the last thing I wanted, and I would do anything to avoid that. We’d come close, and I wouldn’t go back in that direction again. There was something else bothering me, but I couldn’t remember what.

She sighed again. “It’s not you, it’s me.”

“What does that even mean?”

“It’s just… I might be feeling a little… jealous.”

My brows raised. *Jealous?* What could my beautiful, powerful goddess of a girlfriend ever have to feel jealous about?

“About what?” I asked. “Why?”

She brushed past me, wiping her forehead off. “Don’t worry about it. It’s fine.”

She was heading for the basement stairs. Was she really going to walk away without telling me what was going on with her?

No, I wouldn’t allow that. We were going to talk this out, and then I was going to do everything in my power to make sure she was never unhappy with me ever again.

I followed after her. “Don’t worry about what?”

She spun around to face me. “I don’t want to talk about this.”

When she continued her journey upstairs, I was hot on her heels. We were halfway up the stairs when I reached out and grabbed her arm to stop her in her tracks. “What’s wrong? Talk to me. Don’t walk away like this.”

She slowly turned around, sighing again. “Artemis, you really don’t know why I’m upset?”

“No, I don’t. But if you tell me, I promise I’ll do everything I can to make it right.”

She just shook her head. “You were crying about some other woman! You were nearly inconsolable! How am I supposed to feel after something like that happens? Have you ever shed a tear over me?”

Oh. This was about Deidamia, and my weird, unexplainable reaction to seeing her. I didn’t know how to answer Rishika’s question. I mean, I *knew* the answer, but I also knew she wouldn’t like it.

But I guessed I should be honest. “I haven’t,” I admitted. “I don’t tend to cry over anything—that’s never been my thing. I mean, if I cried over everything that upset me, I would have drowned in my own tears before I ever left childhood.”

My joke fell flat, and instead of understanding, there was hurt written across my girlfriend’s face.

“It’s not like that,” I insisted. “I know it was weird, and I really wish I could explain where all those emotions came from. But I can’t, because I don’t know either.”

And I wished so desperately that I did have an explanation—for both Rishika and myself. Anything. It was like I had real emotions for that woman, which was impossible, because why would I feel anything—intense or otherwise—for some ancient witch who’d died centuries before I was even born?

But clearly, it looked a certain way to Rishika.

“Okay, so you’re telling me you never cry, that it’s not your thing, but I saw you fall apart, Artemis. I mean, what did you see in her that caused you to react that way?”

I heard the unspoken question there, too. *What* don’t *you see in me?*

I shook my head. “I’m sorry that my reaction has made you feel like you matter less to me. And I’m sorry that I can’t explain what happened, but please believe me when I say there’s nothing to be jealous about. I don’t even know her!”

“But if you did, you’d feel something for her. Something more than you feel for me?”

“No.” I grimaced. “That’s not what I’m saying.”

She scoffed and shook her head. “Clearly you’ve got some things to figure out. I’ll leave you to it.” She walked away again, heading through the house and up the stairs to her room. I followed after her with panic pouring into my veins.

“Rishika, please! Wait—”

She closed her bedroom door before I could reach it. The sound of the lock clicking echoed dimly in my mind.

“Shit.”

I leaned my forehead against the door, wishing she would unlock it. Wishing she’d hear me out and believe what I was telling her.

*How am I ever going to make up for this? How can I make up for something that I can’t even explain?*

I blew out a breath. I’d known there would be a learning curve to being in a real relationship, but clearly I was doing very poorly if this was how things were going already.

The floor creaked, and the sound of footsteps pulled me away from Rishika’s closed door.

I looked up to see none other than Deidamia approaching me.

*Perfect timing.*

Once again, that unspeakable, all-consuming grief washed over me, and tears began to well up in my eyes. I wiped them away, but more moved in to take their place. My chest hitched with a barely suppressed sob.

What was wrong with me?

The witch rushed forward, concern etched into her face. She took my hand, and I was surprised by how soft and warm her touch was. “Are you all right?” she asked.

I nodded, but my face crumpled and I began to silently sob. I couldn’t stop crying. I could barely breathe. It was like I’d fallen into an endless well of sadness and I couldn’t see which way was up.

There was something comforting and familiar about Deidamia’s presence, about the simple feel of her hand in mine. But at the same time, I could barely look at her without feeling my heart crack in two. It felt like someone I loved very, very much had died.

“Can I do anything for you?” she asked.

I shook my head. Through my tear-blurred vision, I searched her face, and my eyes landed on her lips. Suddenly, all I wanted to do was close the distance between us and capture those full lips with my own—

I jerked away in shock, then turned and sprinted off down the stairs. I didn’t stop until I was outside, the cold winter air wrapping around me.

What the hell was that? Why did I want to *kiss* Deidamia? I didn’t even know her! This was absolutely insane.

*What’s wrong with me? First the voices and the headaches, and now this?*

I walked further away from the house, trying to work off the frustration.

A dark voice whispered in my mind. *Go to the pond.*

“Stop it!” I snapped. “Leave me alone!”

But the voice had never listened before, and it wasn’t listening now.

*Go to the pond. It’s happening tonight.*

**Episode 1678**

GREYSON

Xavier burst out laughing. “You’ve got to be kidding!” he managed to say, through frantic inhales as he doubled over.

That wasn’t the reaction I’d expected. Nearly every single conversation we’d had lately had centered around how he’d be a much better Alpha than I was, so I’d thought he’d be all over the chance to prove it. It was exactly what he’d been clamoring for.

“I’m dead serious, Xavier,” I said.

“Well, I have to wonder what brought on this sudden change of heart,” he said, after his laughter had completely died down—though he still had a smirk on his face.

“What, you’re going to make me spell it out? Isn’t it obvious? You’ve already pointed out that I’m not… well.” I glanced around the room, wondering if Silas or the boy were going to suddenly appear again. I didn’t need that right now. Telling someone that you weren’t feeling like yourself was far preferable to freaking out right in front of them, which was exactly what would happen if they popped up right now. *If either of them shows up, will Xavier see them, too? Or will it prove what I fear? That I’m going mad?*

Xavier followed my gaze. “What are you looking at?”

“Nothing,” I said quickly, not quite ready to admit to Xavier that I was being haunted by a creepy child that might actually be Silas. None of it made any sense, and it would be impossible to explain it to Xavier without sounding like I’d completely lost it.

“Is all this because of your wound?” Xavier asked. I picked up the slightest hint of concern in his voice—now I knew I was going crazy.

“That’s part of it,” I said. “But in reality, I’m distracted. There’s a lot going on, and it’s starting to get a little overwhelming. I did some thinking, and… you were right. You should be Alpha.”

Xavier didn’t say anything for a while. He was studying me, like he was still trying to figure out if I was joking or not. “Okay, what’s really going on? Since when do you agree with me about anything—especially over something like me becoming Alpha?”

“Believe me, with our history, I understand your skepticism—but this isn’t a scheme, Xavier. I want to do what’s best for the pack—”

“And for Cali?” Xavier cut in.

“That goes without saying,” I said. He was right, of course—he and I didn’t see eye to eye on most things. We were the very model of contentious siblings, but the one thing we would always have in common was our love for Cali, and our need to protect her at any cost. But if Xavier thought that meant I was handing her over to him, he was dead wrong. “But just because I’m handing over the reins to the pack doesn’t mean I’m giving up on Cali. I want to make that perfectly clear.”

Xavier’s gaze hardened. “If the pack isn’t safe with you, what makes you think that Cali is?”

“I’m warning you, Xavier, don’t push it. This is already hard enough. You’re getting what you want. You wanted to be Alpha, and I’m giving that to you. Can’t you accept it and leave it at that?”

“I don’t accept it,” Xavier said.

*Of course not. Why is he being so fucking difficult about this, of all things?*

“Don’t get me wrong, brother, I *deserve* to be Alpha, but I will earn it on my terms. Not because you’re, as you said, *giving* it to me.”

“Fine, then what do you want, Xavier? A fucking contract between us signed in my blood? Notarized and framed so that there’s no question that I’m giving you the position fair and square?” I knew I was being dramatic, but I was tired and drained. I was dealing with this strange wound on my leg, seeing things that might not be real, and the last thing I had expected was for Xavier to give me a hard time over something I thought he’d be over the moon about.

“No, no, nothing as official as that, dear brother,” Xavier said with a stiff smile. “I have to admit, the offer is tempting, but if I do this, will the others think I’m taking advantage of your weakness? I want to be Alpha because I’ve earned it, not because you’ve turned into a feeble mess—or rather, a feebler mess.”

*He sure knows how to twist the knife.* I gritted my teeth and balled my hands into fists. I wanted to yell at him. Scream at him, hurl every insult at him that had festered in my brain for as long as I could remember, but I didn’t. I bit my tongue. I didn’t want to get into a petty spat over this.

“Xavier,” I said, my voice level. “I know this is hard for you to comprehend, but you can’t always have things your way.”

“What happens if I accept and then you recover? Then what? Who’s Alpha then?”

I chuckled and turned away, still hoping that Silas and the boy would keep their distance until I could get through this latest battle of wits with Xavier. “You don’t get it. It’s always about you, isn’t it? You know what? Forget I said anything. You were right. I had a moment of weakness, and now it’s over.”

Xavier nodded slowly, his expression unreadable and his jaw set. “So, I guess there’s nothing to talk about, then?” He turned to leave, but then stopped and whirled to face me. “I came here because I wanted to help you. Not that you’d ever believe me, but maybe you’re not ready to accept my help. Later.” And then he was gone.

I was even more bewildered now. What did he mean? He wanted to help me? That was a laugh. Xavier was just like Big Mac. Hinting at something but never actually revealing anything. I couldn’t count on him. That much was clear. He wasn’t even making sense. He’d said that he wanted to help, but when I’d asked for his help plain as day, he’d rejected my offer because of his ego. *Dammit! I don’t need this bullshit right now!*

I paced around a bit, trying to think. One thing was for sure: I was going to have to get better. Somehow. Just as I’d suspected—despite all of his claims and posturing and insults—Xavier was in no way ready to be Alpha. If he was truly ready, he would’ve jumped at the chance instead of making a bunch of lame excuses.

*Well, back to it*,I thought. I’d tried to do what I thought was best for the pack, and I still would. Alphas didn’t get sick days, and I had to go and show the pack that I was fine, that I had recovered and was ready to take on whatever came our way—even if I wasn’t.

I was about to head downstairs when Cali burst through the door. I tensed immediately, worried that something else had happened, but I calmed when I saw the hopeful expression on her face. She looked so beautiful. Just the sight of her eased some of my stress and uncertainty. Seeing her reminded me how much I needed her, and—as I’d told Xavier—why I’d never give up on having her.

“I saw Xavier. Did he tell you about the serum?”

“Serum?” *How like my brother to bury the lede.* “What serum are you talking about?”

“Lola brought a vampire friend named Jacqueline back from Tottenville. She’s outside.”

I tensed. “A vampire is *here*?” One more thing to add to the list of nightmares…

“Yes, but that’s not the point right now! I know it sounds crazy, but listen—Jacqueline brought a serum that can cure the revenant state. She was becoming a revenant, but then she was injected with this serum, and she went back to normal. Lola saw it herself. You get what this means, Greyson? We might have the key to getting rid of the revenant threat.” Her eyes were shining, and she looked more excited than I’d seen her in a while.

I couldn’t help but feel pretty hopeful myself. Was that what Xavier had meant when he’d said he was going to help me? Why hadn’t he just come out and said it? I chuckled to myself. *Because he’s Xavier. That’s why.*

“Greyson, this is amazing! Don’t you think? If this serum is some kind of cure, maybe it could heal your wound from Lester, it could help save the pack—”

“It could help save *us*?” I added.

Cali blushed and nodded.

I smiled down at her, thankful that she was here with me right now, and not a moment too soon. My conversation with Xavier had left me frustrated and confused, and for the first time, I’d really felt afraid of what the future might hold. Of course Cali would come to me with an answer, with news of a possibility that could change everything for the better.

I pulled her close and kissed her. Her soft lips were literally all the solace that I needed in the world. I didn’t know what tomorrow might bring, and if history had taught me anything, it could easily bring more craziness and destruction, but I was going to cherish every single moment I got with Cali. I pulled her tighter against me and wrapped my arms around her. She hooked her arms around my neck as our kiss deepened. I kissed her with every ounce of passion that I felt for her. She was here now, with me. And despite everything else going on around us, we could still have one another. And I was going to take full advantage of that.

**Episode 1679**

I was fresh off my fight with Lola and still frosty with Xavier, and had not at all planned to come up here and make out with Greyson. But as usual, he felt amazing, safe, and comforting. I moaned into his lips and fell slack against him. He tightened his hold around me and held me up, his mouth sliding against mine and his tongue teasing at my lips. I hesitated, wondering if I should be doing this right now, but my body was way ahead of me in deciding that this was exactly what I needed and had shut all reason down.

“I’m okay, Cali,” Greyson said, as if reading my mind. “If I weren’t, would I be able to do this?”

I gasped as Greyson scooped me up into his arms and effortlessly carried me to the bed. He crawled on top of me, ran a hand through my hair, and urged my face up toward him so that he could taste my lips again.

He snaked his tongue into my mouth before pulling away suddenly to break our kiss so that he could trail his lips down to my neck to the soft, tender spot under my throat. He licked me there and then nibbled at my ears as I giggled.

“That tickles,” I said.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” he said as he pulled away.

I gave him a playful swat. “I didn’t say stop.”

I closed my eyes and slid my hands down his back to palm his ass as he ground his hardness against me, hitting all the right spots. I pulled him even closer and spread my legs wide so that he fit perfectly against me. There was something about the weight of him on top of me that drove me wild. He was deliciously warm, and his musky, masculine scent wafted up between us, reminding me of all the other times that he’d made me feel like we were the only two people in the world.

He pulled away and tore off his shirt. I sat up and ran my hands down his chest, then looked up at him as I planted wet kisses down his abdomen until I reached the waistband of his jeans. He helped me unbutton his fly, and I slid his jeans and his boxers halfway down his legs.

My face was now level with his cock, which bobbed inches from my mouth. I stared at it. It was familiar, now, and the mere sight of it made my whole body vibrate with arousal. I grabbed it hungrily, and he smiled down at me, arching it toward me so that I could do whatever I liked with it. I ran my tongue up and down the impressive length, then licked along the tip before popping it into my mouth. He fell onto his back, his eyes closed and a heavy sigh escaping his lips. I stood up quickly and wriggled out of my clothes, then pulled his jeans off completely.

I straddled his legs, reached up to lay my hands flat against the ripples of his chest, and took his cock in my mouth again. My fingers danced along his warm skin until I got the urge to touch myself. I kneaded my breasts as he held his head up to watch me, as he reached for them, but I pushed him back down. I licked him, moaning at how good it felt to have his hardness pulsing against my tongue. I reached down and played two fingers over the swollen nub between my legs while I brought my other hand to the base of his cock, skating my hands up and down him while he bucked his hips and slid in and out of my mouth in perfect rhythm.

“If everything went to shit right now, Cali, I wouldn’t give a damn. As long as I have you right here with me,” Greyson said, his voice husky and low.

“You know that’s not *all* true,” I whispered as I let his cock slip heavily from my mouth.

He sat up and took both of my wrists in one hand, then reached down between my legs with the other.

“It can be,” he breathed, “if only for right now.”

He dipped a finger inside me, and I closed my eyes, but rather than continue with that course, he guided me onto my hands and knees.

“I have to be inside you, Cali. Right now,” he said.

And then he was.

I lost track of time. There was only him, filling me up over and over again, his hardness sliding against every quivering part of me, sending me closer and closer to the edge. He held my hips as he guided me back and forth, owning our pace and alternating between squeezing my ass and grabbing handfuls of my hair. I straightened up so that my back was against his chest, and he slowed his thrusts and began pumping in and out, deliciously slow. He reached down and placed his palm against my clit, and as he rubbed back and forth in time with his languid movements, I considered how sexy he always made me feel, whether we were making love, talking, or anything in between.

My climax caught me by surprise, and I thrashed back against him as I came. My mouth was open, but the pleasure was so sharp that not a sound escaped my lips. Quickly, Greyson disengaged and flipped me over before burying his face between my legs, his tongue slipping inside me as my entire body shook with release. By the time I floated back to reality, he was planting kisses up the inside of my thigh before pulling me into his arms.

Before I could drift off to sleep in his embrace, I got up to go to the bathroom. I took care not to wake Greyson, who was sleeping soundly, his face buried in the pillow. After a quick, hot shower that was the perfect follow-up to the amazing moment we’d shared, I dressed and went out into the hallway. I stood there for a moment, staring at Didi’s door. I wanted to peek in and check on her, but Big Mac had made it more than clear that Didi was off limits. With everything that was going on, the last thing I wanted to do was make things worse, so I decided to heed Big Mac’s stern warning. For now.

As I thought back on it, I couldn’t recall any conversation with Big Mac that hadn’t been some stern admonishment, or a terse directive that I’d needed to follow if I didn’t want to suffer her wrath. Still, I liked to think that we had an uneasy friendship—emphasis on the uneasy part.

I bounded downstairs, my mood at an all-time high. I still felt a tickle of pleasure between my legs, a sensation that nearly sent me back upstairs to Greyson for more. That idea melted away when I saw Xavier in the living room, talking to Ravi. Our gazes connected, and he looked away quickly. A twinge of guilt hit me then, and I wondered if part of what had led me to Greyson was the need to forget that Xavier and I weren’t on the best of terms right now. I was upset with him—not only had he asked me to take his side, to basically choose him, but he hadn’t bothered to mention the serum to Greyson, even though he knew it might help him. Though things were complicated between him and Greyson, how could he treat his own brother like that? I thought of Artemis. There was nothing I wouldn’t do, nothing I wouldn’t sacrifice, to help her.

Before I could even begin to deal with Xavier, I needed to talk to Lola. I had to make sure that her wound wasn’t serious—and apologize for staking my BFF in the first place, even if it *had* been an accident. I walked into the kitchen to find my dad, Torin, and Astrid arguing about something. I couldn’t help but smile. They were a constant reminder that sometimes, we all needed to slow down and not take everything so seriously. But where was Lola?

I left the kitchen and ran right into Jay. “Hey! Have you seen Lola?”

“She’s in the study. Big Mac’s taking a look at her.”

“Okay, I need to see her. I need to apologize for what happened.”

“I know you didn’t mean to hurt her, Cali, but you might have a hard time convincing Lola of that,” he said with a sober expression.

I knew I’d messed up big time, but I wasn’t worried. Lola and I had been together for a long time. No matter how bad things got, we’d always love each other, and she had to know that I would never do anything to hurt her on purpose. We were like sisters, and I knew that our bond couldn’t be broken by something that was a complete accident.

I left Jay and found Lola in the study with Big Mac. I popped my head in and waved. “Hey, how are you doing, Lola?”

Lola gave me an icy glare, and I suddenly wondered if Jay had been right. She leapt up from her seat. “Cali, you’re the last person I want to talk to,” she snapped.

And then she slammed the door in my face.

I stood there for a moment, shocked, hurt, and stunned. *What just happened?*

**Episode 1680**

LOLA

At first, slamming the door in Cali’s face had felt so good, but the pleasant feeling faded fast. I couldn’t believe that I’d done that to my best friend in the entire world. Sure, we’d had our share of falling outs, but this was different. This wasn’t some spat over a misunderstanding, or some minor disagreement. She could have killed me with her recklessness—with a fucking wooden shovel. What a shitty way to die.

“Sit down!” Big Mac commanded. “I’m not done yet. I want to make sure that there aren’t any splinters left.”

I slumped back down into my seat and sat back as Big Mac poked around in the stinging wound in my chest, her brow knitted in concentration.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but that was pretty harsh,” she said. “Not that Cali doesn’t deserve to have a door slammed in her face from time to time, but I thought you two were like sisters.”

“We are, but look at what she did to me,” I said, staring down at the puckered red gash in my chest. She’d barely missed my heart.

“I know. I wasn’t there, but from what I understand, it was an accident.”

“A preventable accident,” I grumbled. “She didn’t accidentally trip me or something, she impaled me with a literal wooden stake. It’s almost *worse* that it was an accident. Cali needs to use her head more often, and not go running into every situation guns blazing.”

“Well on that you and I are in perfect agreement,” Big Mac mumbled distractedly as she used her super pointy tweezers to remove the smallest sliver of wood from the wound. Then she sat back and sighed. “Done. You should heal up pretty quickly, now, then you’ll be good as new. You’re right—this was a bad accident, and it could’ve been a deadly one. Now, as much as I think Cali could use a little humbling, I also know how close you both are. Grudges aren’t always as satisfying as you may think. Don’t leave her hanging for too long.”

I rolled my eyes. “With all due respect, Big Mac, that’s not exactly your concern.”

“I disagree,” Big Mac said. “If we’re going to defeat Silas, we need everyone on the same page, working together. Even if they don’t want to.”

“Whatever. I need to go see Jay, let him know that I’m okay and that Cali’s little accident didn’t end up killing me after all. And then there’s the whole Jacqueline issue…”

I left Big Mac in the study, relieved to see that Cali wasn’t still hanging around. We needed some time apart if I was going to even think about getting over this. Though slamming the door in her face might have been overkill, I’d needed to make it clear that I had nothing to say to her right now. It was all too fresh in my mind, and I needed to cool down. Maybe once my wound healed past being a painful reminder of her carelessness, I’d have more to say.

Jay was coming downstairs when I walked into the foyer. He rushed up to me, relief coloring his handsome features. “How are you?” he asked, gathering me into a gentle hug and being mindful of my wound, which was already starting to heal up, just like Big Mac had said it would.

“You mean, am I okay after getting staked by someone I thought was my friend?”

Jay nodded and winced. “Yeah, I know. That was… a lot. But I think you’re being a little too hard on Cali.”

“Do *not* take her side on this, Jay,” I warned. “I could’ve died.”

Didn’t anyone understand that? Having a near-death experience at the hands of your best friend was not easy to digest.

“Alright,” Jay said quickly, throwing his hands up in mock surrender. “Let’s talk about something else—Jacqueline. She’s been asking to see you. Maybe we should go talk to her together?”

“Yes, for sure. After everything that’s happened with her, I don’t fully trust her,” I said.

We went back out to the driveway, where Jacqueline was pacing back and forth with her arms crossed over her chest and an annoyed look on her face.

“It’s about time!” she huffed. “It’s getting cold out here.”

I suddenly noticed that I was a bit cold myself. *So vampires* are *affected by weather? I thought they were already cold and it canceled out, ugh!*

“Well, I don’t know if you saw, but I was staked, so I had more important things on my mind,” I replied dryly. Even though Torin had healed it and Big Mac had looked at it, the wound still smarted.

Jacqueline waved me off and rolled her eyes. “I want to come inside.”

“Um… it’s not that simple,” Jay said.

“Yes, it is. Let me into the house before I freeze my ass off. Daylight items don’t prevent hypothermia.”

Jay shook his head. “We can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

Jay looked between me and Jacqueline and shrugged his shoulders. “Because you’re a vampire.”

“I’m a vampire? I had no idea. Thanks for stating the obvious,” Jacqueline spat. She pointed at me. “What about her? She’s a vampire, too.”

“That’s different,” I said.

“Different, why? Because you used to be a werewolf? You’re not one anymore, and you could attack them and drink their blood anytime, just like I could.”

“Yes, but they know me, I know them, and I was a part of this pack first. Plus, you haven’t always been the most… friendly… vampire, so you shouldn’t be surprised that we’re still a little iffy about you.”

“Iffy? I’ve brought you the one thing that can take out the revenants, and I’m iffy? What have you done—”

“You two, stop arguing! It doesn’t matter what we think. This is a pack decision,” Jay cut in.

Jacqueline rolled her eyes. “So much bureaucracy. You know, werewolves are even more of a drag than I thought.”

I was over this. I pulled Jay to the side. “Maybe we should leave her out here to freeze.”

Jay smiled. “That’s tempting, but she does have a point—she has the revenant serum, and that could be a game changer for all of us. What’s more, she has nowhere else to go. Let’s run all of this by Greyson.”

“Okay, that sounds like a plan,” I said begrudgingly. Honestly, I would’ve been fine with relieving her of the serum and telling her to hit the road. But I knew that wasn’t the right thing to do, even though it sounded like a great idea.

“Well?” Jacqueline said, when we returned.

“We’re going to talk to our Alpha, Greyson. We could give you a blanket while you wait?” Jay offered. He went around to the trunk and pulled out a fluffy grey blanket that we’d used many times to snuggle up in the back seat. He tossed it to Jacqueline.

“You’re such a good guy,” I said, looking up at him and planting a kiss on his lips. He was so thoughtful and giving. A spike of heat rose in my stomach as I looked at him. Maybe that was why I found him so irresistible. That and his overwhelming hotness. Then it dawned on me that I still hadn’t found my phone.

“Looking for this?” Jacqueline said with a self-satisfied smirk. She tossed the phone toward me—and it sailed over my head and clattered to the ground.

I shot Jacqueline an icy look and turned to scoop it up from the concrete. I examined the screen. Not cracked or scratched, no thanks to her and her shitty aim. *Yup, we should definitely take our time deciding what to do with Jacqueline.*

As Jay and I headed back inside to find Greyson, I noticed that I’d missed a few calls and texts from Emmett.

“Emmett got back to us!” I said as I scrolled through the notifications.

“We should call him back,” Jay said. “He might not know how to get my wolf back, but we can at least find out more about the revenant the serum.”

I wasn’t sure how Emmett would fair if a pack of werewolves solicited his help, but as always, Jay was right. Emmett had information the pack needed.

I returned his call, and he picked up on the first ring. I didn’t know why I was surprised—he was always enthusiastic when it came to me.

“Lola! I’m so happy to hear your voice. I thought you might have died. What happened? Where are you?”

“I’m back home, and we nearly *did* die. There were revenants all over Tottenville’s campus. They chased us out of there, literally.”

“Well I’m so glad that you got out okay. I’ve got things under control here, but I did notice that some of my serum is missing.”

“Yeah, you have Jacqueline to thank for that. She’s here, and she brought the serum with her. We were wondering if it might work on other, non-vampire revenants, too. We have a bit of a revenant problem here as well.”

“Oh, yes! I was looking to do further research on that,” Emmett said excitedly. “By the way, has Jay gotten his wolf back yet?”

“No, he hasn’t.” I frowned at my mate. “But do we need to be worried about Jacqueline turning into a shark or something? How do we know she grabbed the right serum?” There were so many different serums in that lab, including the one that had affected Jay. It certainly seemed to be the right one, if Ava was telling the truth about the aura, but you could never know with that girl.

“It was definitely my stash of humanizing serum that she raided,” Emmett confirmed. “Though maybe I need to change the name to anti-revenant serum now. But Lola, you should still be incredibly careful with the serum. I didn’t have a chance to research all of its side effects, or what it can and can’t do. It’s still in the experimental stage and a very mysterious, volatile thing.”

I mulled over what he’d said. It was great that we had the serum in hand, but it was no good to us if it was unpredictable, or if it could make things worse. I took a deep breath.

“Then you have no choice,” I said. “Emmett, you have to get here immediately.”

**Episode 1681**

CHARLIE

Alarm bells clanged in my head. *Chad knows that “Daisy” is a werewolf? How?*

“Chad, I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I said as calmly as I could manage. “Did you hurt your head, too? Are you sure you don’t have a concussion? Talking about werewolves… Wow. Why would I ever allow a werewolf to come to hunter camp? That’s actually crazy,” I said with a laugh that sounded fake and awkward to my own ears. All I could think was that I should have let Chad die out there in the woods. It would all have been so simple if I’d walked away when I had the chance. *But no, I had to go and do the right thing. No good deed goes unpunished, after all.*

“Oh, there’s nothing wrong with my head. Trust me on that. I know you and that girl have a secret. I saw you together right before the supernatural alarm went off, and then I found a girl’s clothes in the woods. I’m going to figure it out, you can count on it,” Chad said, leaning close.

I clenched my teeth, fighting the urge to snap Chad’s other arm. “Maybe you should have your head X-rayed? You never know, you might have hurt yourself more than you realize. You’re not making any sense at all. Daisy is a hunter, just like you and me. Why would a werewolf be a hunter? Kind of defeats the purpose, doesn’t it? Besides, you heard what my mother said about her hunter heritage, and my mother is sponsoring her here at camp. Are you insulting my mother? That’s a new low, even for you,” I said, hoping I wasn’t overdoing it. I was in panic mode. The very thing I’d been afraid of was happening, and once again, Chad was raking me over the coals.

“Hey man, not at all—your mom is legendary, but she’s also your mom. She’d lie to protect her son.”

For other mother-son relationships, that might be true, but it hadn’t quite been the case with me and Iris. “So, you’re calling my mother a liar?”

Chad scoffed. “If the shoe fits.”

“Fuck you, Chad. If you don’t have a concussion, I’ll sure as hell give you one.”

“Don’t play games with me, Kim.” I could tell that Chad was a little flustered now. He was getting worked up, and he had his good hand planted on his hip. “I’m on to you, and I’m not letting go until the entire camp knows the truth,” he said with a smug smile.

*What the hell is up with this guy? He’s literally obsessed with me.* I shrugged. “Bring it on, Chadster,” I said, trying my best to mask my growing anxiety.

Chad snorted and headed off. I took a deep breath. *This is not good.* The more Chad poked around, the more dangerous things would get for Violet. He was like a dog after a bone. I wondered if he dreamed about me at night. I shuddered and shook it off as best I could as I made my way back to my dorm. I racked my brain, trying to think of a way—short of ripping Chad to shreds—to get him to back the fuck off. He was so sure of himself, and he had no idea that he was playing with fire. Violet was my mate, and you don’t mess with someone’s mate. A hunter like Chad would never understand. Sure, hunters paired off here and had flings and relationships and whatever else, but nothing they experienced would ever come close to a mate bond.

I went into my room, where Reggie, Aisha, and Zachery were sitting around and talking. They brightened when they saw me and wasted no time asking me about the double date. I’d almost forgotten about it while sparring with Chad. Shit was hitting the fan on all sides.

“So, what are you going to wear?” Aisha sang. She was smiling like she was the one going on the date. It made me wish that I was going on a real date with Violet, and not being forced into yet another ruse with a girl I wasn’t into. “I’m partial to guys who dress simple, yet trendy. Take some risks, but make it tasteful. A pair of washed-out shredded skinny jeans, a black V-neck shirt, a blazer—you have any of that in your closet?”

“You watch too much *Bachelorette*, Aisha. Men don’t dress like that in real life. Keep it simple, man, forget trends,” Reggie argued. “Wear your favorite outfit, whatever makes you comfortable and shows your most authentic self.”

“Have you seen how Reggie dresses, Charlie? Don’t listen to him. And everyone knows that the guys on *The Bachelorette* are super hot, so you can’t go wrong copying them.”

“Hell, I still can’t believe that our boy Zachery here landed a date with the new girl. You wasted no time,” Reggie said, high-fiving Zachery, who was beaming from ear to ear. “How the hell did you pull that off?”

“Well, you know me, I am the king of charm. I poured on the sugar sauce, and Daisy ate it right up. Easy as that,” Zachery bragged.

I had to remind myself not to haul off and clock Zachery across the face.

“Truth is, I didn’t even need to do much,” Zachery continued. “Daisy agreed almost right away. And why wouldn’t she? Just look at these guns.” He slid up his shirt sleeves and pumped his admittedly impressive biceps. Reggie and Aisha howled with laughter. “And you *know* I had to give her a free ticket to the gun show.”

By now, I was seeing red. I was standing there, clenching and unclenching my fists, trying to take deep breaths and keep my expression as neutral as possible. I was already pissed off about Chad’s antics, and now I had to sit here and listen to another guy talking about my mate. I would’ve given anything to be alone with Violet right now, taking advantage of how close she was. And what had Zachery said? That Violet had agreed to the date right away? That wasn’t how Violet had relayed the whole thing to me. It wasn’t that I doubted Violet’s version, but all of this was rubbing salt into a very fresh wound. I liked Zachery a lot, but right now, all I could think about was punching him right in the face and wiping that smile off his lips.

“Hey, Reggie and I are going to grab some pizza,” Aisha said, heading toward the door.

“I wish I could come grab some ‘za with you two,” Zachery groaned.

“Yeah, but you can’t. You’re going to have your hands full with Daisy, right Charlie?” Reggie said, nudging my arm.

I did my best to turn what I knew was a scowl into some semblance of a smile. I must not have done a convincing job, because Reggie gave me a strange look as he and Aisha left.

“Later, guys,” I called after them, trying to sound as normal as I could.

“Man! I’m *so* psyched. I can’t believe I finally have a date with a really hot girl. Who knows? Maybe Daisy is the ONE!” Zachery turned to look in the mirror, already preening and primping.

The *one*?I had to shut this down, pronto.

“Well, it’s just a date. Don’t get your hopes up so much,” I said.

“Maybe in the real world, but this is hunter camp,” Zachery countered. “At hunter camp, coupling up is a thing. Don’t throw shade at my parade, man. What’s up with you, anyway? You’ve been standing there looking like someone kicked your cat.”

“Nothing, man. Just tired,” I lied.

I was getting ready to, as he put it, “throw shade at his parade” some more and tell him again why he was being unrealistic about this whole date thing when he shoved two shirts in my face.

“Which one?” he asked, holding up one and then the other, then flipping them both around so that I could get a good look.

I examined them closely. One was way too garish, and the other was ultra douchey—something that Chad would wear with pride. I started to suggest the garish one—after all, why should I help Zachery out when he was going on a date with *my* mate? On the other hand, I couldn’t fault Zachery for trying to make a good impression, and it wasn’t like he knew that “Daisy” was my mate.

I sighed. I knew a thing or two about Violet and her tastes. I pointed to a pale green shirt lying across Zachery’s bed. “My guess is that Daisy would love that one,” I said.

*Mr. Nice Guy strikes again.*

“Wow man, thanks a lot,” Zachery said, clapping me on the shoulder. I couldn’t believe I was helping him look hot for my Violet. It was strange, to say the least. Deep down, though, I knew that there was nothing for me to worry about. Violet and I were meant for each other, no matter if we were going on dates with two different people. Together. Even though I knew that, the whole thing was still rubbing me entirely the wrong way. I just wanted to get it over with.

Zachery put on the shirt and admired himself in the mirror. “You’ve got great taste, Charlie.” He suddenly smacked his forehead. “Dude, I almost forgot.” He opened up a drawer and pulled out a monster box of condoms. He tore it open and threw a couple at me. I was so shocked that I didn’t even move to catch them, and they tumbled to the floor. “So, are you ready to get lucky tonight?”

**Episode 1682**

I worked overtime to hold back tears as I took an aimless lap around the house. I was still in shock, and my heart felt like it was breaking. Lola had slammed the door in my face. *Lola*. My best friend in the whole world. She didn’t even want to talk to me. What had I done? You know, other than accidentally stab her with a wooden stake? But it was just that—a major, never-should-have-happened accident. She had to know that I would never intentionally do anything to hurt her. She knew me better than that. We’d been through so much together. It was unbelievable that one little slip of the wrist could completely torpedo our friendship.

I was beyond frustrated. I’d gotten my friend back, and now we were fighting, and it was all my fault. I was starting to feel like it was the same story with everything else going on around me.

I turned a corner and smacked right into Xavier’s rock-hard chest. I reeled backward, well on my way to falling flat on my ass until Xavier reached out and pulled me close, steadying me on my feet. His warmth paired with his woody, earthy scent washed over me, rendering me flustered and breathless.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I said quickly. “I wasn’t watching where I was going.”

Xavier only gave a short, curt grunt in reply before he paused. “Were you crying?” He looked down at me, concerned. For a moment, I wanted to bury my face in his massive chest and have a good cry, but things were still a bit awkward between us, and we weren’t quite there at the moment. “Is something wrong?” he asked awkwardly.

“Lola’s pissed about how I accidentally staked her, and I went to check on her and see how she was doing, but she slammed the door right in my face. She won’t even speak to me. And now I guess we’re in a fight? I don’t know what happened. Lola just got back to the pack house, and now everything’s gone to shit.”

“A fight?”

I nodded up at him.

“Oh, like the one you and I are having?”

I was taken aback by his bluntness. I pulled away, my heart sinking into my stomach. I knew that he’d been avoiding me and that we had a few issues festering between us, and I wanted to talk about them—but how could we when he was avoiding me?

“I wouldn’t call what we’re in a fight,” I said. “Not exactly. It’s more like a disagreement.”

Xavier raised an eyebrow. “I don’t think you refusing to back my bid to be Alpha is a ‘disagreement.’ It’s a matter of whether you believe in me and my abilities as a wolf, and as an Alpha.”

“Well I *disagree* with that. It’s not about you—it’s about the pack as a whole. You know as well as I do that causing any unrest right now where there’s already enough of that is a bad idea.”

“No, that’s not it. It’s about whether you believe in me. That’s the issue here,” Xavier said.

I could tell by the look on his face that he was hurt. His icy tone was a lot to take, especially with how bad things were between me and Lola right now. I felt awful, and I didn’t agree with him at all. Didn’t he understand where I was coming from? Why was everyone misunderstanding me lately?

“Xavier, how could you even think that? Of course I believe in you! Of course you’re more than capable of being Alpha. But do I think this is the right time to pursue any of that? No! It’s also the fact that you’re asking me to decide which of my mates deserves to be Alpha more.” I turned away and pressed my fingers to my temples, trying to calm the beginnings of a gnarly stress headache. “You’re just refusing to see my side at all.”

“Yeah, I think that’s true—I don’t see your side, and I’m not going to,” he said with a bitter chuckle. “You’ve made it clear where you stand, Cali, and it’s with Greyson, not me. I wish I could say that I’m surprised, but I’m not.” The bitterness in his voice felt like a slap in the face, and I didn’t know quite what to say in response.

We both turned to look as Jay and Lola came walking in. *Great.* Now we had an audience that included another person who was pissed at me. That was all I needed for this fight—because it was definitely a fight now, and *not* a disagreement.

Lola wouldn’t even look at me. We’d had our share of dust-ups in the past, but I couldn’t remember the last time she’d acted like I didn’t even exist. I’d take her slamming a million doors in my face over her treating me like I basically didn’t exist.

“We’ve got something,” Jay said.

Xavier turned his back on me as the three of them moved off to the side to talk. I felt like crap, like a fourth wheel on a car that had gone flat and useless. Much worse than being a third wheel.

“So, I just got off the phone with the professor I mentioned earlier. His name’s Emmett Laurence, and he’s going to come to the pack house,” Lola said. She paused. “Don’t give me that look, Xavier.”

“*Another* vampire?” Xavier said. “No offense,” he added quickly, giving Lola a weak smile.

“None taken,” Lola said dryly. “I understand your concern, believe me, but we need him. He’s the one who created the serum that Jacqueline used to get rid of her revenant aura. The thing is, the serum is still a mystery. We don’t know exactly what it’s capable of, so Emmett’s going to come to the pack house to study it further,” she explained. “With it, maybe we can unlock something to prevent werewolves from becoming revenants, or whatever. I don’t fully understand how it works; I’m not a scientist, and that’s why we need one—namely, Emmett. I don’t know how else we can swing this.”

“Xavier, this stuff might be able to help us defeat the revenants altogether,” Jay added.

“Really?” I piped up.

“Could be,” Jay replied, throwing me a bone. Lola and Xavier continued to act like I wasn’t even there.

I was still hoping that the serum could help Greyson. He was putting on a brave face—as usual—and while he had said the wound was fully healed, I’d seen enough magical injuries recently to want a second, hell, even a third opinion. Who knew what effect it might end up having on him? We had to do everything we could to keep him safe. He was our Alpha, after all.

I hazarded a glance at Xavier as that last thought crossed my mind. If Xavier could read my thoughts, he’d probably be even more upset with me than he was at my apparently unthinkable decision to continue supporting Greyson as our Alpha.

I didn’t understand why Xavier was so hell bent on this replacing Greyson as Alpha thing. Sure, Greyson was a little under the weather right now, but that didn’t automatically mean he was unfit for his role—a role he’d won fair and square. I only wished that Xavier could make peace with it. Him behaving this way was making everything harder than it needed to be, and I was getting tired of this ongoing feud between them. *Even though it’s partially my fault that they’re always at each other’s throats…*

“So, what about the other vampire? Jacqueline?” Xavier asked.

“That’s what we wanted to talk to you about,” Lola said. “Do you think Greyson might let her come in and stay? It’s cold outside. And she *did* bring us the one thing we might be able to use against the revenants. I know we don’t know exactly what the stuff can do yet, but I guess we kind of owe her at least a roof over her head while we figure all of this out?”

“I’m not sure about that,” I cut in. They might not want to acknowledge me, but this was my home, too, and I had family, friends, and loved ones here—even if some of them weren’t happy with me at the moment. No matter how they felt about me right now, I would still do everything in my power to protect them. “She’s a vampire, after all,” I added.

“So am I. Do you think I’m going to snap and become a danger to the pack too?” Lola barked, glaring daggers at me. I was actually relieved when she looked away and went back to acting like I didn’t exist. “Xavier, I’d take total responsibility for making sure that Jacqueline doesn’t eat anyone. It’ll be completely fine. I promise.”

“Yeah, and I’ll help keep things under control, too,” Jay said. “There’s no way I would let her hurt anyone in the pack.”

Xavier nodded at them and then bowed his head as he thought it over. He was about to say something when Kira appeared, looking surprised to see us all standing around in the living room.

“Oh, hey all,” Kira said awkwardly. “Sorry to interrupt yet another house meeting,” she said with a chuckle, then looked at me. It was nice to finally be acknowledged. I was still feeling pretty iced out, and from the way Lola had just snapped at me, it didn’t seem like she’d be thawing any time soon. “Cali—Didi’s awake, and she’s asking for you.”

**Episode 1683**

XAVIER

“Thanks for letting me know. I’ll go check on Didi right now,” Cali said to Kira. She could hardly contain her excitement. She was about to bound off when I put a hand on her shoulder to stop her.

“Cali, that’s a bad idea. There’s so much that we don’t know about her,” I said.

Like I knew she would, Cali huffed and shook my hand off. She was addicted to wedging herself into the middle of things that didn’t concern her—it was like she couldn’t help herself. Under normal circumstances, I found it charming. Not so much today.

“The only way we’re going to learn about Didi is to talk to her,” Cali said.

She moved to leave again, but I blocked her way. “Cali, seriously, we don’t know what’s up with her, you shouldn’t head off on your own. What if she’s… possessed or something?”

“I don’t need your permission, and it’s *because* we don’t know anything about her that I *should* check in on her,” Cali snapped. She pushed past me and stomped off.

I watched her go, toying with the idea of going after her. There was no way that Cali should be talking with Didi. We didn’t know the first thing about her, or what she was capable of. I wasn’t sure if Cali had noticed, but things were precarious right now, and Didi was the type of mystery that could blow up in your face if you weren’t careful.

“What’s up with everyone around here?” Kira grumbled, once Cali was gone. “When you brought me to the pack house, I thought it would be this cool communal space, a sort of family. I thought there’d be lots of parties and hanging out and shooting the shit. Boy, was I wrong. All I’ve seen since I got here is a bunch of tense conversations and infighting.” Kira shook her head and rolled her eyes. “It’s just like werewolves to act like this—you can’t manage to get along with anyone. I should’ve stayed with the vampires. At least they actually *liked* the people they chose to hunker down with.”

“I don’t have time for this,” I muttered, still distracted by Cali. She’d just blown me off, royally. I knew she was still upset about our fight, but now things had gone too far. *Maybe I should go after her? No. She should be coming to me. I’m not the one in the wrong here.* She was the one that needed to prove herself loyal to me, not the other way around. She still refused to back me up, even after I’d made my case for why I was the better fit for Alpha right now. After all, wasn’t I always on her side? Well, maybe not ALL the time, but mostly. Whenever I did disagree with her, it was usually to save her from herself, or to protect her.

“Uh, so what about Jacqueline?” Lola’s question cut through my thoughts, snapping me back to reality.

“Go ask Greyson,” I grumbled. “He’s the Alpha.”

If I wasn’t the Alpha, I’d be damned if I was going to stress out as if I was. How would people learn that Greyson was unfit for leadership if I kept stepping in and solving all our problems? Greyson was in charge, so he could handle all the annoying micro-decisions that were pretty much adding up to one huge clusterfuck.

I shook my head and turned away from everyone’s urging stares. It was all getting to be too much. On top of everything else, we were now considering having vampires come to stay with us. I was happy to let Greyson deal with *that* can of worms. This pack house was turning into a boarding house for all types of unsavory strangers. Even though this was my home, I had more pressing things on my plate than approving the newest tenant, revenant-vampire or not.

Jay opened his mouth to say something, but I gave them all a stiff nod and left before he could get the words out. I didn’t want to hear from him, either. I walked away, deciding to go check on Mace. I knew that he was still hurting over Pip’s death. Being there for him right now seemed like the best use of my time.

I found him in his room, staring blankly into his phone. His eyes lit up when he saw me.

“Hey, man,” he said. “Have a seat, stay awhile.” I returned his smile and took a seat in the armchair across from him. “I was just thinking about going to find you. I was wondering what the plan was.”

“Plan? What plan?” I asked.

“Well, we have Deidamia, so we should be using her to get to Silas, right? What’s the hold up? Is it Greyson?”

“You think Greyson is stalling on something?” I asked, my interest piqued.

“Yeah, haven’t you noticed that he hasn’t exactly… been on top of his game lately? I mean no disrespect, I know he’s your brother and all, but he doesn’t seem to be his usual decisive self.”

I waited before I replied, mulling over the implications of this. If Mace knew that things weren’t quite right with Greyson, other people might be noticing too, and that could throw the pack into turmoil. Despite my own misgivings about the current arrangement, I couldn’t let that happen. It wasn’t that I wanted to protect Greyson—I wanted to let him fail on his own. Besides, Mace wasn’t a Redwood pack member, and he didn’t need to know everything.

*On the other hand, it would be fun to throw Greyson under the bus… and not a little bus, either, but one of those huge, cross country ones. Or a tour bus. Yeah, that would work.* I smiled to myself.

“You’ve noticed too, right?” Mace pressed. “Is something wrong with Greyson?”

I stifled my smile and let the image of the bus go. I waved Mace off. “Nah. He’s just dealing with a lot. As you know, being Alpha is a stressful job.”

“Yeah man, I get that,” Mace said. He was quiet for a moment, head lowering as he ran a hand through his hair. To my surprise I saw tears spring into his eyes. “But you don’t get it. Every second we let Silas roam free is another second that Pip is robbed of the justice she deserves. Do you realize that I haven’t even been able to properly honor my dead Luna because of all the bullshit going on around here? I won’t wait any longer. Something has to be done, or dammit, I’ll do it myself,” he growled.

“I get it, Mace. I understand, believe me. We all want Silas gone. I mean, he’s *my* father, and I’ve dealt with his shit for a hell of a lot longer than you—I might argue that I want him gone even more than you do.”

Mace snorted. “I doubt that.”

I reached out and placed a hand on Mace’s shoulder. “I’m here, man, and I’m going to do everything I can to fix all this. Trust me.”

“Alright. Not that I have much of a choice, but… I trust you.” Mace sighed. I could see a thin line of tension in his shoulders deflate, and I knew I had stopped any retaliation on the heartbroken Alpha’s part. Temporarily, at least.

I left him to head back to my own room and try to clear my head. My mind was racing a mile a minute. There was still so much left unsettled, and I knew that inaction was going to cause even more issues. There were a lot of hurt feelings and wild fears whipping around the pack house right now, and it needed to be brought under control, ASAP.

*Shoot, maybe I should’ve accepted Greyson’s offer. Why did I have to go and get all noble… or petty. Egomaniacal? No, that’s not me.*

I wanted to be Alpha and Greyson had handed it to me, and I’d turned him down. It just hadn’t felt right. Still, if I’d taken over, I could’ve taken charge and dealt with all this shit—the vampires, the revenants, everything.

I was getting more pissed with every passing second. I kicked a door as I stomped by.

“Bad day?”

I whirled around. It was Ava, complete with her patented smirk. I would’ve loved to rip that smirk right off her face.

“And it just got worse,” I replied. “What do you want?”

The smirk slid off her face, and for a moment, she looked hurt. “Nothing. I didn’t want anything really. I heard that the pack house might have a vampire problem on its hands. Maybe I can help?”

“I doubt it,” I said, turning to leave.

“Here we go. Typical Xavier. Turning and running off the moment things get too uncomfortable for you—which is pretty much all the time. Do you ever just stand your ground and face anything?” she asked, her expression hard.

“Did it occur to you that I don’t want to talk to you?”

“Oh, it occurs to me all the time. You’ve made that much pretty clear. You know, I really don’t get you. I got rid of the Iñigo problem for you, didn’t I? Who knows what the hell he had planned? I took care of a threat, and this is how you repay me?” Ava sucked her teeth and flipped her hair. “It’s too bad, really, that you refuse to believe me. To trust me.”

“Too bad? It’s not bad at all—it’s smart. You’ve earned your reputation.”

“Xavier, I deserve a chance to show you that you’re wrong about me.”

I tittered. “I doubt that’s possible.”

“Oh yeah? Then come with me, and I’ll prove it.”

**Episode 1684**

I’d thought I’d be getting some one-on-one time with Didi, but when I got to her room, Big Mac was waiting for me and Kira was right on my heels. I was glad to see that Didi was looking better—stronger, and surer of herself. Though as I thought about it, I wasn’t sure if that was a good thing. Big Mac had made it clear that we had to be careful around Didi. What if she *was* involved in dark magic? Could Didi’s strength be a threat?

Didi’s eyes lit up when she saw me, which put me at ease, especially after the cold reception I’d been getting from Lola and Xavier.

“Cali! It’s so nice to see you again,” she said. She stood up and stretched. “So, I recall that you all wanted to know about the Orb? My apologies—I was too disoriented before to think clearly. I’m better now, and I’m remembering some things. It’s amazing what a good rest can do.” She was beaming at me, and I couldn’t believe that she was capable of wielding black magic—but like Big Mac said, using black magic didn’t necessarily make someone a bad person.

“Yes, that’s exactly what we wanted to know—anything and everything you can tell us about the Orb. I’m happy to hear that you’re feeling a little clearer,” Big Mac said. I could tell that she was cautious, and she had the slightest hint of suspicion in her eyes as she considered Didi. “What can you tell us?”

“Letifer and I created orbs as vessels for magic. We’d enchant them with spells that would be released if the orbs were ever broken. If a fire magic orb shattered, it would release powerful waves of flames that could level a city. If a gravity magic orb shattered, same thing, different power—nothing within its reach would be spared.”

“So, it’s sort of like an egg—crack it open and instead of yolk, you get a spell,” I said.

Didi nodded and gave me a pleasant smile.

“Great analogy, Cali,” Big Mac said with an eye roll.

“Thanks,” I replied cheerily. Maybe ignoring her sarcasm was the best approach.

“Why are you all so interested in the orbs?” Didi asked.

“We believe an evil force has broken free from one of your orbs and its magic is threatening our world.”

Didi furrowed her brow. “Letifer and I would never use an orb to do something like that. Certainly, the orbs hold powerful spells, but a spell that could destroy the world? No.”

“Maybe you didn’t know Letifer as well as you thought you did,” Big Mac said.

A look of anguish crossed Didi’s face, and I felt for her. This must have been so upsetting. I couldn’t imagine processing all of this in such an unfamiliar place with a bunch of strangers—not to mention Big Mac, who was about as sensitive as a Gatling gun. Even if she thought that Letifer might be a sore subject for Didi, she wasn’t the type to tread lightly to mind someone’s feelings—especially if she needed something from them and didn’t have time to waste.

“Was Letifer a medium?” Kira asked Didi. “Are you sure that he never expressed interest in necromancy?”

Didi’s anguished expression gave way to suspicion. She stepped back and cocked her head to the side, her eyes narrowed. “No, he wasn’t involved in necromancy. You’ve asked me that before. Why do you all keep wondering that?”

“The orb that we’ve encountered… It has power over the dead. It’s unlike anything we’ve ever seen before, so we need to be sure that we understand what intentions Letifer might have had when it was created,” Kira explained.

I was glad that she was taking over this line of questioning—she was at least *attempting* to be tactful.

Didi’s eyes widened as she finally began to see what we were getting at. “Are you saying that you think Letifer purposefully put something evil in that orb? Some type of magic that controls the dead?” She was shaking her head and pacing around. She looked genuinely mind blown. I wondered if we should come clean and explain our theory: that Letifer himself was in that orb.

“Losing someone you love—it can change a person,” Kira said. She had a faraway look in her eyes, and I knew she was thinking about her own loss. “Maybe when you died, it did something to him. Turned him into someone different, someone he’d never thought he could become.”

I couldn’t help but think about how I would react if I lost Xavier or Greyson. Just the thought of it chilled me to the bone. I shuddered. I had no idea what I would do in my grief. Without them, I didn’t know if I’d even be able to breathe, to think. Nothing would matter. I didn’t *think* that I’d move to the dark side and bring murderous minions back from the dead, but really, who could say? It all made a dark kind of sense to me. I looked at Kira. In her case, loss had made her hungry for revenge—at any cost.

“No, not Letifer. He was a good man,” Didi said. She was tearing up, and I knew that she was trying to hold back sobs. “I’m sure that if he changed the orbs—and I’m not saying that he did—that he would have had a good reason to do so.”

She couldn’t hold back the sobs anymore, and she broke down. She collapsed back onto the bed, covering her face with her hands and wailing into the duvet.

“That’s enough, you two, can’t you see that she’s exhausted?” I said.

“We need answers from her about this,” Big Mac replied, completely unmoved. “That’s why we did all this in the first place.”

“We thought we’d be questioning a ghost in a séance, not dealing with a living, breathing person. She’s overwhelmed, can’t you see that? She needs time to process everything.”

*Did I really just challenge Big Mac like that?* I stood there, stunned, waiting for the hammer to drop. Big Mac looked at me, her jaw set. I could tell that she was pissed at me—it was radiating off her in waves.

“I agree,” Kira said softly. She was watching Didi, whose sobs had quieted, though her body still shook with the force of her crying. “Two against one, Big Mac. She’s grieving. We should give her some time.”

“Fine,” Big Mac conceded.

I kept my distance from Big Mac as the three of us began to file out of the room. I stopped and turned to Didi before I made it through the door. “Didi, I’m sorry about all that. We’re just trying to figure all this out, but we don’t want to hurt you in the process. If you need anything, anything at all, let me know.”

I closed the door behind me, just as Marta came walking out of her room. She looked frazzled and was putting on a pair of woolen gloves.

“I didn’t realize it was so cold in here,” she mumbled. “But I guess the pack house is pretty drafty.”

I’d never considered the pack house to be abnormally cold. In fact, it was a tad toasty today. I liked it that way, though. Maybe Marta had low blood sugar or something? I turned as I heard another pair of footsteps heading down the hall. Greyson.

“Hey, is something going on out here?” he asked. He looked a little tired, but otherwise normal.

“Yeah, Didi wanted to talk. Her memory is coming back,” Kira replied. “But she got overwhelmed. It was all a bit too much for her, I think.”

“Yup, she started crying, and your main squeeze here wouldn’t let us keep questioning her,” Big Mac added, shooting me a pointed look. “We did find out a little about the orbs. Apparently, Letifer’s orb is just one of many. She and Letifer would fill orbs with magic—and if the orbs crack, the magic leaks out and unleashes whatever spell is inside. We think that Letifer’s orb might be filled with a necromantic magic that’s causing all this mess, but Didi didn’t want to believe that Letifer would create something so evil. I’m not buying it.”

“Maybe that’s the key to everything—and that might mean we don’t have to bother Didi about this anymore. She took it hard, and I don’t think it’s cool to harass a person by villainizing someone they loved, someone they’re still grieving. She doesn’t even know us. We’re pretty much holding her captive while insulting her lover,” I said to Greyson. I hoped he would agree. I knew that the stakes were high, and that we had to get to the bottom of everything, but there had to be a better way.

“Okay, let’s slow down,” Greyson said.

Big Mac rolled her eyes. If she did that enough, maybe they’d get stuck that way.

“But I don’t think questioning her today was entirely for nothing. She talked about putting spells in orbs, but I wonder… Do you think that’s how they trapped Letifer the first time?” I asked.

Big Mac nodded, and I could tell she liked where I was going with this. “We need that witch to teach us how to make a new Orb.”

**Episode 1685**

GREYSON

I was doing my best to take everything in, but even I could admit this was a lot to process. I felt like I’d just stumbled into a conspiracy theory meeting.

“What witch are you all talking about?” I asked. There were a few to choose from in this pack house alone.

“Didi’s a witch. At least that’s what Big Mac says,” Cali replied.

“How do we know she’s a witch?” I genuinely wanted to know. If there was a telltale sign, then we should all be on the alert for it. These days, I was taking any edge I could get.

“It’s her tattoo—it’s a witch mark,” Big Mac said.

“Bingo,” Kira confirmed.

Witch mark? It made me wonder about my own. I wasn’t a witch now, was I? Becoming a witch would be preferable to dying or becoming a revenant, that was for sure. I had always assumed witches were born, not made, so whatever my mark was, I didn’t think I should be expecting any latent magical abilities anytime soon. As cool as that would be.

“Okay, so she’s a witch,” I said. “I still don’t get how she’s supposed to help us.”

“Well, like Big Mac said, Didi and Letifer used to use orbs to contain magic spells,” Cali said. “And we know that when Letifer was defeated before, he was put inside the Orb, and it was hidden.”

“But as we also well know, the Orb was uncovered, and Silas was able to wield Letifer’s power,” Big Mac added. “We want to use Letifer’s own magic to trap him again *and* stop Silas,” Big Mac said matter-of-factly. It was just like Big Mac to say something outlandish without batting an eyelid or changing the tone of her voice.

“But… I thought the Orb was destroyed?” I was doing my best to keep up.

“It *was* destroyed. But now we have the person who used orb magic with Letifer. Maybe we can get Didi to help craft a new one—one that’s strong enough to hold a powerful force like Letifer,” Big Mac said.

I thought over what she said. “If we could make another Orb to trap Silas and Letifer, that would definitely be good. That’s actually the best idea we’ve had so far—how else would we defeat a ghost? But how would we create an Orb? And one that powerful? I imagine it’s an involved process. Probably dangerous, too. We’ll have to make sure that we do it absolutely right. If we fail, we might not survive to get a second chance.”

“Agreed,” Big Mac said, shooting Cali a look.

“And if he escapes again?” Cali asked. “How are we supposed to stop that or if he influences people?”

Big Mac mulled this over, then said, “Let’s start with capturing him first. Leave this to the experts.”

I looked at Cali, trying my best to hold back a smile. I could only imagine how Cali was taking Big Mac’s not very subtle poke, but I had to agree with the witch on this one. We didn’t have any room for mess ups, mistakes, or accidents. We had to take our time and do this exactly right. The only problem was, time was something we were running out of.

“So, it seems we’re all in agreement then. Let’s do it,” I said.

“While all of this sounds like a good idea and all, we have to remember to be kind to Didi throughout all of this. I think she wants to help, but she’s also dealing with a lot. Remember it’s not her fault she’s been physically pulled into this mess,” Cali said.

Classic Cali.I wasn’t surprised that her first thought was of Didi, someone she’d only just met but was already invested in protecting. Her big heart was one of the most alluring things about her, which was saying a lot, since there were so many things about Cali that drove me absolutely wild.

I wanted to pull her in for a kiss, despite being with the two witches, but the impulse was interrupted as Lola and Jay came bounding up the stairs. “We need to talk to you, Greyson,” they said in unison.

Cali and Lola exchanged an uneasy glance before Cali excused herself and made a beeline for the bathroom. *What was that look? Is something going on with them?* I felt bad for Cali if she and her friend were having issues, but she’d have to sort it out on her own. There were too many other things to deal with right now, and if the past was any indication, the two of them would make up in due time.

Lola’s eyes followed Cali as Jay launched into telling me about whatever it was that had both him and Lola on edge.

“So, there’s a vampire girl named Jacqueline who Lola knows from Tottenville. She stowed away in the back seat when we left to come here, and she’s waiting outside. We were wondering if we could invite her in. She doesn’t have anywhere to stay.”

I was pleased, but I kept that to myself. All the talk about Xavier taking over had started to make me doubt myself, just a little. The fact that Lola and Jay were coming to me to ask for my permission on this meant that they still regarded me—and only me—as the Alpha of this pack. I was actually surprised that after our little tiff, Xavier hadn’t started going behind my back to cause trouble by planting seeds of doubt in everyone’s minds about whether or not I was still capable of running things.

“Yeah, Cali mentioned her earlier. Do you two really think it’s safe to have her here? I have enough on my plate already.”

“You don’t have to worry. I promise that I’ll keep an eye on her,” Lola said.

“Me too,” Jay said.

“Fine. As long as you two take responsibility, I’m good with it,” I said, once I saw that Jay was completely on board. I trusted Jay’s judgement, and his ability to hold his own if things happened to go south—and with our track record lately, things definitely could.

“Great. Thanks Greyson, you’re a lifesaver,” Lola said. She looked at Jay. “I’ll go and get her,” she said, before bounding back down the stairs.

“One more thing,” Jay began. “Another vampire from Tottenville—one of Lola’s professors, his name’s Emmett—is coming to stay here too, but it’s for a good reason. He might be able to help with the revenants.”

Another vampire? What was going on here?I waved Jay off, not in the mood to deal with it right now. I’d worry about it once this professor got here, and if he might be able to help with the revenants, dealing with the stench of another vampire in the house would be worth it—as long as they didn’t try to suck us dry in our sleep.

“I’m hungry,” I said wearily. “If anyone needs me, I’ll be in the kitchen.”

I hoped that no one would need me for a few minutes. I needed a quiet moment to think—and stuff my face.

I went downstairs and peered into the refrigerator, looking but not really seeing. I had a lot on my mind, and it took me a few tries to finally calm my thoughts enough to pay attention to what was in front of me. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Artemis, heading for the back door. Where was she going?I’d just zeroed in on some leftovers from yesterday’s dinner that looked pretty tasty and unspoken for, but they’d have to wait. I knew that Cali was worried about Artemis, and I wasn’t so sure about what had been going on with her lately, either. I shut the fridge and followed the Fae.

“Hey Artemis, where you headed?” I asked, trying to sound as carefree as possible.

“Going for a walk.”

“Oh, cool. Well, be careful. We all need to stay close to the pack house right now. There’s no way of knowing if there are revenants lurking around out there.”

Artemis paused and smiled at me, then ran a hand down my cheek. “Aren’t you sweet, being concerned about me?”

I was stunned. “Uh… yeah. You know—Cali…” I trailed off.

Artemis was being weird, but maybe being happy in a relationship with Rishika had softened her a little? If Artemis could recover from all the troubles she’d run into with dark magic, then maybe I could come out of whatever was going on with my mark unscathed.

“Well, just don’t go too far!” I said awkwardly. “I’ll never hear the end of it from Cali if anything happens to you.”

“You got it,” Artemis replied, and then she was gone.

I watched her through the window as she walked away. I was starting to feel really lightheaded. I thought about the leftovers in the fridge. I really needed to eat something. I went back into the kitchen, and as I reached for the fridge handle, the room started to spin. I reached out for the counter as my knees buckled and I collapsed to the floor, clipping the counter on my way down. Dark spots crowded my vision, and I felt like I was drifting in space as I heard a voice calling out to me.

“Greyson, join me. We will become one. Together, we will become stronger.”

I shook my head, trying to push the voice away.

*Who is that? Who’s talking?* I blinked my eyes, and when I opened them, I was standing at an altar, surrounded by darkness. I looked down at myself. I was dressed in a tuxedo. *Oh no, not this dream again.*

Out of the darkness, two figures materialized. It was the mystery woman dressed in white, and leading her by the hand was that boy, Shaine. They came to join me at the altar.

Shaine smiled up at me with dead, blank eyes. “I told you that you knew my mommy!”

**Episode 1686**

VIOLET

I tried my best to calm my nerves and enjoy myself as I prepared for tonight’s double date. I’d chosen a pair of high-waisted black jeans and a flowy black blouse. I wish that I could have accessorized with my favorite gold necklace, gold bangles, and delicate gold hoop earrings, but it wasn’t like I had my full wardrobe with me. I knew that Charlie would love this look, and since he was going to be there, I’d decided to dress with him in mind—even though he wasn’t going to be with me, technically.

I was all alone in my room right now, though my roommates flitted in and out from time to time. They’d sort of introduced themselves, but I’d come into this so late that people had already formed their cliques, and I was feeling a little like the black sheep. No one really wanted to talk to me, but boy did they stare.

I grabbed my jacket, shrugged it on, and admired myself in the mirror. *Not bad at all.* It felt good to get dressed up like this, but I wished the circumstances were different. It would be a little bit of a thrill to tease Charlie, at least. I would be able to flirt with him through our mind link. But if Zachery tried to kiss me… I only hoped that I’d be able to figure out a smooth way to avoid it without causing any suspicion. Punching him in the face might be too strong a reaction, so I’d have to figure out something a bit more tactful.

I sighed. This hidden identity thing was confusing already. I had to keep reminding myself to answer to the name “Daisy.” I’d already gotten a few strange stares from people who’d had to say my name more than once before I’d answered. I definitely had to get better at that, considering Charlie’s and my safety depended on it.

I took one last look in the mirror before I left my dorm room and headed down to the lobby to meet Zachery.

He was waiting at the bottom of the staircase for me, and he broke out into a wide smile when he saw me. He pulled a bouquet of flowers—daisies—from behind his back.

“Beautiful daisies for a beautiful Daisy,” he announced.

I pasted on a smile. *Flowers? On the first date? And daisies at that? Cornball city.* This didn’t bode well. I laughed awkwardly and took the flowers as Zachery pulled me into an awkward half-hug.

“Thank you,” I said. “These are… certainly… very floral. So nice.”

He beamed. “You look stunning.”

Thankfully, Charlie and Sophie came walking in, saving us from any cheesier moments. But my relief dwindled as I took in the sight of them. I had to admit that they looked good together. I absolutely hated it, but there wasn’t much I could do.

“If everyone’s ready, let’s go and score some strikes,” Zachery said with a pump of his fists.

This was going to be a long night.

*How’s it going, Daisy?* Charlie mind linked on the drive over to the bowling alley.

*Watch it*, I replied. I didn’t even like the name Daisy, and hearing him use it was more annoying than it probably should have been, but I wasn’t in the mood to be teased right now.

*Well, you look beautiful.*

*Why thank you*,I mind linked back, blushing. Even under these weird circumstances, Charlie knew just what to say to get to me. I could feel Zachery’s eyes on me, and I hoped to hell he didn’t think that I was blushing because of him. *Ugh*.

After a short, uneventful ride, we arrived at the bowling alley. Zachery swiped my bowling shoes as soon as the bored-looking attendant slapped them on the counter. “I’ll help you with those,” he said.

I rolled my eyes and followed him over to our lane’s seating area. He took his time untying the shoes and swatted my hand away when I went to remove my boots.

“Ah, I’ll take care of that,” he said. I wondered if he had a foot fetish or something as he took his time removing my boots and sliding the hideous bowling shoes onto my feet, only to tie them like he was wrapping a present.

“Ugh, I’m not thrilled about wearing shoes that who knows how many people have worn before,” Sophie said with a scowl.

“You’re telling me,” I agreed, and we laughed, sharing a moment. She seemed nice enough, the type of person I could be friends with—though not right now.

Zachery shrugged. “It’s not that big a deal.”

I stifled the urge to roll my eyes. We all got up and chose our bowling balls, then brought them back to the lane. Charlie and I exchanged a few loaded glances, taking care not to stare at each other too long for fear of rousing suspicion. He looked as handsome as ever tonight, and all I could think about was that hot moment we’d shared in the shed, what seemed a lifetime ago.

“You should go first,” Zachery insisted as he entered our names into the scoring system.

I shrugged and picked up my ball, hefting it in my hand as I zeroed in on the pins, standing straight and white at the end of the lane.

*Don’t put too much effort into it. You don’t want to stand out*, Charlie mind linked, just as I readied myself to toss the ball down the lane.

I groaned and shifted my form. I was a good bowler, and it was definitely going to be painful to pretend that I wasn’t, but I understood why.

*Got it*,I mind linked back.

I wound up and threw the ball down the lane, purposefully missing an easy strike. I grumbled under my breath. I *really* hated losing on purpose. This was so unfair. I barely ever got to go out and have fun like this—even at the pack house—and now I wasn’t even allowed to let loose and use my full skills and strength. Lame.

Zachery went next, and he got a spare. He and Charlie high fived, then he came and sat next to me—a little too close for my taste. His thigh was pressed against mine, even though he had more than enough room in his own chair.

“Did you see my spare?” he asked me, his eyebrows arched so high they looked like they were about to touch his hairline. I didn’t think I’d ever seen someone so excited and eager about bowling in my life.

*Be nice, Vi*,Charlie mind linked.

I forced a smile. “Yeah, you’re really great at bowling.”

*I’m better*,Charlie said. *Wait until we go bowling—just the two of us.*

I smiled to myself. I couldn’t wait to do just that. In fact, I couldn’t wait to do *anything* with Charlie one on one. Our moments alone together were so rare and precious, and I was hungry for more of them.

It was Sophie’s turn, now. She walked her ball up to the lane and bent at the waist, swinging the ball back and forth between her legs like a kid and only managing to knock down two pins. I rolled my eyes. *Amateur.*

Charlie laughed. “You’re doing it wrong. You have to use the finger holes.”

Sophie made a face. “But what if there’s, like, gross stuff in there?”

“Soph, don’t be a priss,” Zachery called out. “They sanitize them.”

Sophie sighed and tried to hold the ball like Charlie instructed, but she kept putting the wrong fingers in the wrong holes.

Charlie leapt up from his seat. “Let me show you.”

He stepped up and helped her adjust her grip, then helped her pull her arm back to show her how to properly throw the ball.

I watched, noticing how closely he was standing behind her. Too close. Before I knew it, my vision had gone red with rage. Sophie released the ball and managed to pick up a spare. She squealed and jumped into Charlie’s arms. I narrowed my eyes at them as the hug went on a little too long for my liking.

“Daisy, it’s your turn,” Zachery said, nudging my shoulder.

I stood up and yanked my ball out of the carousel, my blood boiling.

Zachery came up behind me. “Let me show you.”

“I think I’ve got it, thanks,” I snapped.

I fell into perfect form and wound my hand back, nearly nailing Zachery in the crotch with the ball in the process. I launched the ball down the lane so hard that it crashed into the pins, breaking two of them in half. Everyone in the place went silent as they stared at the carnage I’d left at the end of the lane.

*Violet, what are you doing?* Charlie demanded. *You’re going to expose yourself as a werewolf, showing off your strength like that.*

*What am* I *doing?* I mind linked back. *What are* YOU *doing, and why are you doing that with* HER*?*

*Violet, come on. I’m just being nice.*

*Well, be less nice*,I shot back.

I didn’t think I’d ever been more annoyed in my life. I stormed off, and Charlie chased after me. He reached out and took my arm, spinning me around to face him.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

I yanked my arm away. I couldn’t get the image of him helping Sophie out of my head. They just seemed so… familiar and comfortable with each other.

“At least tie your shoes before you trip,” Charlie said. He bent down to do it himself, and as he did, something shiny and gold peeked up out of his back pocket.

*That can’t be what I think it is.* Pure rage flooded through my veins like lava.

“Charlie Kim, what the hell are you doing with a *condom*?”

**Episode 1687**

MARTA

I stood there frozen in front of my bedroom door, watching Big Mac and Kira in the hallway. I had my gloves on, and I tugged at them to make sure they were on nice and snug.

Lilac’s voice floated into my ears. “You need to tell them about this.”

I hadn’t been able to keep what had happened to my hands hidden from him. How could I? He was frickin’ tethered to me, like a chatty ball and chain.

“I know, I just… Ugh, this is complicated, alright? But you probably won’t stop pestering me until I do it,” I replied.

“Damn right.”

I rolled my eyes as I pushed the panic out of my stomach, willing myself to walk over to Big Mac. “Hey… I kinda have a thing,” I muttered.

“A thing?”

I hesitated for a moment, then peeled off my gloves, revealing the mangled messes that my hands had become. Big Mac and Kira exchanged an unsettled look. I had hoped that they would react a little better—maybe laugh and wave it off like it wasn’t a big deal, or pull out a magic wand and made them good as new. No such luck.

“How long have they been like this?” Kira asked.

“Not long. It just started a little while ago. Is it serious, do you think?”

“Ask if you should see a doctor,” Lilac urged.

“Shut up!” I snapped. I returned my attention to the witches. “Should I see a doctor?”

Kira shook her head. “This isn’t a medical problem. It’s a spiritual one. You have to reset the balance in your body, or this will take it over.”

*What the hell does that mean?* “Reset the balance? *Take over?*”

“The balance of life and death in your body is off kilter right now. As a medium, it’s a delicate balance to begin with, and now the magic of the undead is taking you over because you took a life back out when you brought Didi here,” Kira explained.

This didn’t sound good, and I was getting more nervous by the second. “So, what am I supposed to do? I didn’t intend to unbalance anything.”

“Well, you’re a medium, and you’re stronger than the problem. If you deal with it—quickly.”

“*Okay.* So how the hell do I deal with it?” Was it always this hard to get a straight answer out of a witch?

“The ghost tethered to you—Lilac, right? —might be able to help. He could take some of the undead energy from you, which would re-balance you. That seems like the best option,” Kira said, looking to Big Mac, who gave a hesitant nod.

“Ah, so now I’m the best option,” Lilac gloated. “How does that feel?”

I shot Lilac a look. *Ugh.* The last thing I wanted was to be doing something *else* with him. We already spent every waking—and sleeping—moment together. It was looking more and more like I was never going to get a moment’s break from him. For me, all roads led to Lilac. *Yay me.*

“Hmm,” Big Mac said, her eyes narrowed in concern. “Would this affect Lilac as well?”

I was surprised. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

The ghost got on my nerves and all, and he was definitely cramping my style in a real way, but I didn’t want any harm to come to him.

“Yes, it might do something to Lilac’s ghost. And we can’t know if that something will be good or bad,” Kira said.

I looked at Lilac, suddenly feeling unsure. After what had happened with Didi, I didn’t like the uncertainty of how things might turn out. There was so much I didn’t know about messing around in the world of the dead, even though I’d had my fair share of experience doing just that. I also didn’t like that Big Mac looked so worried. It was rare for the witch to look anything but smug and self-assured, so her current demeanor was more than a little unsettling. Big Mac had been around the pack for a while, and had probably known Lilac when he was younger. Of course she was worried about him.

“Hey, I’m already dead, it’s not like things can get much worse,” Lilac said. “Besides, I want to help.”

“Why? So you can hold it over my head?” I snapped.

Lilac faltered a little, letting some of his bravado slip. He actually looked sincere. “No, because I want to help *you* if I can.”

“Big Mac, you look concerned. Is this a bad idea?” I asked.

Big Mac reached out and placed a hand on my shoulder, then gave it a squeeze. She was actually attempting to comfort me. Now I was even more worried.

“I’m here to assist if you decide that you want to do it. There could be other ways to get you back in balance, but like Kira mentioned, you have a connection to the spirit world right here at your fingertips. Either way, you won’t have to do any of this alone. I’m already sorry about what happened with the spell as it is,” Big Mac said. “It wasn’t meant to go that way, but we need to deal with this consequence soon.” She squeezed my shoulder again. “We wouldn’t want anything to happen to you.”

I looked up at Big Mac, a sick feeling circling in my stomach. I wanted to say something, but what was there to say? It seemed like I didn’t really have a choice.

“Let me know what you decide. If this is spreading quickly, we might not have much time,” Big Mac said, before she and Kira left me alone with Lilac.

I stood there for a few moments, mulling everything over. I looked down at my hands. They didn’t hurt, but they sure looked like they should. I’d always loved my hands, and right now, they looked like something you pulled out of a clogged drain. Not a good look at all. All the same, I didn’t want to do anything that could put Lilac in jeopardy. Not only would Violet kill me if anything happened to him, but I’d also feel like shit if he got hurt in some way because of me.

“Why didn’t you just tell them to go ahead and show us what to do?” Lilac asked. “I told you, I want to help you.”

“Thanks, Lilac. I really appreciate you having my back, but you heard them—there’s too much we don’t know, and I don’t want to hurt you. What if—”

Lilac put his ghostly hand on my shoulder, cutting me off. “I said before, I’m already a ghost, Marta. What more could happen to me? Will I die? Too late!” he said with a weak chuckle.

“That’s the point, Lilac,” I said. “You and I both know that there are fates worse than death. What if whatever happens hurts you? What if you go away for good or something? I wouldn’t be able to live with myself.”

It was starting to get to the point where I couldn’t even remember what life was like *without* us being joined at the hip.

Lilac stepped closer to me. “You really care about me, don’t you?”

I pushed him away. “Are we going to do that again? Get all mushy and serious? Don’t read too much into it, okay? I wouldn’t want to hurt *anyone.* Ghost or not.”

“I get that, but I have a say in this, too. And if I can save you from whatever has your hands looking like two huge prunes, then that’s my choice to make.”

“Lilac, this is serious,” I said, laughing despite myself. That was an accurate assessment, though. My hands weren’t pretty, and if whatever was afflicting them spread to the rest of my body… I couldn’t imagine what that would be like. I wasn’t a particularly vain person, but no one on the planet would want to look like a life-sized shriveled fruit.

I looked into Lilac’s eyes, and I could tell that he was serious. When I really thought back, I had to admit that Lilac had always been there for me, right at my side, ready to take on anything. I was oddly moved.

“You’d really do this for me?” I asked. “Take such a risk?”

He stepped closer. “Marta, don’t you get it? I’d do anything for you.”

Emotion welled up in my chest, and I leaned forward and kissed him. His lips were as soft as ever, and as our kiss deepened, I felt him becoming corporeal. I lost myself in him, and I was overcome by the increasing heat of the kiss, which I hadn’t even realized I’d needed so badly.

Lilac leaned away and smiled at me. “I knew you cared about me.”

I rolled my eyes and leaned in to kiss him again, but before our lips could touch, there was a flash of light and a wisp of smoke billowed up right beside us. Lilac and I leapt apart as the smoke cleared and a strikingly beautiful woman with long, dark, wavy hair and sparkling dark eyes appeared before us.

“You need to stop. This is getting out of hand. Bringing him back and forth willy-nilly without a thought, and then contacting the spirit world and bringing back long dead witches?” The woman shook her head, a serious glare sparking in her ancient-looking eyes. “You’re affecting the balance of everything!”

**Episode 1688**

Today sucked.

I was crying in the bathroom, staring at my reflection. The red eyes and the snot and all the sadness were not a pretty sight. Where had everything gone wrong? Xavier was angry with me, Lola thought I’d tried to kill her, and honestly, it felt like nobody had taken a single second to understand me.

It felt like when I’d first joined the pack, when I’d been an outsider looking in, like someone the rest of the pack would’ve preferred not to deal with. I also found it entirely unfair that Xavier took everything so personally. And how could Lola really believe that I would ever harm her on purpose? It was like both of them had forgotten who I was. It was like they didn’t even know me, or care about anything I had to say.

Also, if I remembered correctly, Lola had actually tried to kill *me* at some point, and I definitely hadn’t reacted the same way she had.

*The double standard is what’s* really *killing our friendship!*

When Jay and my apparently former best friend had come up to talk to Greyson, nobody had tried to stop me from leaving. Nobody cared anymore. And as much as I was sad about everything, I was also mad, and the result was the sniffly monster I saw looking back at me in the mirror.

My mascara was running, the concealer was gone from under my eyes, and everything was horrible. I tried to fix the mascara situation at least, but all I managed to do was smear and smudge my eyes even worse. *UGH!*

“Cali?” my dad said through the door, startling me. The handle started jiggling. “Are you in there?”

I stared at my reflection one last time and did my best to deal with the mascara. “Just a second!”

My fake cheerful voice was an abomination. Same as my face, but hopefully my dad wouldn’t notice. Or if he did, I would pretend it was allergies. The last thing I needed was to make him feel bad as well. I took a deep breath and opened the door.

“What’s up?” I said, plastering a smile on my face.

My dad’s eyebrows crawled up his forehead as he registered my expression. “What’s wrong, honey?”

I opened my mouth to start with the excuses, the allergy bit, but instead what came out was a sob. I burst into tears like a loser, but the only thing my dad had for me was sympathy.

“Oh, darling, what happened?” He pulled me into a hug, wrapping his arms around me tightly. “You’re going to be okay. Do you want to talk about it?”

I didn’t know how to respond. For a moment, I just enjoyed my father’s warm embrace, trying not to cover him with snot.

“If this is about me becoming a werewolf, I promise we’ll work it all out.” Dad started stroking my back.

*Oh, god. That wasn’t even the thing I was worried about! One more problem to add to the pile!* I thought bitterly.

My dad seemed pretty worried, though, so I realized that I needed to be honest with him. “It’s not about that. Lola and I are fighting.”

Dad frowned. “Is it serious?”

I nodded, sniffing.

Dad arched an eyebrow. “You know, you and Lola have had plenty of fights before, and you’ve always worked it out. Maybe you should let things cool down a little and then talk to her.”

I knew that my friendship with Lola wasn’t over. At least I was pretty sure about that*.* In theory.

I sighed. “You’re probably right.”

Dad stroked my hair. “Why don’t we sit down somewhere and figure things out?”

He took me by the hand and led me to one of the rooms, gingerly closing the door behind him. We sat down at the mini seating area, and Dad leveled me with a stare. “

“Are you sure there isn’t anything else that’s bothering you?” he asked. “Because you seem pretty upset.”

I took a deep breath, and my dad squeezed my shoulder comfortingly.

“Are you having problems with the boys, Cali?” he asked. “You know you can talk to me about anything.”

Ugh, so my mom had told him I wasn’t talking about it. Damn it. What was I supposed to do?

My dad was so sweet that I folded like a deck of cards. “I had a fight with Xavier.”

Dad fell quiet for a moment, blinking at me slowly. With a heavy sigh, he said, “I may have made a mistake with all this, you know. I really didn’t handle the whole two mates thing the way I should have, and I imagine that none of this is easy on you. Especially the whole *Bachelorette* dating thing that Torin and I cooked up…”

I didn’t interrupt my dad, because honestly? That whole thing *had* been kind of a nightmare. Dad scrutinized my expression, and the way I felt was probably plain as day on my face.

“I promise I will be far more sensitive to your situation from now on,” he said.

“The fight that I had with Xavier isn’t your fault, though.” My voice was quiet.

“Your mom and I have had our fair share of fights over the years, but what I’ve learned is that in the end, our love for each other was always stronger.”

“Why are you telling me that?” I asked.

“Just saying,” Dad said with a shrug. “It’s obvious that both those boys love you. I may not fully understand everything that’s going on, but I know that Xavier and Greyson would do anything to protect you, my precious baby girl.”

I snorted. “Stop it, I haven’t been a baby in years!”

Dad pulled me in for a hug. And like the dad-est dad alive, he said, “For me and your mother, you’ll always be our baby. Don’t hesitate if you ever want to talk.”

I nodded softly. “Thank you.”

“Anytime,” he said. Then he stood up, straightening his shirt. “I gotta get going now, though. I promised my good friend Torin that I’d show him how to make a French omelet.”

I arched an eyebrow. “I’m not so sure that Torin sees you as just a friend. Better be careful there, I think he has a crush on you.”

My dad’s expression turned solemn. “I know. I really like the kid, so I’ll let him down gently. He’s not like the others.”

I stared, eyes wide. “The *others*? You’ve had more than one person have a crush on you while you’ve been married to Mom?”

“What can I say?” Dad deadpanned. “I still got it.”

I was still grinning after he left the room. Talking to him may have not fixed anything, but I felt so much better. A memory popped up in my head—me falling down, scraping my knee, and then asking Dad to kiss it better, even though it was covered in dirt. He pretended to do so, and of course I instantly felt indestructible.

The thought put a smile on my face. In the end, I decided to take my dad’s advice and talk to both Xavier and Lola at some point soon, after things settled down. It wouldn’t be good to let any resentment grow on either side. And I was talking about me too, because they had *obviously* wronged me!

As I was thinking all that over, I heard a groan from outside. Curious, I walked toward the window and saw Artemis in the yard. Weird. She seemed to be…

*Is she attacking a* snowman*?*

That did not look good. I slipped on my coat and quickly headed outside. My sister was kicking at the snow with such fury that I was hesitant to interrupt. I definitely admired Artemis’s strength, though. Her thigh muscles were doing an amazing job. I hoped that training would allow me to fight like her at some point, and somehow reach her level of badassery in general.

“Cali?” Artemis asked, flinching when she noticed me. She cleared her throat, awkwardly dusting the snow from her hands. “I hope you don’t mind, but I took down the snowman. I needed to vent a little.”

I gave her look. “It’s fine… But what happened?”

Artemis rubbed her forehead, exhaling sharply. “I really screwed things up with Rishika. Not even sure how it happened. “

I thought back to my dad’s genius advice. “Have you tried to talk to her?”

Artemis scoffed, slamming the stump of the snowman. “Yep. And I only made things worse.”

“How so?” I asked cautiously.

“I mean, the situation is a mess.” Artemis looked down on the ground. “And actually, Rishika has a valid point—*why* did I get so emotional when I saw Didi?”

I blinked. “Are you asking me?”

Artemis rolled her eyes. “No. I’m just wondering what the hell is going on with me.”

“I guess it could just be the stress of everything?” I told her. “I know that you try to keep everything under control, but…” I pointed at the slushy remains of the snowman. “Sometimes that can backfire, causing you to blow up. Honestly, I think that if the two of us were blended together we would be the *perfect* person.”

“Really?” Artemis snorted.

“Totally! A dash of my impulsiveness tempered by your self-control. We would be like the ultimate weapon of destruction,” I said seriously, and Artemis’s grim expression cracked into a chuckle.

I laughed as well, feeling much better about today. I was pretty grateful to both my dad and my sister for easing all the tension inside me.

Artemis was opening her mouth to say something else when Sage came running up to us.

“Hey! That witch is looking for you!”

I flinched. “Didi wants to see me? So soon?”

Sage shook her head, breathing sharply. She turned to my sister, staring. “Didi wants to talk to Artemis.”

**Episode 1689**

XAVIER

I scoffed, not believing my ears. “You want me to come with you? Just like that?”

Ava huffed. “Since you refuse to believe me, I can just take you to see Iñigo’s body. And then you’ll have proof, right before your eyes.”

I shook my head. This was fucking bullshit. “If you had truly killed Iñigo, there wouldn’t be a body to see.”

I made a move to leave, but Ava blocked my way. Her expression was fierce as she glared up at me. “I staked him. Kira was there. Have you even bothered to talk to her?”

I took a sharp breath. I really didn’t have time for this. I had other things to worry about, like my fight with Cali, and what the hell to do about Greyson. There were serious issues—seemingly never-ending ones—plaguing me. And then there was the constant nuisance of Ava. Like a mosquito out for blood, buzzing all over me.

“You know what? I don’t need to talk to anyone. I just know that this is the Redwood pack house, and you’re not a Redwood pack member,” I declared. “You’d better figure out where you’re going to be staying, because you’re done with this place.” I pointed at myself, clenching my jaw. “*I* am done accommodating you. I have no idea why I did it in the first place.”

Ava’s eyes widened. “But the Redwoods need me. I can help them find revenants.”

I rolled my eyes. “Right. That’s what you say. But I’m still not seeing any proof of that. Now, get out of my way.”

Ava pressed her lips together, taking a deep breath. I could see that she was about to change her tactics. At least that was something I could appreciate—even admire—about her. She was crafty. She always came up with a different angle to get what she wanted.

“Look,” she said, taking a step closer to me. “I promise you, I did kill Iñigo. And I am more than capable of helping fight the revenants.” She placed her hand on my arm, her touch so gentle I barely felt it. There was an intensity to her expression, a fire that made her seem honest.

But there were so many unanswered questions about Ava.

I had wondered many times before if Ava had changed. I had wondered whether she was actually capable of change. But then, before the pack wars, before Silas, she’d never given me a reason to doubt her. She had never made me feel like every word out of her mouth was a lie.

For a long time, I had believed Ava to be good— the best thing in my life. But was any of that goodness left in her now?

I doubted it.

Brushing her hand away, I said, “You should stop wasting your time trying to convince me and think about your next move instead.”

She swallowed audibly. “And what about yours?”

I scoffed. “*My* next move? That’s none of your concern.” I walked past her, my shoulder brushing against hers, but she didn’t budge.

Instead, she spoke, and her voice was even. “Whatever you do, I’ll be there to support you.”

Her words gave me pause. Because they were the exact thing that I would have loved to hear Cali say to me. If fucking Ava was willing to back me up, why couldn’t my mate?

I clenched my fists hard enough to hurt. I headed to the living room, my thoughts burning. Maybe Greyson thought he was strong enough to remain Alpha, but that didn’t mean I agreed. I wasn’t going to sit around and do nothing.

The revenant threat wasn’t going to go away by itself, and now we had a vampire—no, *two* vampires, if we counted Lola—staying at my pack house. Oh, and then there was the witch who’d come back from the dead. That was another fun thing to deal with. Someone needed to keep track of all these erratic developments that threatened the pack’s well-being in more ways than one. And since Greyson remained useless, I needed to do something.

And I would start with Jacqueline.

Just then, the front door opened. Speak of the devil… Lola was holding Jacqueline by the forearm, about to lead her into the house. Not on my watch.

“What the hell is this?” I asked, blocking the door.

Lola scoffed. “What does it look like?”

“Are you seriously going to invite Jacqueline in here? We don’t know anything about her!”

Lola rolled her eyes. “It’s fine. I offered to watch Jacqueline, and Greyson already gave his permission.”

I wanted to growl. “Good for Greyson, but this is *my* house. If Jacqueline’s going to be staying here, there need to be some ground rules.”

“I promise not to bite anyone, if that’s what you’re worried about.” Jacqueline glanced at Lola. “In fact, your friend over here should be the one you keep an eye on, because her control isn’t that great yet.”

Lola gave Jacqueline a glare. “You’d better watch your mouth—I’m about to leave you to sleep in the car and freeze your ass off!”

“Stop being so dramatic!” Jacqueline huffed. “I’m just telling the truth—learning control is literally why you came to our school, and you’re still struggling with it, even if you won’t admit it.”

Lola grabbed Jacqueline by the arm, pulling her closer. “You want a fight? Because I’ll give you one!”

“Hey!” I barked, pointing at them. “If you two want to get into this house, you’d better not start fights. Either of you. Am I making myself clear?”

The vampires paused, then grumbled.

“I mean it,” I said.

“He does,” Lola told Jacqueline, and the other vampire scowled.

After both of them had offered their agreement, I suppressed a long-suffering sigh and stepped aside.

Lola passed through the threshold and made a gesture for Jacqueline to follow. “Come on in.”

I couldn’t believe there were *two* vampires in my house. And then I realized something else. “What about this vampire professor guy? When is he coming?”

“He’s on his way,” Lola replied seriously.

Right. That made *three* vampires for us to deal with. Vampires and werewolves, two species that never meshed, under the same roof.

This was a horrible idea, wasn’t it?

“So?” Lola asked me, tapping her foot. “Where should we put Jacqueline?”

“She can stay in your room. Sleep on the floor or whatever,” I said.

Jacqueline glared at me. “I’m not a dog. Or a wolf.”

“Don’t test me,” I told her.

“Well, having Jacqueline stay in my room with Jay isn’t going to work,” Lola told me with arched eyebrows, and she was testing me as well. I did not deserve this attitude, and I was getting really fucking irritated here, but I knew that if I snapped at Lola, I’d have to deal with Cali afterward. And we were already on rocky ground, so I didn’t want to push my luck.

“Listen, Lola,” I said from between clenched teeth. “Since you volunteered to keep an eye on Jacqueline, you’re the one who’s going to have to figure out where she stays. Go find her a spare room, get her a sleeping bag, tie her to the roof for all I care. She’s *your* problem, not mine.”

Lola rolled her eyes and motioned for Jacqueline to follow her. As she led Jacqueline upstairs, she said, “Don’t you ever associate dogs with wolves again. You hear me?”

Jacqueline snorted. “Why, what are you going to do? Bite me?”

Lola shot back something equally petty to Jacqueline, and the two bickered all the way up the stairs. I was standing at the bottom, regretting all my life choices, when Kira came up to me.

“Who’s that girl with Lola?” she asked.

“She’s a vampire. So, basically, the only kind of supernatural creature that you mesh well with,” I said.

Kira nudged me, her expression mirth mixed with exasperation. “I guess I’m kind of getting used to the werewolves, though.”

I smirked. “Really?”

“Really.”

“What changed your mind?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I’ve been living in a house with a bunch of them for a while now, and they haven’t killed me yet, so I consider that a positive.”

I snorted. “So maybe we’re not that bad after all?”

Kira gave me a look, pressing her lips together to hide a smile. “Maybe. Maybe I’ve even made a friend who’s a werewolf. I don’t know.”

I snorted, shaking my head. Kira was tough as nails and pretty annoying, but definitely reliable. She reminded me of myself, actually. We had a lot in common, and I’d come to realize that I appreciated her as a person. I trusted her, and her opinion.

And right now, I needed to hear her opinion on something that had been bugging me for months now. Something I didn’t quite trust myself to answer, and it pissed me off. I just went for it.

I looked at Kira. “What do you think—can we trust Ava?”

**Episode 1690**

GREYSON

I snapped out of the vision, disoriented and shivering. I looked around the kitchen, my chest heaving. I couldn’t breathe right, and it got even worse when I realized that there was no altar, no Shaine, and no mysterious bride.

*Fuck.*

I rubbed my bruised head, could feel it throb, and when I looked at my hand, there was blood. I got up quickly, ready to pretend that nothing had happened. I was lucky that nobody had seen me go down—it would’ve been one more piece of ammo for Xavier to use against me to prove that I wasn’t fit to be Alpha anymore.

At this point, even though I might not have been at one hundred percent, even though I was at half-capacity, I was still a better option than someone as arrogant and stubborn as my brother.

But that didn’t change the fact that I was in pretty deep shit here.

I looked around the room again, the images from the vision twisting inside my head. I tried to piece everything together, wondering who the hell that bride had been. *My* bride, the one Shaine had called his mommy. I’d never seen her face, but I couldn’t shake the ominous feeling, the growing sense of dread that made my body turn cold.

Somehow, it felt like Shaine himself was an omen… But sent by whom? And for what purpose? Did Marta have anything to do with any of this? Were they after her? But why? Could this be Silas? Letifer? The three witches? Who the fuck was out to get me this time?

If this whole thing hadn’t been such a mess, I would’ve started laughing.

Feeling a little lightheaded, I took a seat at the kitchen bench, just as Torin walked in with Tom. They instantly focused on me, looking startled.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Torin rushed over, fussing over me. “You’re bleeding!”

“It’s fine,” I said gruffly, but Torin wasn’t having it.

“No, let me heal you—”

“I just hit my head on the cupboard. You don’t have to heal me—werewolves heal pretty quickly. Save your energy,” I told the Fae.

Torin was frowning. I wondered if he could heal hallucinations, because that would be pretty fucking helpful.

“Would you like something to eat?” Tom asked me, looking serious. “I was about to show Torin how to make a French omelet.”

“That sounds great, but maybe another time,” I said, standing up. I grabbed an apple from the fruit basket and was about to walk out of the kitchen when Tom spoke up once more.

“I know that things have been difficult around here lately…” He trailed off.

I took a bite of my apple, chewing slowly. “Lately? Or always?”

“It just feels like things have gotten worse,” Tom said. I took another bite, chewed, and nodded. I wasn’t sure where this was going, but before I could ask, Tom added, “Cali is having a tough time. You might want to talk to her.”

My heart started beating faster at the sound of her name.

“I don’t know how any of this double mates destiny thing works, but Cali and Xavier had some kind of argument, and it wasn’t good,” Tom continued.

Under other circumstances, I would have been goddamn excited to hear that Cali and Xavier were fighting. But right now, doubt reared its ugly head. Had Cali slept with me just because things had gotten bad between her and Xavier? Had that been some sort of payback for my brother or something else equally messed up?

I hated that thought. I hated the fact that I’d had it in the first place, but the need to keep Cali all to myself overwhelmed everything else. I wanted her to want me because it was how she felt, not because she was unhappy with fucking Xavier.

“I’m going to talk to her,” I told Tom, clearing my throat. “You know I’ll always be there for her, no matter what.”

Tom nodded. “Thank you, Greyson.”

I considered the conversation over, so I tossed the apple’s remains into the trash and walked out, heading for one of the studies on the first floor to gather my thoughts. Avoiding all the other pack members, I slumped into a chair, trying to clear my head. I had so much to deal with, and I had no choice but to be strong and decisive. Even if everything was happening way too fast, and I couldn’t control it.

I obviously hated it when things got out of control.

I was the Alpha, and events were slipping through my fingers, mocking me right to my face. I didn’t appreciate mockery, no matter the circumstances. Revenants, vampires, even Silas—I could deal with all those things on some level. But the visions? Shaine? The mysterious bride? They were not based in a reality that I can hold on to, or a situation that I could realistically analyze.

And if the others found out what I was going through, I doubted that anyone would be happy. An Alpha hallucinating? That would be an invitation to doubt me. And my control over the pack would slip. I couldn’t allow that to happen, but how could I stop it? What the fuck was even the purpose of these visions?

When the hell would it all end?

Frustration was boiling inside me when I heard my mate’s voice right outside. I took a moment to pull my shit together and got out of the room to see Artemis and Cali heading upstairs.

“What’s going on?” I asked, trying to keep my voice even. Trying not to show that I was angry and insecure and exasperated and so fucking exhausted I could break.

I could never break. It was simply not allowed.

“Didi is asking for Artemis,” Cali explained, looking sheepish.

“Oh, great,” I said dryly.

Cali raised an eyebrow. “You hate everything, don’t you?”

“What gave it away?” I deadpanned. “Let’s go see what Didi wants with your sister.”

“We don’t need a babysitter,” Artemis told me firmly.

“I know, but I think it’ll be better if I’m there. Or would you rather Cali described everything to me afterward and added a bunch of details that probably wouldn’t paint you in the best light, since she’d look at everything through a lens of worry?”

“I don’t do that!” Cali huffed. “*Much*.”

Artemis rolled her eyes, but I won, because a moment later all three of us started to climb the stairs. This entire situation was iffy and problematic, and it gave me a headache.

Big Mac was in front of Didi’s door, and she arched an eyebrow when she saw us.

“Took you long enough,” she told Artemis, letting her in.

Before Cali could follow her sister, though, I pulled her back gently.

“What?” she asked me, looking distracted.

For a moment, I was struck with how beautiful she was. Her soft skin, her eyes, her lips that I wanted to kiss… But I needed to focus here. For a million reasons that I’d already mentioned a million times. Life was hard and all that.

“I wanted to check in with you,” I told her. “I know you’ve been under a lot of stress lately.”

Cali sighed, looking down. “We’ve all seen better days.”

The moment the words were out of her mouth, I reached out to stroke her shoulder, moving my palm from there to her neck, then lifting her chin to make her face me. I could see the hurt in her eyes. At that moment, I would’ve done anything to make all her worries go away, but how? Tom’s concerns were real and damning.

“Hey…” Cali trailed off, frowning as she eyed my forehead. “What happened to you?” She pointed at the bruise.

It was obvious that she was trying to change the subject, so I shrugged it off.

“I just bumped my head on the cupboard.” But as I said the words, I realized that this was not fucking normal. The wound should have healed by now. Why were my injuries taking so much longer to patch themselves up lately?

One more thing for me to obsess over…

“Poor baby! You need to be more careful,” Cali teased, moving to the tips of her toes to kiss my cheek. I rolled my eyes at her coddling tone, but the hint of tenderness made me feel warm inside.

The intimacy between us was so inviting that I told her, “You know you can tell me anything, right?”

“Of course,” Cali murmured, stroking my arm tenderly. “I know I can trust you.”

I looked into her eyes, choosing my next words carefully. “Is everything okay with you and Xavier?”

Cali paused. I expected her to say no. I expected her to tell me what had happened, to let me comfort her. I expected her to reassure me that this had nothing to do with us, and that she loved me anyway, even when she was mad at my brother and he seemed like the worse choice.

But what she said instead was: “Everything is fine.” She quickly added, “Anyway, I gotta go check something in my room, okay? See you later.”

She kissed my cheek again as I stood there, rigid.

Why the hell had Cali just lied to me?

**Episode 1691**

VIOLET

I grabbed Charlie by the arm and yanked him to his feet. I could barely recognize myself—I wasn’t one to get angry or yell or freak out. But right now, I felt so furious and surprised that I couldn’t contain it.

My voice was low and hissing. “What are you doing with *condoms*?”

Charlie made things a million times worse when he glanced toward Sophie and Zachery. Why had he just looked at Sophie? What the *hell*?

“It’s not what you think,” he spluttered, like that wasn’t the worst possible thing to say to me right now.

“Are you for real?” I whispered in a huff. “Did you bring these for Sophie?”

Charlie blinked at me, looking like he’d been electrocuted. “*What?* No! How could you think that?”

“Who are they for, then?” I asked, crossing my arms over my chest. “And why so *many*?”

The idea of Charlie being with someone else had set my brain on fire with jealousy.

“This isn’t—”

“Hey!” Zachery called out, interrupting Charlie. “You’re up, dude!”

Charlie offered an awkward smile and moved to head toward the lane, but I grabbed his shoulder. Where the hell did he think he was going? How could he just walk away from me? What kind of freakish parallel universe had I just walked into?

“I asked you a question,” I said from between clenched teeth. “Answer me right now. Were you planning to sleep with Sophie tonight?”

I just couldn’t believe that he would do something like that—the two of us hadn’t even gone there yet! Would he take advantage of this fake date to sleep with Sophie? How could this be my life? What was *happening*?

But somehow, Charlie didn’t seem guilty. He plastered that same awkward smile onto his face and told me in a very low voice, “What are you even talking about? Zachery gave them to me. Violet, we *can’t* talk about this right now—he’s watching us and waiting.”

“What kind of an excuse is that?” I hissed. “What are you, Zachery’s wallet? Did he—wait.” Another thought hit me full force. I tried not to gag. “You’re holding those for Zachery because Zachery was planning on sleeping with *me*?”

No. Fucking. *Way.*

“What? *No!*” Charlie looked appalled by the very idea. He pointed at his chest, whispering, “He gave them to me to use.”

I gasped.

“Oh my god, that’s not what I meant! Obviously not!” Charlie mutter-hissed. “Just trust me, okay? I took the condoms to avoid questions. We really shouldn’t be talking about all this right now when—”

“Oi!” Zachery bellowed. “Get up here, Kim, or I’ll roll a gutter ball in your place!”

Charlie gave me a look, like, *See? We don’t wanna make a scene!*

“I’ll explain later, I promise. Trust me,” he repeated seriously, squeezing my arm.

I let him go, my whole body shaking.

*Trust me*, Charlie said, and the truth was that I did. At least in general, when worry and jealousy weren’t overwhelming my brain. Of course, I knew deep down that he wouldn’t cheat on me, but the sight of him holding all those condoms—*so many of them*—while being on a supposed date with Sophie had made something territorial inside me snap.

Wolves were *not* good at sharing.

I had to remember I was supposed to be keeping my distance from Charlie in general. Because of his mother. His mother, who insisted on threatening to kill me every chance she got, it seemed. That only pissed me off more. Charlie had no idea how his mom was treating me, and I wasn’t going to be the one to break it to him.

The last thing we needed was Iris pissed off even more.

Still trying to keep my composure, I watched as Charlie grabbed his ball. He walked up to the lane and did some practice swings, and Zachery laughed. “You’re so bad at this!”

As Zachery kept teasing Charlie, Sophie walked up to me. Her expression curious, she asked, “Is everything okay? It looked like you and Charlie were arguing just now.”

I stared at Sophie. Her skin was flawless and her eyes were gorgeous and her body was amazing, boobs and all or whatever. She was extremely attractive. What teenage boy wouldn’t want to sleep with her?

These thoughts definitely weren’t making me feel any better.

“It’s fine. Charlie was criticizing my throwing motion,” I said, shrugging.

Sophie snorted. “But you’re the best bowler here, Daisy! What does he know?”

I arched an eyebrow. “*Right?*”

Sophie grinned at me. She was fine, apart from the fact that she seemed to have a very particular interest in my mate. *My* *mate*.

“How long have you and Charlie known each other?” Sophie asked.

Before I could think about it much, I said, “We don’t.”

Sophie frowned. “But his mom sponsored you. I thought that meant you were family friends or something.”

Why was this girl asking so many questions? Was she onto something? I needed to be much more careful with my answers!

“I mean, I do know Charlie. I knew *of* him, but only through mutual family friends. We never really hung out or anything, you know?” I said, trying to sound cool.

Sophie seemed thoughtful, which was not a good thing. “Oh. That’s weird.”

I swallowed roughly. “Weird, how?”

Sophie raised an eyebrow. “I mean, I just assumed you two had known each other for a while. You just seem so… close.”

… Did Sophie know?

Oh my god, had Charlie told Sophie that I was his mate? That I, Daisy or whatever, was with him? Or had Sophie just figured it all out because I’d been too much of a dumbass earlier to contain my jealousy?

I chuckled awkwardly, because I had no idea what else to do. “Well, he’s a good kid, so it’s easy to talk to him, that’s why—”

“Hey guys,” Zachery cut in, grinning. I was beyond thankful for the interruption. “Sophie, it’s your turn. Good luck!”

Sophie did a little curtsy. “Thank you.” Then she turned to me. “Nice chatting with you, Daisy.”

I blinked. Why did that sound so *ominous*?

As she walked away, Zachery swung an arm around my shoulders, pulling me a little too close. *Ugh*.

“So, are you having fun?” Zachery looked at me like an excited puppy, but I wanted to kick him. In fact, the idea that Zachery had a bunch of condoms stuffed in *his* pockets because he thought he was gonna score tonight made me feel like using him as a bowling ball. What a presumptuous asshole!

“Oh yeah,” I said tightly. “I’m having *so* much fun!” I glanced ahead as Charlie cheered for Sophie’s almost-spare. At least he wasn’t putting his paws all over her like earlier.

Jealousy was certainly bringing out the worst in me.

“Aww, they look so happy!” Zachery told me, and he was really pushing his luck here. Even more so when he took my hand in his and pulled me toward the other two.

“Is anyone thirsty?” Zachery asked, looking between Sophie, Charlie and me. “I’m going to order some beer.”

“But we’re underage,” Charlie said, ever the trying Boy Scout. Be prepared and all that… Oh my *god*, was that why he had the condoms?

*Violet! You know you can trust Charlie! He’s your mate! Chill!* I told myself.

I really was struggling to chill.

“Well, look what I’ve got,” Zachery said conspiratorially, and gestured for us to move closer. He pulled out his wallet and proudly showed us a fake ID.

It looked photoshopped. By Zachery. Who in their right mind would be fooled by that?

As if on cue, Zachery said, “I made this just for tonight.” Just like I figured. “Should I test it out?”

“I’m not sure…” Sophie trailed off.

“We could just get a soda,” Charlie said quickly, and Zachery scoffed.

“Oh come on, Kim! Let’s live dangerously!”

I narrowed my eyes at Zachery. I hoped to hell that he wasn’t thinking he could get me in the mood by buying me a drink. He could buy me a million drinks, and I still wouldn’t be charmed by his bullshit. It just wasn’t going to happen.

“You know, maybe it’s best not to—” I didn’t get to finish my sentence.

There was a sudden deafening alarm. Lights flashed on and off, making me jump, making Sophie squeak and Zachery cry out. But then laser beams started shooting through the air, and cheesy music blasted through the speakers, along with an announcer’s voice.

“Hello to the people! I’m here to remind you that tonight is Bowlarama’s Date Night. And we all know what that means!”

“What the hell does that mean?” I asked Charlie, who looked equally stunned.

The announcer continued. “It’s time for lovers to share their love with everyone—with a spotlight kiss that will win you both a free shoe rental!”

Everybody around me started cheering, and suddenly, the lights went out. A bright spotlight swept the room. I held my breath as it neared Zachery and me.

It passed us, and I exhaled in relief. Thank god I wouldn’t have to kiss that annoying doofus!

But then the worst happened.

The spotlight froze on a wide-eyed Charlie and a smiling Sophie.

Instantly, everybody started chanting, “Kiss, kiss, kiss!”

The word was vibrating all over me, with Zachery nudging me to join in on the cheering. And then…

Sophie and Charlie looked at each other.

I couldn’t control my mouth—or the shout that came out of it.

A loud, overwhelming, screaming, “*NO!*”

**Episode 1692**

MARTA

The woman stared at me, pinning me with her dark gaze. She was beautiful and imposing, almost intimidating. But I didn’t feel unsafe. I just felt really confused.

“First of all, who are you, and what is it that you want me to stop?” I asked her.

She rolled her eyes, impatient. “It’s me, Vander!”

“Right!” Lilac spoke up. “We know them—they’re the Keeper of All Nature. I think they were a redhead last time?”

I blinked, trying to wrap my head around what was happening. “That still doesn’t answer my question. What did I do wrong?”

Vander tapped their foot rhythmically on the floor. “Every time you bring a ghost back from the dead, it upsets the balance of life.”

“Wait, are you talking about Didi’s ghost? Because that wasn’t my fault,” I said defensively.

Vander took a deep, long-suffering breath. They pointed at Lilac. “What about him? The ghost that’s tethered to you?”

I glanced at Lilac, who winked and made a kissy face at me. I blushed fiercely, turning to Vander. “I don’t—I mean, I *didn’t* mean any of it!” I stammered. “It’s not like I intended to bring him back. It just happened!”

Vander raised an eyebrow. “So your lips just happened to press against his? With tongue and all?”

My face was now so hot, I probably resembled a tomato. “I didn’t…”

Vander sighed. “Every time you kiss, he comes back, and that upsets the balance.”

“But—”

“Oh my stars, what don’t you get?” Vander asked impatiently. “You kiss, he appears. You kiss, he appears again. Don’t you see the pattern here?”

I couldn’t believe this was happening. After fifty years of not being able to kiss anyone, I finally get my chance with someone as cute as Lilac, and I get admonished by the Keeper of All Nature!

“How did you even know what we’re doing in here? Do you see and hear everything all the time?” I asked.

“That is literally my job description,” Vander declared. “And I’m having a hard enough time trying to keep the worlds from imploding, so I can’t be constantly monitoring your mouth. You’re going to have to control yourself.” Vander turned to Lilac, pointing at him accusingly. “And that means you too, you rascal.”

“I really am a rascal,” Lilac said mock-seriously, but Vander wasn’t having it.

“Lilac, I mean it,” Vander said. “No more kissing, no more flirting!”

Lilac gasped, outraged. “*No more flirting?*”

“What?” I asked.

Vander groaned. “If you flirt, you will end up kissing, and that will make my job harder! And my job is already hard enough!”

Lilac frowned so deeply you would’ve thought he’d just been told that someone had died. Though, someone *had* actually died. And that was him. *Damn*.

I cleared my throat, trying to change the subject. “How are things getting worse in general?” I asked Vander. “What’s happening?”

“With the constant shift in balance—caused by you two—the portals are being pulled apart, allowing negative energy from the spirit world to escape,” Vander explained. “It started at Haystack Rock, but it’s threatening to burst through all the portals. When the pressure increases, the excess force has to find a way out.”

“Find a way out… here? To the human world?” I asked, swallowing roughly.

“Obviously,” Vander said, frustrated. “I fear that further disruptions will lead to a catastrophic shift in the balance.”

I stared at Vander, trying not to freak out. “Catastrophic?”

“*Catastrophic*,” Vander repeated, both eyebrows raised.

A heavy silence fell in the room, then Lilac chuckled.

Both Vander and I turned to look at him, shocked.

“What part of *catastrophic* do you find funny?” Vander asked Lilac.

“It’s just—it sounds ridiculous and amazing at the same time,” Lilac said, clearly dubious and yet somehow amused. “Like, I’m not sure I’m getting this right—are you saying that me kissing Marta is threatening the entire world?”

I glared at him. “Why does it sound like you’re proud of that?”

Lilac actually grinned. He was the biggest rascal ever, dead or alive!

“If you continue with this nonsense, your lips could spell doom and gloom for everyone,” Vander told Lilac. “You’d better not take this lightly, Lilac, it’s not a joke!”

“I’m not joking. I just think it’s super cool that—”

“It’s *not* cool,” Vander declared. They pointed between Lilac and me, severe. “You two *behave* yourselves, or else.”

And then *POOF!*

They disappeared.

I stood there, stunned. I’d suspected that there were a whole bunch of reasons why romancing a ghost was a questionable idea, but *destroying the world?* That was far and beyond.

Meanwhile, Lilac looked all happy with himself. He pointed at his mouth and said, “I knew I was a good kisser.” He leaned closer, winking, and I shoved at his chest.

“Is everything a joke to you?” I asked, outraged. “Didn’t you hear what Vander just said?”

Lilac huffed. “And what about that?” he asked, pointing at my hand.

I looked down. The darkness on my fingertips was spreading. It looked like I was wearing a glove.

“Remember what Kira told us? You need to transfer the negative energy out, or else it could kill you,” Lilac told me severely. His voice was sharp, his expression grim. For once, he actually seemed serious. “I don’t want you to be killed. I don’t want anything bad to ever happen to you.”

The honesty and emotion in Lilac’s expression struck me, but I tried to keep a level head. “You’re just saying that so you can stay corporeal…” I trailed off. I had said the words softly, without a lot of conviction, because Lilac looked frustrated.

“When are you going to believe that I’m genuinely worried about you?” he demanded. “I care, okay? And I don’t like what the negative energy is doing to you, so I wanna help!”

“But you could be harmed. We have no idea what could happen to you,” I said quietly. I stared at Lilac’s handsome face and felt my stomach flutter. He was the one person—ghost—who truly worried about me. He might have been annoying, but I had formed a bond with him. What if I lost him? What if…

“Kissing me could break the world, but it could also save you from the darkness. It’s two in one, and right now, I care more about the second part ,” Lilac said, taking a step closer. He glanced at my mouth, and my heart started racing. His voice was a husky whisper. “Kiss me.”

I shook my head to clear it, shoving him again. “No! Stop this, I’m not going to blow up the world!”

Lilac smirked. “It’s kind of cool, though, isn’t it? Our kisses are so powerful we could literally destroy everything.”

I stared at him. “Is that supposed to make me feel better? Are you even listening to yourself?”

“Okay, fine.” Lilac sighed, and his entire presence started to soften, to fade again. “But I need to figure out a way to help you, Marta. And I know it’s gonna be hard not to kiss you anyway. Sometimes it’s all I can think about.”

A tingly feeling started from my toes and spread all over me at his admission. The way he looked at me made me feel… Wanted. Desired. It was a strong emotion, and I had no idea what to do with it. I glanced at his mouth, at his well-shaped cupid’s bow, and I knew that I wanted to kiss him as well. I wanted to lie on that bed and pull him on top of me, feel his mouth on my own, feel him become solid under my touch, under my lips, because of the way we could make each other feel.

It was something else altogether.

“Maybe…” I cleared my throat, reaching my hand out to him. “Maybe we can just hold hands. Maybe that’ll work to suck out the negative energy?”

Lilac silently took my hand, and I immediately felt a warm sensation. Instantly, Lilac became less faint. The color returned to his cheeks.

“I think it’s working!” I told him, smiling.

But my hopes were crushed as, almost seconds later, he began to fade again. Lilac shook his head. He stared at my hand. It still looked like I was wearing a glove. “It’s not working,” he said. “And we can’t just sit here, I can’t sit here and let you be hurt—”

“That’s not what’s going to happen,” I said quietly, and he scoffed.

“Seriously? The negative energy is spreading all over you—we can see it,” he said, pointing at the glove of darkness once more. “The best way we have to keep it from expanding is to transfer it from you through me directly.”

“But all the things that Vander said—”

Lilac slipped closer to me, his face two inches away from mine. There was an intensity to him that stopped me in my tracks. “We can worry about the balance stuff later. Right now, I want to save you, so pucker up.”

He leaned in, but I took a step back. I shook my head, my breath coming out sharp. “We can’t, Lilac. It’s too risky.”

Lilac shook his head, looking away, letting out a broken laugh. “Then what are we supposed to do? Just let the darkness spread all over you?”

**Episode 1693**

When the coast is clear of Greyson, I returned to Didi’s room, where Big Mac was still standing watch by the door. I felt bad about what I’d said to Greyson, but I didn’t want to worry him about something Xavier-centric. Given how the two brothers were struggling to deal with the whole sharing thing, I wasn’t sure if Greyson could even offer any unbiased advice when it came to his little brother.

It would probably just irritate him, and he would feel bad over the fact that I was upset about Xavier. How had he even figured out that something was going on between us, though? He was pretty observant, I had to give him that—he probably had to be, as the Alpha—but this was a little farfetched. Could he be jealous?

I mean, he was jealous already, even if they’d promised to keep things respectful. But, like, was he *extra* jealous? Had he been watching me?

*None of this is going according to plan, Cali*,I thought to myself, frowning.

Either way, I would have to deal with Xavier on my own. If that failed, then and only then would I consider asking Greyson for help. But then again, why would I? Why would I even put Greyson in that kind of position? I doubted he wanted to be Xavier’s and my relationship therapist!

*Ugh, this is so bad!*

I pushed all thoughts of Xavier and Greyson from my mind and stopped in front of Big Mac.

“Back so soon?” she asked.

I shook my head. “Just let me in.”

Big Mac rolled her eyes and stepped aside. When I got in, I saw Artemis sitting by Didi’s bedside. The two of them were staring at each other, and I was sensing a weird vibe. When they turned to look at me, I quickly said, “It’s fine, ignore me and do your thing.”

Artemis snorted, but Didi remained expressionless. And then, she asked Artemis, “Are you feeling any better?”

“I told you, I’m fine,” Artemis said. “But I can’t imagine you called me over just to ask how I’m feeling.”

Didi glanced at me. Then she stared Artemis. “I didn’t. I just felt a connection to you that I really can’t explain.”

*Uh oh*, I thought. *Where’s Rishika to hear this?*

“I wanted to talk to you. I hoped that that would help me remember more of my past,” Didi said quietly.

“Right,” Artemis said dubiously.

Didi’s eyes narrowed. “Have we met in the past? You remind me of someone.”

Artemis seemed confused. “I do?”

I cleared my throat. “Who does Artemis remind you of?”

Artemis looked weirded out, but Didi’s eyes took on a faraway look. Her voice became chillingly low. “Someone I used to know…” She turned to Artemis. “Would you mind staying? Spending some time with me?”

Artemis stared up at Big Mac, who was hovering at the threshold. “What do you think?”

Big Mac looked between me, Artemis, and Didi. She nodded, gesturing for me and Artemis to follow her out of the room. The moment the door was closed, Big Mac told Artemis, “If you’re loyal to the pack, you need to do this.”

Artemis frowned. “I’ve always been loyal to the pack. What are you even talking about?”

I was about to defend my sister, probably make a fuss about this, when Big Mac said, “Well, you choked Marta and you stole the Orb, and who could ever forget our little face off at Haystack Rock?”

Artemis winced in obvious remorse. I instantly reached out to squeeze her hand.

“I really need you to remember that I believe in you,” I told her.

Big Mac scoffed. “That’s great, but save the sisterly love for later. If Didi is going to open up to Artemis, then it’s Artemis’s duty now to get everything she can out of this. We need to figure out how to stop Letifer, find out Letifer’s weaknesses, and most importantly, we have to learn if it’s possible for him to be contained in an Orb again in this state.”

“Could Didi know all that?” I asked.

“There’s a solid chance.” Big Mac’s expression was stern. “Either way, Artemis needs to be cautious with her. We have no idea where her loyalties lie. Do you understand?”

“Yeah,” Artemis said shakily.

Big Mac squeezed my sister’s shoulder. “Didi could be the key to stopping Silas and Letifer once and for all. This is the most important thing I’ve ever asked of you, Artemis. You need to ease into it, get her to feel comfortable around you, and learn everything you can.”

Artemis had fallen silent, but Big Mac was right, and I rarely agreed with her. At the same time, though, I didn’t want my sister to feel pressured.

“You should do what you think is right,” I told Artemis. “I don’t want you to go in there and act in a way that doesn’t feel natural to you.”

Artemis swallowed roughly. She looked between me and Big Mac before her eyes settled on the witch. “What do you mean by ‘ease into it’?”

Big Mac arched an eyebrow. “Just get close to her.”

Artemis’s lips pursed. “But what about Rishika?”

“What *about* Rishika?” Big Mac asked.

“Rishika was upset when I cried over Didi,” Artemis said. “She seemed jealous of Didi, and now you want me to spend more time with her? How do you think Rishika’s going to take that?”

Big Mac snorted. “I’m not asking you to get married, kid. Just learn whatever you can from Didi. Be her friend or whatever.”

The friendship part was what troubled me, actually. I wasn’t sure how friendly they could be, how platonic, especially after I’d seen how intensely Artemis had reacted to Didi before. And Rishika had been upset because she clearly believed there was something between them.

This whole thing just reeked of trouble, and I knew all too well what being stuck in the middle of two people felt like. It sucked. And I hated the idea of Artemis going through something like that just because she felt some weird connection to this witch.

“It’s really not that hard,” Big Mac told Artemis. “Start with making small talk.”

“I don’t know if I’m good at that,” Artemis said awkwardly. “Especially when I feel some type of way about her.”

“What type of way?” Big Mac asked.

Artemis swallowed roughly. “I don’t know.”

This whole thing was bad news. I needed to make sure that Artemis would be okay. I needed to protect my sister in every way—including preventing her from entering into a messed up emotional triangle.

“For the last time—do you think you can do this, Artemis?” Big Mac asked Artemis. “Ease into things?”

Artemis nodded. “I can. I will.”

I squeezed my sister’s hand encouragingly. “It’s gonna be okay. I’ll be there the entire time.”

Artemis didn’t say anything, but she squeezed my hand back.

We went back into the room, and Didi instantly lit up when she saw Artemis. “So? Are you going to stick around and spend some time with me?”

Artemis suddenly looked extremely uncomfortable. Deception did not seem to be her strong suit at the moment.

*Shit*, I thought. *Is this going to backfire?*

“Sure. Let’s talk,” Artemis said, sitting down by Didi’s bedside. Her nervous energy seemed to be getting worse by the second, though. Before Didi could speak again, Artemis said, “The weather is pretty bad today, right?”

*God*. She was talking about the *weather*! Big Mac *had* told her to make small talk, but this was the most boring small talk subcategory!

Didi blinked slowly. “The weather is bad?”

“Yeah.”

“But it’s sunny out,” Didi said, confused.

“Right,” Artemis said, coughing. “I guess I like the rain more than sunshine, you know? I like it when it’s very, very cold. And today it’s cold, but there’s the sun, so I don’t like it as much.”

Big Mac looked horrified at Artemis’s lack of social skills.

Didi fell quiet.

The silence was so cringe-worthy that just I wanted to leave the room.

*Artemis! You can do it!* I screamed inside my head, hoping that my sister could somehow sense my energy of encouragement.

Didi opened her mouth to say something, but Artemis was, unfortunately, not done. “So, what’s your favorite food? Ghosts don’t need food, right? What was your favorite food when you were alive?”

*This is so painful to watch.*

A wincing Big Mac seemed to be thinking the same.

“I mean, I don’t really remember what my favorite food is,” Didi was saying. “What’s yours? Is it something that—”

“Oh my god,” Artemis interrupted Didi, exploding out of nowhere, “I can’t do this!”

I cringed. *This is so, so bad!*

Didi looked confused. “You can’t talk about food?”

Before either Big Mac or I could speak, Artemis sat up straight, full of restless energy.

“The orbs you used to put magic in,” she burst out. “Can you show us how to trap a soul inside it?”

**Episode 1694**

CHARLIE

My eyes burned from the spotlight. My wolf recoiled inside me, and I squinted, fighting to avoid the obscene brightness. My gaze fell on Violet, just three feet away, glaring at me. Then I realized what was going on…

“Kiss, kiss, kiss!” the crowd chanted.

They wanted Sophie and me to kiss.

This could not be happening.

It was almost as bad as when I’d first been attacked by that Rogue werewolf and left to die. I felt like dying right now, actually. I could feel Sophie staring at me, *expecting* and *feeling* things, and I remembered our conversation the other day, when she’d told me that she liked me. I winced at the thought the moment my eyes met Sophie’s.

And at the same time, I heard a loud, vibrating *NO!* inside my head.

Violet was mind linking with me.

I turned to look at her, and if the entire room was expecting me to kiss Sophie, Violet was expecting me NOT to do it with the force of a thousand suns.

*Charlie Kim!* Violet snapped. *Put those lips away! What are you even doing?*

My throat had dried up. *Of course I’m not going to kiss her! I told you to trust me!*

But as Violet glared at me and the people kept screaming for me to kiss Sophie, I realized that I needed to do something. Sophie was expecting me to kiss her, and everybody in this room was expecting me to kiss her, but if I did, Violet would never forgive me. Though if I did nothing, it would look like I didn’t like Sophie after going on a date with her, and Zachery would start asking questions, and Sophie would feel humiliated.

This. Was. *Bad*.

“Charlie?” Sophie mouthed my name, glancing at my lips through her lashes, leaning slightly closer, and I panicked.

I thrust out my hand to shake hands with her. Or high-five.

Sophie gaped, shocked, and the room erupted into jeers and boos. I thought back to Romilly’s warning, to my mom’s warning.

*Don’t draw attention.*

And yet, here I was, literally standing in a spotlight on a fake date, with everyone waiting for me to kiss a girl in front of my mate and the entire bowling alley.

“*Kiss her, kiss her, kiss her!*” started to build up again, initiated by Zachery, who started clapping. I didn’t dare look at Violet.

*Trust me*, I mind linked to her, before turning to Sophie.

She looked disappointed, and I didn’t want to make her feel bad. Seeing no way out of this, and with the word *kiss* echoing inside my ears from everybody’s screams, I bent slightly. I lifted Sophie’s hand and brought it up to my lips, kissing it softly while looking up at her.

Instantly, Sophie’s troubled expression vanished.

She broke into a huge smile while the entire room erupted into cheers.

Who would have thought that chivalry would get me out of this?

I grinned myself, relieved, until I saw Violet.

*I had to do something!* I said defensively.

*Well, your date seemed to enjoy it*, Violet scoffed.

I glanced at Sophie, who was staring at me and blushing. *God*. Did she really like what I just did? Did Violet know that Sophie liked it? Had I just made everything worse?

Sophie was now surrounded by a bunch of people who were asking her all kinds of questions about me, and Violet pretended to be tying her shoes, now ignoring me. My spiraling thoughts were interrupted by Zachery, who patted me on the back.

“Dude! Who knew you were such a romantic?” He leaned closer to me, waggling his eyebrows as he whispered, “If I were in the same position with Daisy, I would have kissed her on the lips big time, for everyone to see!”

My jaw clenched, my hands tightening instantly into fists. A jealous fire ignited within me at the mere sound of those words. Through gritted teeth, I told Zachery, “You might want to stop getting ahead of yourself there.”

Zachery snorted. “Hey man, I’m just being hopeful!”

I wanted to grab Zachery’s hope, shove it to the ground, and stomp on it.

“Anyway, how about we go and try new out my new ID?”

“Yeah,” I said, glancing at Violet, who straightened up after finishing with her shoes. “I’m coming with you.”

“Where are you two going?” Violet asked, scowling.

“Just the bar,” Zachery replied.

Trying to be polite, I asked, “Do you girls want anything?”

“No, thank you,” Sophie told me with a demure smile while Violet kept glaring. I’d never been one for beer, but I sure could use one right now.

I quickly followed Zachery to the bar, watching as my friend slapped the booth to get the bartender’s attention.

The man eyed Zachery skeptically. “Can I help you?”

“I would like a beer,” Zachery said with practiced ease.

The bartender raised an eyebrow. “How old are you?”

Zachery stood straighter, as if trying to appear taller. “I am—” He cleared his throat, turning his voice deeper. “I am 22 years old,” Zachery said seriously, sliding the fake ID across the bar.

The bartender examined it, eyebrows still raised, and then he tore it in half. “You kids better get outta here.”

“Excuse me?” Zachery demanded, slapping his hand on the counter. *Again*. “We are paying customers, and we will—”

I grabbed the guy by the neck of his T-shirt and pulled him away, feeling mortified. This was turning into the worst night ever.

Okay, maybe I was being a little dramatic here, but still.

“Maybe we should call it a night,” I told Zachery.

He gasped, clearly offended. “No way! This is just the beginning. Why do you think I gave you all those condoms?”

I prayed to every god out there that Violet hadn’t heard a word that had just come out of my friend’s mouth. This guy had a death wish.

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What felt like a century but was probably, like, half an hour later, Zachery parked the car on a ridge that overlooked the entire region. The view was beautiful. A little *too* beautiful. As Sophie tried to make small talk in the back seat with an entirely unimpressed Violet, I leaned closer and whispered in Zachery’s ear, “What is this place?”

“It’s Lookout Point.” Zachery’s voice was loud enough to grab Violet’s attention.

Ignoring Sophie, she asked, “Why are we here?”

Zachery glanced at me and winked. This was so painful, I wanted to bang my head against the dashboard. “It’s the best view around.”

Violet’s expression turned murderous.

I had no idea what my moronic fool of a friend had in mind. Like, what did he expect? That I would start making out with Sophie and he would start making out with Violet, or that we would all start having sex next to one another?

This was a mess, and I needed to stop it. I couldn’t let it go any further and make everybody uncomfortable. Or dead. Because I did not doubt that if Zachery laid one finger on Violet, even by accident, she would bite his head off. Or *I* would bite his head off. He was a friend and all, but I wasn’t about to let him kiss my mate.

Before I could say anything, though, Sophie spoke up. “I actually need to use the bathroom. Is there one around here?”

“Yeah, just down the path,” Zachery said.

Sophie frowned. “What path?”

Sighing, Zachery opened the door. “Come on, I’ll show you.”

He got out of the car after grinning at Violet. “I’ll be right back. Try not to miss me.”

Violet gave him a dead smile that I was sure my friend found very encouraging.

The second we were alone, Violet pushed my shoulder. “What the *fuck*, Charlie? I did *not* agree to this!”

I shook my head. “If Zachery tries anything, I’ll—”

“What? What are you going to do?” Violet demanded.

“If he tries to kiss you—”

Violet gagged, which was encouraging.

“If he does,” I continued, “there will be one less hunter in the world.”

Violet thrust her chin up, crossing her arms over her chest. “Oh really? Since when do you care?”

I rubbed my forehead, sighing. “I’m really sorry about all this, Violet. I had no idea our night would take this kind of turn. There was no way I would have agreed to this whole thing otherwise.”

Violet pressed her lips together. As we stared at each other, the mate bond between us vibrating with tension and affection and desire, her expression eased. Finally.

This was the Violet I knew.

“I know that you didn’t want to kiss Sophie. I was just so mad and jealous, even though this isn’t really your fault,” she said quietly. “I’m the one who’s responsible.”

I shook my head. “When the other two come back, I can pretend to have a migraine or something and make Zachery drive us all home. How does that sound?”

Violet gave me one of her beautiful smiles. She seemed relieved. She looked so sweet. She looked at me like she loved me, and my heart started racing in that familiar way. The way it only beat for her.

“Thank you, Charlie,” she murmured.

The tone of her voice sent chills down my spine. The way she said my name made something possessive, raw, make itself known inside me. The idea of anyone other than me ever kissing her was fucking unbearable. I leaned closer. The need to touch her, to smell her, to taste her was suddenly overwhelming.

My wolf wanted to stake his claim.

I knew that I shouldn’t do this, that the others could be back any second…

But somehow, that made everything even more exciting.

Without thinking, I leaned over the seat, cupped her face, and pulled her in for a kiss.

**Episode 1695**

ARTEMIS

The tension in the room increased instantly.

I knew I shouldn’t have just come out and asked Didi about the Orb directly, but making small talk was not my area of expertise. How had Big Mac not seen this coming? I’d been fumbling around the entire time. She had asked for the long con, but I’d barely managed to sit down before I’d messed everything up.

All I kept thinking about was Rishika. The more time I spent with Didi, the more upset Rishika could get. And the thought of causing my girlfriend any kind of pain was too much to bear. I was obviously not a very good con-woman, was I?

“What’s going on here?” Didi’s eyes were wide as she looked between me, Cali, and Big Mac.

Big Mac rushed to cover for me. “What Artemis really means is—”

“Why would you want to trap a soul?” Didi asked, staring at me. “Whose soul?”

I hated this. All this beating around the rosebush—as the humans said—was a waste of time. I knew from personal experience that the dark magic we were dealing with could be dangerous, so why not bring everything out into the open? Especially since I obviously had no talent for espionage?

Big Mac would be mad, but that was too bad for her.

“Artemis, don’t…” Big Mac trailed off when she saw me leaning closer to Didi. From across the room, I could feel my sister holding her breath as I stared into Didi’s eyes.

“We think that Letifer isn’t dead, and that he’s using dark magic against people,” I said decisively. At the same time, Big Mac slapped her forehead, and Cali choked.

Didi, for her part, looked confused. “Letifer? *My* Letifer? He would never do that.”

I could feel Big Mac glaring at me, but at this point we couldn’t go back, and she knew it. The only thing I could do was take this idea and run with it. Taking a deep breath, I told Didi, “I know that this is hard to hear, but it’s the truth. And we need your help to stop him.”

I could feel Big Mac’s eyes boring holes through me. A second later, I felt Cali’s hand on my shoulder, squeezing.

“How about stopping now, okay? I think you’ve said enough,” she told me awkwardly.

Had I gone too far? I couldn’t read Didi’s mind, and even though her expression was almost blank, I imagined that she was probably upset. How would I react if someone told me that Rishika was a murderous witch? I’d never believe it. Why should Didi believe me about all this?

But after a beat of silence, Didi reached out and held my hand. Her fingertips made contact with my skin, her touch so feather light but hot that I felt a tremor pass through my body. I tried to pull my hand back, shocked, but Didi gripped me tighter.

“I will never believe that the Letifer I knew would do that,” she whispered. “But I know that I can trust you, Artemis. I can feel it in my gut. I can feel that you believe what you’re telling me.”

Nobody in the room was speaking. I swallowed roughly, feeling my hand throb where Didi was touching me. And then she started speaking again in that soft voice of hers.

“I trust you, Artemis,” Didi said again, “so I will help you all. If only to prove that Letifer is not the demon you believe he is.”

The connection I felt with Didi didn’t falter. There was something about her belief in Letifer that made me feel that what she was saying was not only true, but *right*.

What was happening to me?

Big Mac cleared her throat. “Thank you, Didi,” she said. She no longer seemed to condemn my methods—not after they’d brought in results. “Is there anything else you can tell us about the way you used orbs to contain magic? Anything that could help us contain a spirit?”

“Why are you asking?” Didi said, staring at Big Mac.

For the first time, probably ever, Big Mac didn’t hesitate to tell the truth. “The Orb is what started all our problems. Problems with the spirit realm and the undead. It all comes down to this powerful object, and we believe it once contained Letifer himself.”

Didi paused. Then she slowly said, “That is not what orbs were meant for. But I can see how an orb could be used to hold a spirit.”

Cali piped up. “The problem though is that Letifer broke out of it…”

“Is there a way to make one of them unbreakable?” I asked.

Didi seemed thoughtful. “Perhaps… Are there any spell books I could look through to reignite my magic? I’m a bit rusty.”

“I’ll go check on that,” Big Mac said, and walked out the room.

“Um,” I said awkwardly, standing up. “I need to go check something as well. With Cali. We’ll be back later.”

Didi looked up at me with huge eyes. “Okay. I’ll be here.”

There was something in the way she looked at me that made me feel funny. But I ignored it, following Cali out of the room. I closed the door behind me gingerly and took a deep breath.

Cali stared at me. I was instantly defensive. “I did what you wanted, didn’t I?” I asked. “Maybe not in the way you wanted me to, but it worked. So please, save the lecture.”

Cali pursed her lips, crossing her arms. “I have to admit, I think that what you did was risky… but also brave and honest.”

Seriously? Had I just heard her right? I had been preparing for a Cali speech. The relief I felt was beautiful. Cooling, like a raindrop falling from the leaves of the talking trees in the Fae world.

“Really?” I asked Cali hopefully.

“Really.” My sister hugged me, squeezing me against her. I hugged her back, still a little unused to these kinds of displays of affection. But I was learning, wasn’t I?

“I wish that everyone could be as upfront as you are,” Cali told me.

I swallowed, shaking my head. “It’s not hard. I just go after whatever I want in the most direct way possible.”

Cali arched an eyebrow. “Speaking of—what about using some of that upfront energy on Rishika?”

I felt a little weird. “You think that’s a good idea?”

“I’m just certain that you should do something else besides worrying,” Cali told me seriously. “Talk to Rishika, tell her how you feel, and I’m sure she’ll listen. She really cares about you.”

*She really cares about you*, my sister said. I loved to hear that.

It made me feel better about everything.

“Thank you, Cali,” I said. “Maybe I will.”

But as I was approaching Rishika’s room a few minutes later, I felt my stomach hollow out. Why was this so hard? Were relationships supposed to be like this? I’d never had to worry about this, any of it, in the Fae world. There was something inside me, though, that made me feel like Rishika was worth whatever bad feelings I was drowning in right now.

I knocked on the door softly and took a deep breath when I heard her call, “Come in!”

I found Rishika towel-drying her hair. She glanced at me over her shoulder. Her expression was cold. “Did you forget something?”

I swallowed roughly. “I just… I came to talk about what happened. I feel like we didn’t really solve things earlier, and I hate feeling this way.”

Rishika paused, turning to face me. Her brow was furrowed, but at least I had her attention.

Taking a deep breath, I continued. “I still don’t know why I cried when I saw Didi. But it had nothing to do with how I feel about you.”

“And how do you feel about me?” Rishika asked. Her tone was even, but low. Not daring to be hopeful. But I did feel hopeful, somehow. Even though I didn’t really know how I felt. What could *I* know about love? I’d grown up like a wild animal, but now…

Now, I’d found a family. I’d found Rishika, and when I looked at her, I felt my heart grow to twice its normal size.

“I know that since we had our fight and I said what I did, I’ve felt miserable,” I said. “I miss you.” I looked down, rubbing my eyes with the heels of my palms. Was I about to cry? I didn’t know. I just knew that this hurt. Being without her hurt. “Maybe I have no idea how to handle being in a relationship, being your girlfriend, being…” I looked up at her. “Being in love.”

Rishika stared at me, motionless.

“But I’m trying to learn,” I whispered. “And I’d like to learn with… you.”

The way Rishika looked at me made my heart beat hard enough that I felt it under every inch of my skin. She threw the towel to the floor, closed the distance between us, and pulled me into a hard kiss.

**Episode 1696**

XAVIER

My back was killing me.

But then it wasn’t, because I could feel a steady, warm weight against my skin, a kneading sensation that rolled upward from the base of my spine. The hot oil and the hands on my back were really getting into the knots there, squeezing and twisting and releasing before they reached at my nape.

I let out a deep groan.

God, I hadn’t realized how much I needed this.

Slender arms wrapped around my shoulders then, and a kiss was planted on the side of my head. Tender and soft. “Feel good?”

“Yeah,” I said gruffly, turning around to face the woman who was responsible for this relief. For this desire. I knew she was my mate, and I wanted more of her. Always. I sat up and pulled her close, offering her a peck as her hands, still slick and hot from the oil, ran over my chest, my abs, making me shudder.

“There’s a knot I didn’t quite get to,” she murmured in my ear, nibbling it, and I grinned. I grabbed her tight, sliding her onto my lap. She straddled me, her short skirt riding up. “We could do this again tomorrow…”

I nodded and kissed her again, wrapping my arms around her, taking in the soft feel of her body. Her touch felt so good against my skin, same as her mouth against mine, and I needed more of it. Her tongue brushed against mine, the kiss electrifying my senses as she swayed on my lap, grabbing my hand to slide it up her thigh. I let out a sound, the friction between our bodies making the pit of my stomach tighten.

“Xavier…” she moaned, and I smiled into the kiss, opening my eyes to look into hers.

Ava’s lips were perfectly pouted in front of me.

“I’m so glad you forgave me,” she breathed, stroking my hair back. “I love you so much.”

I stared at her mouth, using my thumb to trace the outline of her lips.

“You’re the only one for me,” she said. “Only you.”

Only you…

Only you…

“Only you, Xavier. Nobody else.”

Her words ignited something inside me, and when I kissed her this time, it was devouring. I grabbed her by the nape and ran my fingers through her hair, keeping her steady as I licked into her mouth, feeling her melt under my kiss. She glued herself against me, so tight it felt like we were already one, her breasts against my chest, the spot between her legs brushing up against me, grinding.

The pressure was fucking amazing. Just like her taste.

Writhing on my lap, she gripped my wrist, pulling it right up her skirt, my palm tracing her smooth skin, and then…

I jolted awake.

*What the fuck?*

I sat up quickly, looking around. I had somehow dozed off on the couch and—what the hell was that dream? I swallowed thickly, my throat feeling dry, my skin feeling sticky somehow. Hot. *Dirty*. I felt like I needed to take a fucking cold shower and wash everything off—all those fucking thoughts that made me disgusted with myself.

What the hell was wrong with me?

Ava did a single decent thing and *that* was how my subconscious processed it?

Absolutely. Fuck. That.

I tried to shake it all off as I got up, but it all felt so goddamn real. I made a beeline for the kitchen. My stomach was clenched, but maybe eating something would make things better—just, anything. I would do anything to stop thinking about this shit.

For fuck’s sake, I had unmated from Ava. *Unmated*. For a really serious reason.

She’d killed my mother.

If my brain could get itself out of the gutter, that’d be great. That would be…

*You’re the only one for me, Xavier. Nobody else.*

Ava’s voice from the dream echoed in my head, and I shuddered. Something clicked inside my mind, then. Could this be about my fight with Cali? Ava had encouraged me in a way that Cali wouldn’t…

But still.

That was *no* fucking excuse.

Sure, I couldn’t control my dreams, but I really, really wished that I could.

Irritated, I grabbed a bunch of things from the fridge at random. When I turned around, though, I wasn’t alone in the kitchen.

My older brother was staring at me, his eyebrows raised.

“Milk? And salami? You gonna eat that together?” he asked.

I looked down at what was in my hands and huffed. Gross. I put the milk away, but when I turned to face the kitchen again, Greyson was fucking lingering. God knew I didn’t want to talk to him right now, but ignoring him seemed impossible.

“You need anything?” I asked impatiently.

Greyson nodded. “I feel like we should straighten things out between us.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. “What?”

Was he going to offer me Alpha again?

Greyson scoffed, bristling. “I want to talk about Cali. What happened between the two of you?”

The nerve of this man was amazing. Did he think he should know everything, just because he was the Alpha? Not on my watch. “That’s none of your business.”

Greyson stared. “What happens in the pack is my business.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re so pretentious.”

“I’m just being honest. But that’s not even why I’m asking. Cali’s upset, and you’re the reason.”

“So what?” I challenged. “You wanna fight me over it?”

Greyson looked at me like I was nuts. “Are you fucking serious? I’m just here because I know that neither of us want to hurt Cali. I’m here to help.”

I paused. That was unexpected.

“What’s going on, Xavier?” Greyson said. His voice was lower. Less demanding. More brotherly.

It wasn’t gonna work on me.

There was no way that I would tell my brother that Cali had refused to support me as Alpha. That would only make Greyson feel better about himself, and I had no desire to engorge Greyson’s already inflated ego.

I was gonna turn this conversation around if it was the last thing I did.

“The only problem I’m dealing with right now is you, Greyson.”

“What?”

“You’re pretending that you’re healthy enough to be Alpha when we both know that isn’t the case, so—”

“I’m not doing this again,” he snapped. “I *am* healthy.”

I scoffed. “You’re in denial.”

“If I’m in denial, you are too,” Greyson said, stepping into my personal space.

You didn’t do that to an Alpha, not unless it was a challenge.

This was a challenge, through and through.

Especially because Greyson then declared, “You need to admit that your problem isn’t with me—it’s with Cali.”

Could Cali have told him what had happened? No. She wouldn’t do that. She knew better than to tell him about our personal problems. I felt sick to my stomach at the mere thought of that—of Cali discussing our issues with Greyson, and Greyson taking advantage of that, comforting her, touching her, telling her how bad for her I was.

Cali wouldn’t do that to me. No.

*But she doesn’t want me to be Alpha…*

The thought made me bite the inside of my cheek until I drew blood.

“What are you even saying?” I demanded. “How do you even know that? Whatever happens between Cali and me is our business, not yours!”

Greyson glowered at me. “Not if it affects her negatively. Whenever you upset her, I get upset too. Do you fucking understand?”

I scoffed. “You’re overstepping. Cut the bullshit before it’s too late.”

Greyson cracked his neck to the side. “It’s clear that you can’t handle sharing Cali, Xavier. You’re pathologically jealous all the time, and you’ve tried to undermine my authority multiple times.”

This was insane. I shook my head, pointing at him, my voice rising. “For real? You’re the one who can’t deal with sharing Cali, and we both know that, Greyson!”

“What the fuck are you—”

I shoved him in the chest. “The only reason you’re clinging to being Alpha is because you want to puff out your chest and make Cali think you’re a big deal. Your ego is as big as a fucking galaxy.”

Greyson pushed me back, laughing like this was a joke. “You wanna talk ego? The only reason you wanna be Alpha is to feel good about yourself! You don’t care about the pack—you only care about power!”

I grabbed him by the front of his shirt. “You’d better take that back right the hell now.”

Greyson gripped my wrist tight enough to bruise. “You’re too immature to be Alpha, Xavier. You’re too selfish—only someone who’s obsessed with himself would upset his mate like this when all our lives are in danger!”

“You know *nothing* about my relationship with Cali!” I snapped, raging. “You have no idea what it’s like, and you never will, because what we share is different. *I* was with her first.”

Greyson snarled, pushing me away. “You take that back before I—”

“Greyson.”

Greyson froze.

I did too.

Both of us turned to the kitchen entrance, where Cali stood, blank-faced. She looked between us, her voice shaking as she spoke. “I’m glad you’re both here. We need to end this.”

**Episode 1697**

*Did I… Did I seriously just say that?*

My heart was drumming in my ears. It was as if all the oxygen had been sucked out of the room. Both my mates were staring, stunned. But since I’d had that conversation with Artemis, I’d been thinking about my own life, and how I could be more upfront.

How I should be braver.

The reality of it all was looking at me right in the face. Two brothers—my two mates—were arguing about me. Again. It felt like if the curse didn’t take us out, at some point things would escalate so intensely between Greyson and Xavier that they would just take each other out.

This was killing all of us slowly, one way or another.

“What are you saying?” Xavier asked me quietly. Gone was his raised voice from earlier. Gone was the anger. He’d dialed it all down and was hanging from my every word.

Just like Greyson, who said, “Are you okay? Did something happen?”

The moment I entered a room, they became the epitome of civilized, the epitome of concerned. It was heady, unbelievable, to see the effect I could have on them. But it just wasn’t enough.

It couldn’t be enough, because it wouldn’t last.

“This can’t keep happening,” I whispered, looking between them. “I love both of you a lot. I love being with you. But the friction this causes between you two is too much.”

Neither of them spoke. They seemed frozen, as if in denial, but I needed to power through.

“I know it’s been rough on both of you, and it’s rough on me as well,” I continued. “I also know that you both meant well when you decided to do… this.” I pointed between the three of us, this triangle of madness. “You did it for me, but I’ve always known on some level that it’s putting a wedge between all three of us.”

“Cali…” Xavier trailed off, his voice broken, but I shook my head.

“No. It’s all true—you know it is. And you two are brothers, for god’s sake,” I said bitterly. “You shouldn’t be fighting over the same woman—you should be there for each other. You’ve never had a good relationship, Silas never gave you that chance, and now *I’m* not giving you the chance either.”

“This isn’t your fault, love,” Greyson said.

I raised a hand, taking a shaky breath. “That doesn’t change the fact that I’m standing between the two of you. I know it’s impossible to escape, because the *due destini* doesn’t let us make our own decisions. At least, not really. Fate’s brought us together, and we have to live with that, but if living with it is like this…”

I felt my eyes burn, my whole body burn with something that could only be sadness. It had never felt so potent, so damning.

*Is this how it all ends?* I wondered, and the thought made me choke. What was left now?

“Are you…” Xavier cleared his throat. The quietness in his voice was jarring. “Are you choosing not to be with either of us?”

I had no idea how to answer.

“What am I supposed to say to that?” I asked Xavier, swallowing past the lump in my throat. “What if I accidentally, somehow, say something that will seem like a choice? A fatal choice for one or maybe both of you?”

Xavier sighed. “Cali, baby—”

“I mean it, Xavier. Greyson.” I looked between them, my hands shaking. “I would rather go mad, like Cassandra warned, than live knowing I killed one of you.”

Maybe the curse was making us all go mad already.

Maybe that was what those visions were about, and it was only a matter of time before they hit Xavier as well.

“Cali, what happened earlier was nothing,” Greyson told me gently. “Xavier and I were just talking—”

“Don’t bullshit me, Greyson. You were screaming at each other,” I said, shaking.

“Yes, we were screaming at each other, but also talking. It’s what we do,” Greyson told me. “It’s what we always do.”

I laughed bitterly, closing the distance between us. “And I’m sick of watching it. I’m worried sick, Greyson.”

He shook his head. “You shouldn’t worry—Xavier and I will work it out.”

I pressed my lips together, pointing between them. I didn’t even have the fire to be angry. I just felt… exhausted.

I was exhausted, and that was, in many ways, the worst feeling possible.

“Is that what you were just doing? Working it out? Because what I saw was my mates shoving each other, screaming. It looked like you were ready to kill each other, *again*, and I just can’t stand it anymore.”

Xavier stared at me, his jaw clenched. “You’re reading too much into it, Cali. Things have been rough around here, tensions running high. My brother and I…” He glanced at a severe-looking Greyson. “This is who we are. But we can communicate. If we try. A lot. And we’re willing to do that.”

Greyson shot him a look before turning to me. “Both Xavier and I made this decision together. We knew what we were doing. We knew the implications. We knew the drawbacks.”

“In theory, yes,” I said quietly. Dejectedly. “But in practice, it’s too much for both of you. I don’t want to be the source of all this fighting. Not anymore. I don’t want Xavier to be mad at me for supporting Greyson, or the other way around. I don’t want to be stuck in the middle of a situation where everything is and forever will be taken personally. I just don’t want to make a choice. I’m sick of being forced to every day. And I think that you are too. So why don’t we just call a truce?”

Greyson glanced at Xavier, who shook his head. “That’s not an option—and not for the reason you think.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Yes, I want to be with you, and I’d love to see Greyson tuck his tail between his legs, admit defeat, and run off—”

“Keep dreaming there, kiddo,” Greyson scoffed.

“Like I said, I do want that,” Xavier repeated. “But neither of us is willing to risk you going mad.”

I paused. Then I softly asked, “What if it’s too late? What if we’re already slowly going mad? What if those visions that Greyson’s been getting are just the start, and they’ll soon expand to you and me, Xavier?”

Xavier paused. For once, he seemed hesitant.

“Cali…” Greyson, his expression full of longing, made a move to touch me, but I took a step back. I couldn’t do this right now. It felt like if either of them touched me, I would break.

“Greyson?”

I turned to see Big Mac at the entrance of the kitchen.

“I need you,” she told him. “Didi’s given us some information.”

Greyson stared at me, his silver eyes boring into mine. As ever, he was gorgeous. Proud. “Don’t worry, love. We’ll work this out.”

“Greyson,” Big Mac said impatiently. “This is important. Life-or-death important, literally.”

Greyson stared at me. “I promise you, we *will* work it out.”

I watched him as he left, my head throbbing.

“Cali—”

“I need some air,” I said to Xavier. “Sorry.”

I stepped onto the porch, fighting not to choke. Did I have any more tears left to cry? I wasn’t sure. A few of the pack members were goofing around in the yard with Torin and Astrid, building snowmen with melting snow, chasing each other like kids.

I watched them with something akin to envy.

*Look how happy they are*, I thought. *Look how free they look without a curse looming over their heads.*

I hadn’t really planned on confronting Xavier and Greyson, but now that I had, I wanted to believe Greyson, to believe that there could be a happy ending for all of us… But how?

How could that be?

I felt a gentle hand on my shoulder. I knew it was Xavier, even before I saw him.

“Are you feeling any better?” he whispered, cupping my chin.

I didn’t speak. I was afraid that if I said anything, I would burst into tears.

“I get how you’re feeling, I really do.” Xavier gazed at me, his eyes leaving a scorching path in their wake as he mumbled, “But I need you to remember one thing: in my head, in my heart, the only person who should ever be kissing or touching you is *me*.”

The heat in his words made a shiver run through me. I couldn’t deny how drawn I was to him.

“Even if this wasn’t happening,” Xavier went on, “Greyson and I would never get along. Am I upset about the Alpha stuff? Yeah. But I would *never* throw away what I have with you, not for anything or anyone. You know that don’t you, baby?”

The weight of Xavier’s words hovered between us.

*He’s telling the truth*, I thought. Because he always was. But where did that leave any of the three of us?

I opened my mouth to tell Xavier just that when there was a shout from out in the yard. Startled, Xavier and I turned to see Sage running toward us with a scream. She was waving her hands for us to go back inside.

“REVENANTS!”

**Episode 1698**

VIOLET

Feeling Charlie’s arms pulling me close, his lips pressing against mine, the sensation of his tongue slipping along mine… It was even more electric than I could have imagined.

Being separated by thousands of miles when I’d been in Oregon and he’d been in Minnesota had been bad enough. But being back together—but forced to stay apart—was even worse, and being back in his arms felt *so* good. So I threaded my fingers into his dark, silky hair and just hung on tight. I braced my feet—nearly standing up on the seat of the car—and pressed him back, kissing him even harder in my hunger.

Charlie let out a muffled grunt of surprise against my lips.

I pulled back. “Sorry.” I said breathlessly. “Was I too rough? I got a little carried away there.”

Charlie looked a little surprised but grinned at me in the dark. “A little, but I kind of like it.”

I grinned back, and when he reached for me, I melted into his kiss. I *loved* kissing Charlie. Kissing him made me feel like the world was spinning beneath my feet. But… did it usually spin *this* fast?

I opened my eyes and peeked out the window. “Oh no!” I gasped, pulling away from Charlie’s embrace. “*Charlie!*”

It wasn’t the kiss that was making the world move—it was the car! We were rolling backward, down the hill!

“Shit!” In an instant, Charlie leapt into the front seat, and I dove for the brakes, slamming my foot down as hard as I could.

“They’re not working!” I screamed. “The brakes aren’t working!”

Charlie’s eyes were wide with fear. His gaze darted around frantically. “The parking brake! Try the parking brake!”

I looked around desperately, found the handbrake between the seats, and yanked with all my might. With a terrible grinding of gears, the car shuddered to a halt.

Charlie and I sat for a moment in the quiet car, breathing hard. Then I looked up into the rearview mirror to see Zachery and Sophie standing five feet from where the car had stopped, their faces frozen in twin expressions of shock and horror.

“Violet, did we turn off the parking brake?” Charlie asked quietly. “Did we? When we were… you know…”

My face flushed. “I’m not sure. Maybe? I think we might have,” I said, remembering that I had knelt on something as I’d tried to get a better grip on Charlie. I hadn’t thought about it in the moment, but I was pretty sure that was what it had been.

“Crap,” Charlie muttered. “How are we going to explain this?” he asked as I watched Sophie and Zachery—getting over their shock—rush toward the car.

Before I reached to open the door, I checked to see that my shirt wasn’t yanked up and that I didn’t look too suspiciously rumpled. I cast a quick look at Charlie. His hair looked mussed, but there was nothing I could do about that. Zachery and Sophie were already at the car.

“What the hell, man?” Zachery asked, pulling open the door, a look of terror on his face.

“Are you two okay?” Sophie asked shakily.

“Dude,” Zachery said, peering into the car as Charlie and I climbed out, “what happened? My car almost went over that cliff! What were you doing? Did you break anything?”

Charlie gave him an incredulous stare. “Are you kidding me, man? You’re worried about your *car* right now?”

“No, I…” Zachery flushed red.

“Seriously, are you okay?” Sophie asked again, turning to me.

I was taken aback by the concern on Sophie’s face. It looked genuine, but all I could do was nod.

“I’m not like… *Of course* I’m glad you’re okay,” Zachery was still spluttering. “But what happened?”

*What are we going to say?* I asked Charlie, without looking over at him.

“Did the parking brake get disengaged?” Sophie guessed. “But how?”

“Well,” Charlie started, “we were talking after you two left, and then…”

“And then I slapped Charlie!” I blurted out.

But, at the very same time, Charlie yelled, “I thought I saw Sasquatch and freaked out!”

Zachery and Sophie looked back and forth between us for a confused moment.

“Wait, *what*?” Zachery asked, shaking his head. “So which was it? She slapped you, or you saw Sasquatch?”

Shit.

“Both!” Charlie exclaimed.

“What?” Zachery asked.

“I freaked out and kind of slammed into Daisy, and she must have thought I was trying to get handsy or something, so she just hauled off and slapped me.” He rubbed his cheek for good measure.

“It was just a misunderstanding.” I shrugged. “I guess I just have a strong right hook.”

Zachery still looked discombobulated, but he was clearly trying to pull it together. He smiled at me, complete with a suggestive lift of his eyebrows. “Well, I do like a strong woman.”

*Ugh*.

I glanced over at Sophie, to gauge her reaction to our story, and was disturbed to see that she was still looking warily between Charlie and me, her expression suspicious. She didn’t look at all convinced by the slapping Sasquatch story. I swallowed hard.

*I don’t know if we’re fooling Sophie.*

Charlie shot her a sideways glance. *Don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of Sophie.*

I felt a flash of hot jealousy at the idea of Charlie doing *anything* with Sophie, but I knew she was still watching me, so I kept my expression neutral.

“Anyway,” Charlie said, slapping his hands together, “I think that’s enough excitement for one night. We should head back to camp.”

“No! What? The night’s just getting started,” Zachery whined. “We should hang out, enjoy the view…”

But everyone else was ignoring him and climbing into the car, ready to head back.

I sat up front with Zachery, of course, and Charlie was in the back with Sophie. We were all quiet as we drove through the dark, late autumn night.

*Well, what do you think? Contender for the worst date ever?*

I heard Charlie’s chuckle in my head.

*I don’t know*, he said. *It’s the first time* *I’ve gotten to spend a night with you in a while, so that’s not too bad. It’s just too bad you’re on a date with someone else.*

*Charlie…*

*I know. We just have to pretend for now, Sunshine. We’ll get through tonight.*

My cheeks heated. I was in the wrong seat, and I wished more than anything that I was sitting next to Charlie so I could slide in close and snuggle into him. Hell, I’d have given anything just to hold his hand. And I’d be a liar if I didn’t admit I wanted to keep kissing him.

“… and maybe next time we could go see that new superhero movie.” Zachery looked over at me expectantly. “What do you think, Daisy?”

I wrenched my thoughts away from Charlie. “Yeah, maybe,” I said vaguely.

Glancing up, I caught Sophie’s gaze in the rearview mirror. She was watching me closely. I shifted uncomfortably. I didn’t like how observant Sophie appeared to be. It felt… inconvenient. And could turn out to be a real problem.

When we got back to camp, I was happier than I should have been, considering that I was a werewolf and it was a hunter’s camp, but I was just relieved that the date was finally over. But as I gathered my jacket, Zachery came around to open my door with a flourish.

I forced a smile. “Thanks,” I managed, ignoring his offered hand. I hoped he’d get the hint, but no such luck—he followed me as I set off for my room. When I reached my door, I turned to look at him. “Well, thanks. It was an… *interesting* night.”

I stuck my hand out for him to shake, but he’d apparently already decided how he was going to say goodnight, and he reached out to put his hand on my shoulder.

My eyes went wide. I glanced over, where I could see Charlie over Zachery’s shoulder, watching us.

Zachery cleared his throat. “Maybe next time it could just be the two of us,” he said with a grin.

My brain was a beat behind, and by the time Zachery was leaning in to kiss me, it was nearly too late. At the very last moment I turned my head, and he planted a very wet, very messy kiss on my cheek.

“Sounds good, goodnight!” I called cheerily, fighting the urge to scrub my cheek dry with my hand.

I ducked out from under Zachery’s hand and escaped into my cabin without making eye contact with anyone—not even Charlie, who had rushed off.

Inside, I leaned against the door and gratefully wiped my cheek with the back of my hand, trying to erase the memory of Zachery’s lips on my skin.

Distantly, as though from a long way away, I heard Charlie’s voice calling to me through the mind link. He didn’t sound happy.

*Meet me in the storage shed. Ten minutes.*

**Episode 1699**

GREYSON

When I heard Sage’s shout, my body responded instinctively, and I was sprinting outside before I’d even thought about it.

“Protect Cali!” I barked over my shoulder at Sage as I launched myself off the porch.

Then I shifted.

Two revenants had come up the lawn, their orange eyes glowing. Xavier appeared next to me, shifting into his wolf without a word. He stood there panting, his eyes on the revenants.

But then, as they drew closer and their eyes glowed brighter, I felt a pain in my leg as sharp as a dagger and let out a surprised yelp. The pain was bad enough, but I was also gripped by sudden fear. No, this couldn’t be happening. Not now. I needed to stay focused, I needed to be a good Alpha, I needed to protect my pack and my pack house.

*Are you okay?*

Xavier was looking over at me, his eyes narrowed.

*I’m fine. Don’t worry about me. You’ve got other things to worry about*, I added, because just then the two revenants rushed forward, and I lunged, slamming one orange-eyed thing to the ground. Next to me, I could hear Xavier taking on the other one.

I had the revenant pinned beneath me when my vision started to waver, like a heat haze. I shook my head, trying to clear it. But when I looked up, I saw Shaine standing behind the revenants.

“Daddy,” he called, his expression tragic as he looked at me. “What are you doing?”

Shaken, I tried to ignore him. It was just a hallucination. I *had* to focus. I *had* to be an Alpha. Lives depended on it.

The revenant below me was twisting, trying to free itself from my grip, and I raised a paw to swipe at it, but as I did, the revenant’s ugly face changed into Shaine’s.

My heartbeat stuttered, and at the very last moment my paw swerved, missing the revenant’s throat. I let out a frustrated growl, and my leg gave an excruciating throb. It distracted me enough that the revenant with Shaine’s face squirmed out from beneath me and scrambled to its feet.

Next to me, Xavier had dispatched his revenant and moved toward me just as my revenant moved forward to attack again. Xavier crouched low in a way I knew meant he was about to spring—but I couldn’t let him. The revenant had Shaine’s face!

Before I could think it through, I stepped into Xavier’s path, blocking his attack.

Xavier slammed into me instead, and my leg went out from beneath me, the pain of it consuming me like fire.

*Greyson! Oh my god, Greyson!*

I could hear Cali calling my name through the mind link, so I swallowed hard, fighting through the pain. *Stay where you are, love. Stay back.*

Xavier and I were tangled on the ground together, but I wrenched myself free and got back to my feet as Rishika, Artemis, Astrid, and Torin rushed out of the house. I could feel their eyes on me, and I gave my head a hard shake. I wasn’t going to let this damn witch mark and the pain in my leg mess with my mind. I *wouldn’t*. I would protect my pack!

I had just turned back to the revenant with Shaine’s face when a scream from behind me made me whip around. A *third* revenant—one I hadn’t even noticed—was advancing on Torin, who was cowering in fear. At the very last moment, Astrid pushed Torin out of the way, and the revenant attacked her instead, sinking its rotting teeth into her shoulder. She let out a blood-freezing scream.

I started toward her, but Rishika was closer—barely down the porch steps—and she turned back toward Astrid, shifting and jumping on the revenant.

*You can’t stop us all, Daddy.*

Shaine’s voice was in my head now.

As I turned to face the revenant with Shaine’s face, a growl rumbled deep in my throat. This was bullshit. I wasn’t going to let these evil things come for my pack or mess with my mind. I charged forward. I could hear Shaine’s voice in my head—he was screaming—but I gritted my teeth and ignored it. I went after the revenant and ripped the thing’s throat out with my teeth. When I looked down, Shaine’s face was gone, and the lifeless body on the ground at my feet was a stranger.

Exhausted—both physically and mentally—I shifted and staggered back.

“Oh my god, are you okay?” Cali rushed forward, her face pale with worry. She carried two blankets in her arms, and she wrapped one around Xavier, who had shifted back as well, then hurried over to me and wrapped the other around my shoulders, blocking out the sharp November wind.

Her hands were shaking as she pulled it tight around me. “Greyson, I was so scared.”

I didn’t respond—I couldn’t. I was shivering with cold and exhaustion, my teeth chattering, and the wind suddenly felt bitterly cold. But none of that even came close to my biggest problem—the screaming, blinding pain radiating up from my leg. It was nearly unbearable, and I when I tried to stand, I found that I couldn’t seem to put my full weight on it.

Looking up, I saw Torin helping Astrid to her feet. She was white with shock and fear, and her sweater was shredded at the shoulder where the revenant had attacked.

A rough hand grasped my shoulder and gave me a shove. “What the *hell* is your problem, Greyson?” Xavier demanded angrily. “What *was* that?”

“What?” I asked, knowing full well what he was talking about. My stomach clenched as his eyes narrowed.

“You got in my way on purpose back there! What the fuck was that? Can you really not stand to share the glory? So much so you’re willing to put us all in danger?” Xavier looked angry, but more than that, he looked shocked. “What the *fuck*, man?”

I shook my head. I couldn’t answer. The pain was making it hard to think, never mind come up with a convincing lie to explain what had just happened. I couldn’t think through the pain in my leg. It was spreading to the rest of my body, and my head was throbbing, making it impossible to think straight.

“Come on, man,” Xavier pressed. “Explain that! What do you have to say for yourself?”

“Xavier,” Cali said softly. “Calm down—”

But Xavier ignored her. “You know what, you don’t even have to. I know what happened. You put your own pride and your own glory over keeping the pack safe. Just like you always have. It’s the same reason you haven’t stepped down.” He shook his head, looking disgusted. “I should have accepted Alpha when you offered it. You’re a mess, man. Look at you! You’re turning into a fucking liability!”

I could feel anger rising up in my chest like bile. I hated that he was making a scene in front of everyone, but I knew that part of my anger had to do with the fact that he was right. As much as I hated to admit it, I agreed with what he was saying. Whatever the mark was, and whatever had caused it, it was making me weak. I’d thought I could deal with it on my own, but it was clear that that wasn’t going to be possible. It had been one thing when it was just affecting my dreams, but now it was messing with my head when I was awake?

*You cannot show any weakness.*

The voice was a whisper in the back of my mind.

*No weakness*, it repeated. *This anger you feel, you must learn to embrace it. Hug it to you like a lover. It is your ally.*

I shook my head, trying to rid myself of the voice, and turned back to the house.

But Xavier wasn’t going to give up that easily. “Are you seriously going to ignore me? After *that*?”

I’d had enough. “This is fucking rich coming from you,” I snapped, turning on him.

He stopped, clearly surprised, and his expression darkened. “What the fuck is *that* supposed to mean?”

“Are you kidding me?” I asked coldly. “I’ve *always* put the pack first, Xavier. That’s what I do. You get in my face about wanting to be Alpha, but all you’ve been doing is running off on these little personal crusades every chance you get. You’ve disappeared for days on end with your brother or your little witch friend and left me to keep this pack running.”

This took a moment to land, but when it did, Xavier stepped forward, so he was practically nose to nose with me. “Are you fucking serious? I’ve watched you run away from your duties to this pack more times than I can count, brother.”

Rage was making it hard to see clearly, and when I spoke, I could hear that my voice was like gravel. “Yeah? Well if you think I’m doing such a shit job, why don’t we settle this—”

A scream rent the air, and both Xavier and I looked over to the porch, where Astrid was on the ground again. But it was Torin who had screamed. Astrid was silent and pale, and convulsing on the snow-covered planks.

**Episode 1700**

I surged forward, dropping down next to Astrid’s shuddering form. What was wrong with her? I reached to touch her, but I was afraid I would hurt her more.

“What’s happening?” I gasped. “What’s wrong with her?”  
 “She’s reacting to the revenant’s bite,” Torin said, looking down at Astrid, his jaw clenched with tension. “Badly.”

I cast a look over my shoulder and found both Greyson and Xavier watching us closely. I knew we were all thinking the same thing. Was what happened to Pip going to happen to Astrid?

After a moment—that seemed like it lasted a year—Astrid stopped convulsing, and Torin lifted her into his arms. He carried her into the house, and the rest of us followed. We trailed behind him as he walked into the living room and gently laid Astrid on the couch, placing a pillow carefully beneath her head.

I hovered behind him, unsure of what to do, but not wanting to leave. I glanced over at the doorway, where Greyson and Xavier stood. The fight they’d been having before Astrid had collapsed wasn’t forgotten. I could still sense the tension between them, emanating from them like heat. I looked back at Astrid, who was pale and motionless, and my head ached with pressure—I just didn’t know who to help.

Torin solved that problem for me when he stood and looked around. “Everyone out,” he said, with uncharacteristic firmness.

“Torin—” I started, but he shook his head.

“I have to work,” he said shortly, “and I need room to do it. Everyone needs to leave.”

He looked broken but determined, and I didn’t have the heart to fight with him, so I turned to leave. Rishika followed me out, and we all stood in the hall for an awkward moment, not saying anything.

Finally, Greyson turned toward the stairs.

“Hey,” I said, stepping toward him. “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” he said quickly.

I eyed the group—they were all watching us closely—and walked a few steps toward the stairs with Greyson to distance our conversation. “You were pretty harsh out there—”

“So you’re taking Xavier’s side?” Greyson snapped.

I gritted my teeth in frustration. “I’m not taking anyone’s side, okay? But you do seem… *off*, Greyson. What happened during that fight?”

“Look, I took care of things, didn’t I?” he snapped. “I don’t want to rehash the whole damn thing—the revenants are gone. End of story.”

I sighed. Maybe I should try this again. I put a gentle hand on Greyson’s arm. “I’m worried about you. I thought that revenant was going to hurt you, and now you’re walking like you’re in pain again.” I glanced quickly down at his leg, remembering the ugly mark.

Either accidentally or purposefully, Greyson shifted the affected leg further away from me. “I’m fine. I’m just tired. I’m going to take a shower.”

And then he pulled his arm away from my grasp and went up the stairs, leaving me to watch his retreat.

I supposed I shouldn’t have been surprised that he was so short with me. It was possible that I’d hurt him when I’d told him I wanted to break things off with both him and Xavier. I knew I hadn’t worded it well, but I’d meant what I said. I just couldn’t do the whole “sharing” arrangement anymore. I knew they had both meant well when they’d proposed it—and they must have thought it could work—but it was clear that it wasn’t working. Not for any of us. I was starting to feel like a toy that two kids were passing between each other—and fighting over. Not like a mate at all.

With a sigh, I followed Greyson upstairs. I knew I should probably take some time to think about everything, but I before I could make it to my room, Xavier called after me.

“Hey,” I said, turning to see him coming up the stairs.

“Cali,” he said, stepping toward me and taking my hands. “Are you okay?”

His face showed only concern, and—truthfully—I was relieved to see it. I’d been worried that he was going to be angry with me, too.

I nodded. “I’m okay. But I hate it every time you have to fight one of those revenants. It’s terrifying.”

He pulled me into a hug and pressed a kiss to the top of my head. “I know.”

I wrapped my arms around him and let myself melt into him. His arms felt so good around me. “Are you really not mad that I wanted to break things off, Xavier?”

He took so long to answer that for a moment my heart clenched with worry. Maybe he was upset after all.

“I’m not mad,” he finally said, though his voice was strangely tight. “I want whatever will make you happy, Cali.” He pulled back so he could look into my eyes. “Think about everything, and if you want to break things off, then fine. But I hope you know that this doesn’t change anything. I’m never going to stop fighting for you. Regardless of who is ‘sharing’ who, it’s still our reality. This *due destini* shit never lets us have a moment of goddamn peace, does it?”

I shook my head and gave him a shaky smile. “No, it really doesn’t.” I took a deep breath. “But no matter what else is going on—no matter the chaos—I always feel safe in your arms.”

This seemed to catch Xavier off-guard, and when a smile broke over his face, it filled my heart with so much love it felt almost physically painful, like my chest wasn’t big enough to contain it all.

I reached up on tiptoe to lean in for a kiss, and Xavier bent down to meet me—

“Cali!”

I whipped around as Big Mac barked my name. “Yeah?” I asked, reluctantly stepping away from Xavier.

“Have you seen Greyson?” she asked, looking between Xavier and me for a moment.

I remembered that Big Mac had wanted to talk to Greyson about Didi, and I nodded. “He’s taking a shower. But you might want to give him a while. He might need some time to recover after that fight.”

Big Mac narrowed her eyes. “Recover? What do you mean by that?”

*Dammit*. Too late, I clamped my mouth shut. It was highly possible that Greyson didn’t want anyone else to know that his leg was still bothering him. I shrugged, trying to make the gesture casual. “Oh, you know—shower, change. I know he wanted some time to come up with a plan to protect the pack from these constant revenant attacks.”

Big Mac heaved a gusty sigh and turned to Xavier. “Well, maybe you can help, then.”

“With what?” Xavier asked warily.

“I just wanted to tell the Alpha what we learned from Didi.”

“Did she figure out how to make another Orb?” I asked anxiously.

Big Mac peered at me. “Well, that’s the thing. She wants to give it a go, but she needs some supplies to do it, and I don’t want to leave her alone, since she’s the only one who can show us how to do it.”

“You afraid she’s going to run off and join the circus or something?” Xavier asked.

Big Mac did not look amused. “I want to be here to protect her from Letifer—or Silas, as the case may be—in case they figure out she’s here and try to attack. And, as long as I’m being honest, I want to keep a close watch on her in case she tries out any dark magic herself. You know, on anyone here.”

Xavier thought about this for a moment. “Okay, so what do you need?”

“I need some of your wolves to go run a little errand and get what we need,” the witch said.

Xavier shrugged. “Okay, no problem. Just get a list—eye of newt, toe of frog. Whatever she needs. I’ll send a few people out to the potion supply store.”

Big Mac gave Xavier her coldest stare. “Fine. She’s working on a list now. Let’s go see if she’s done.”

We followed her down the hall to the room where Didi had been staying, but before we reached it, there was a heavy thud from behind the door.

The three of us paused for a moment, surprised, then we sprinted toward the door. Big Mac threw it open and stopped short in the doorway. It wasn’t hard to see why.

I stared into the room, my mouth open in horror.

Didi was lying flat, as though she was lying on her bed, but she was floating in the air a foot above the mattress. Her hair waved strangely, as though she was underwater, and there was a strange symbol carved into the wood of the floor. It had sharply angled corners and looked as though it had been burned into the wood, though the black char emanated a strange glow that seemed to light the whole room. Books were floating, too, and zooming backward and forward across the room, ripping themselves apart.

We stood in the doorway, motionless, for a long moment.   
Xavier was the first to break the silence. “What the *fuck* is happening?”

**Episode 1701**

LOLA

When I opened up what must have been the tenth bedroom door, Jacqueline leaned in, looked around, and wrinkled her nose in disgust.

“Oh my god,” I groaned, rolling my eyes. “What is it this time? You don’t like the way the sun is shining in? Too many molecules in the air? What’s wrong with this one?”

Jacqueline shook her prissy little head as she gazed into the room at the drop cloth-covered furniture. “No, I can just tell it won’t work for me.”

“Why not?” I demanded.

She pursed her lips. “Well, it’s not western-facing, for one thing—which I was very specific about wanting. I can also see the bed isn’t made of wood, it’s just a metal frame, and”—she peered into the room—“none of the bathrooms in this wing have bathtubs. I must have a bathtub.”

“You have *got* to be kidding me,” I muttered, shaking my head.

“Besides,” Jacqueline said, looking down the quiet hallway, “it’s so quiet in this wing of the house. No one else is over here. What if one of those orange-eyed abominations attacks me? There’s no one around to help me.”

I rolled my eyes. “Jacqueline, you *were* one of those orange-eyed abominations. And they’re called revenants.”

She clicked her tongue impatiently. “But I’m not *now*. And with the serum, I won’t be again, thank you very much.”

Maybe if she was attacked, she would finally shut up and it would do us all a flipping favor. With a huge amount of effort, I managed to not say that out loud. Instead, I cleared my throat and said, “Listen, I must have shown you a dozen rooms. Just pick one, okay. I don’t care which. I’m going to find Jay.”

And without waiting for a response, I turned on my heel and headed off, leaving Jacqueline in the cold, quiet, lonely east wing.

I didn’t even know how I’d ended up here. I’d never signed up to play concierge to a bratty vampire, but then Jacqueline had risen from the back of Jay’s car like the living dead, and here I was.

*Ugh*.

Back in the main wing of the house, I stopped short. A door slammed somewhere downstairs, and I heard a conversation being cut short. I stopped, listening, trying to figure out what was going on. There was strange tension in the air, and when I saw Ravi coming up the stairs, I waved him down.

“Hey, what’s going on? Did something happen?”

He nodded. “Some revenants attacked a bit ago. Astrid got hurt. Torin’s with her now, trying to heal her.”

“Oh my god,” I said. I looked around, my heart racing. “Where’s Jay? Is everyone else okay?” I felt like I’d only just gotten Jay back—memory-wise, at least—and I wasn’t going to lose him again.

“Yeah, everyone else is okay. Jay wasn’t even outside when they showed up. I think I saw him going down to the gym.”

Without even pausing to say thank you, I rushed down the stairs and to the basement gym, where I threw open the door and found Jay—shirtless—lying on the bench press.

He looked over at me in the doorway, and when he smiled, I felt a flare of heat low in my belly. Without another word, I stepped forward and grabbed him by the hand, pulled him to standing, and kissed him. *Hard*.

Jay responded instantly, pulling me close and sliding his tongue along mine, which only made the vampire heat burn even hotter. Or was it just the mate bond?

As he pulled away, I bit down on his bottom lip until he kissed me again—and again—before I let go.

“What was that for?” he asked, looking slightly bemused.

I shrugged. “I just missed you. And I was worried after I heard about the revenants.”

Jay’s expression darkened. “Yeah, I heard, too. I wasn’t there. I can’t believe my wolf is still gone,” he said. “I hate missing out on a good fight, but especially when my friends are getting hurt.”

I didn’t say anything, but I was selfishly glad he’d missed it. Now that I had my mate back—and remembered the depth of our bond—I didn’t want him at risk.

“Do you know if anyone got hurt?” he asked.  
 “Astrid, but Torin is taking care of her.”

“What about Cali?”

I scowled. “What about her? Why would you ask me about her?”

Jay sighed. “I’m just worried about you, Lola. I want to understand why you’re still so mad at her. She’s your best friend.”

My scowl deepened. “I don’t see why she should concern you. *She’s* not your mate, Jay. *I am*. Why do you care if I’m still mad at her? And for the record, Cali has *never* gone out of her way to ask about you. Literally never. Or anyone else, for that matter. She’s way too concerned about herself and her own very important problems.”

“Lola—”

No, I couldn’t take it. I exploded. “I was attacked by vampires, and you know what we were still discussing whenever I talked to her? *Just Cali!* She’s been a pretty shitty friend to me lately, and spending some time away from her has made me realize that our relationship has been super one-sided for a long time. I’m *always* there for her, but she’s so wrapped up in herself and her mates and her own problems that I could be on *fire* and it would barely register.”

Jay shifted, looking uncomfortable. “Come on, Lola. Cali’s dealing with a lot—”

I narrowed my eyes. “Are you seriously taking her side right now, Jay?”

“No, I—”

Anger coursed like lava through my veins. “I am not going to stand here and be lectured on how to enforce my own boundaries. I am dealing with this, so just *butt out*!”

And then I turned on my heel and left, leaving a confused Jay staring after me.

How *dare* Jay try to make *me* the bad person here. Yeah, Cali was dealing with some shit, but I’d freaking lost my wolf, become a living vampire, and been shipped off to a vampire boarding school, and Cali was still like, *but my mates!* She never seemed all that concerned about how I felt about the shit going on in *my* life.

And—on top of *all* of that—seeing Jay shirtless in the weight room had made my vampire heat flare super-hot.

*Ugh*. Maybe I should have stuck around in the gym to work out some of my sexual frustration on a punching bag. I reached the stop of the stairs and glanced out the windows. Maybe I could go for a jog. Did I jog now? Was that something I did? I guessed I could give it a try.

I headed back upstairs and changed quickly into leggings and a sweatshirt. I grabbed my phone and some headphones and cued up some music. As I headed into the frosty afternoon, I saw Mace and Sage at the side of the house, building what looked like a funeral pyre. After a moment, I realized it was probably for burning the revenant remains.

I paused for a moment, wondering if I should offer to help them, but figured I’d better not. I was different now, and fire wasn’t friendly to vampires. Neither was wood, for that matter. I brushed a finger over my chest, where the wound Cali had given me was still tender. Thank god for Torin.

Turning my back on the pyre, I decided I’d probably just skip the impromptu funeral altogether. I started to jog down the long driveway toward the road and was just starting to find my rhythm when, over the beat of my music, I heard the rumble of an engine. From around the bend of the drive, a sleek, red sports car appeared. I stopped, curious, and waited for the car to reach me.

When it did, it slowed to a stop and the driver climbed out.

“*Emmett*,” I breathed, my vampire heat flaming once again.

His sable-brown hair was slightly mussed, making him look almost as though he’d just rolled out of bed, and his thick grey sweater with its rolled collar gave him the ideal “hot professor” look. The whole look suited him perfectly—or maybe that was just my very, *very* inconvenient sexual frustration speaking.

But then he smiled at me, and my body exploded into flames. No, it was both. It was me, but it was also him. He was just fucking hot, and it was absolutely *not* what I needed right now.

“Lola,” he said softly, walking toward me.

“Hi, Emmett. I’m glad you’re here.”

He reached for me, like he was about to give me a hug, but I backed away. I could *not* let this man touch me—not when my vampire heat was flaring so hot.

I cleared my throat, trying to ignore the awkwardness I’d just created. “Can I help you unload your stuff?”

Without waiting for an answer, I hurried to the back of the car to open the trunk.

“Wait!” Emmett called, but I’d already unlatched the door.

“*Oh my god!*” I gasped.

Looking down, I was shocked to see a bound and unconscious Irma tucked into Emmett’s trunk.

**Episode 1702**

ARTEMIS

I drummed my fingers against the kitchen counter. I felt… *strange*, like I didn’t know where I was meant to be. Torin had shooed me—along with everyone else—out of the living room, but I still lingered nearby. Part of me felt like I should stick close to Astrid. Like I didn’t want to stray too far. Almost as though something important was happening that I needed to be a part of.

“Artemis? *Artemis!*”

I turned to find Rishika staring at me. “What?”

She looked confused. “Are you okay?”  
 I nodded, trying to pull myself together. “Yeah, I’m fine. I just want to help, if I can.”

“Torin’s a really good healer. I’m sure he knows what he’s doing. And no one cares about Astrid more than he does. We should just trust him and let him work.”

I nodded. “I know, I know, you’re right.” But I still couldn’t shake the feeling that I was somehow involved in what was happening with Astrid.

“Besides,” Rishika said with a suggestive smile, “that means we can pick up where we left off upstairs, before all the commotion.”

The anxiety I could feel prickling at the back of my neck eased as I smiled back at Rishika. “I think that sounds like a great idea,” I said, letting her pull me toward the stairs.

As I followed her up, I was filled with relief that I hadn’t lost Rishika, even though I was still navigating a lot of big emotions I wasn’t sure I fully understood yet.

But thoughts of all of that fell away as the door to our room closed behind us and Rishika pressed me against it, kissing me hard. All thoughts fell away, actually. Rishika’s mouth on mine had that effect.

Her hands fumbled with the button of my jeans, and I wriggled them down my hips and stepped out of them as I walked her back toward the bed, where I pushed her backward.

She fell with a laugh and, peeling my shirt off, I threw myself down next to her. She stripped out of her clothes in a heartbeat, and we dove beneath the covers. I slid my hands around her slim waist and up the smooth sides, feeling her ribs beneath my fingers. I wanted to go slowly and savor every moment of her, but when she grinned at me, I knew that wasn’t in the cards. She moved on top of me and leaned over, and when her nipples brushed mine, I gasped with pleasure. Her thigh moved between my legs, and heat rushed through my body, lighting me on fire.

“Artemis,” she murmured, and I closed my eyes, letting the music of her voice surround me. “I missed you like this.”

I caught her hand and led it downward. She leaned down to kiss me as she slipped her fingers inside me, circling them as I moaned against her lips. She kept her knee tucked into me as I rocked harder and harder against her hand, faster and faster, bucking as I lost track of everything—thoughts, fears, doubts, hopes. I couldn’t have stopped if I’d wanted to, and I didn’t want to. I never wanted to. And even when the tide finally rolled out, leaving me panting in its wake, I knew I’d never want to be finished.

And then I rolled Rishika over and straddled her thigh. She was sweating with want already, and panted with pleasure as I bent to kiss her lips, then her jaw, then her neck, then her breasts. She had already started to shake by the time I’d slipped my fingers into her, so when I really got started, she was already shaking. I was sweating too, coming again as I rode our rhythm, and our pleasure—hers and mine—found its aching, pointed peak. We curled into each other, gasping and holding each other tight, and then we grew still.

Still sweating, we lay tangled in the sheets, both of us quiet and sleepy, comfortable in the silence. In her arms, I felt content and as safe as I’d ever felt in my life. I turned, craning my head to see Rishika’s face.

“I’m so sorry about earlier,” I said. “I should have tried harder to explain what was going on with me. I didn’t want to fight with you. Ever.”

Rishika sighed. “I’m sorry, too. I didn’t know I was going to get so jealous. It’s never happened to me before. I just…” She bit her cherry-red lip. “I really care about you, Artemis.”

“Yeah?” I asked.

“Yeah.” This close, Rishika’s dark eyes looked inky black. “More than I’ve ever cared for anyone.”

I felt a flare of *something* in my chest. It was warm and almost painful, and it made me feel like I was about to cry.

“I wish we could always stay like this,” I said quietly.

Rishika smiled gently. “We can.”

I shook my head but didn’t explain what I meant. Here, with Rishika, I felt safe. But whenever I was away from her, I always felt like I was in this constant state of anxiety. Like there was a part of me that just *knew* that something was about to go wrong. And I hated it. I’d lived my damn whole life feeling that way, and I just wanted to feel safe for once. And Rishika was the only one who had ever made me feel that way.

We both looked up when we heard a knock at the door.

“Yeah?” Rishika called out.

“Hey, do you mind coming downstairs?” Ravi called. “We need to move the remains onto the pyre, and we could use some help.”

Rishika sighed. “Yeah, I’ll be right down.” She gave me a wry smile. “Duty calls.”

A little jolt of anger flashed through me, but I managed to smile back. “You’re so sexy when you’re a dutiful little wolf.”

Rishika climbed out of bed. “I can be the big bad wolf, too, if you don’t watch yourself,” she said with a grin. Then she pulled on her jeans and sweatshirt and, carrying her shoes, headed out.

I rolled onto the pillow Rishika had just vacated and breathed deeply, taking in her scent. It was fading too quickly. I stretched long in the bed, trying to feel the warmth she’d left behind—trying to absorb it into myself—but that was cooling, too. After a moment, a shiver passed through me and I sat up and wrapped my arms around my knees, my teeth chattering with cold.

I needed to get up. Get dressed. That would warm me up.

In the bathroom, I flipped on the water in the sink as hot as it would go. I leaned over and splashed it on my face, but when I looked up into the mirror, I froze. My eyes looked dark, almost black.

I blinked hard, and when I opened them again, they had returned to their normal blue.

My heart was beating fast, but I tried to breathe through it. It was nothing. I was just tired. I needed to wake up. Maybe a shower would help.

*You cannot fight it.*

I bit my lip so hard I tasted blood. I ignored the voice and turned on the shower.

*I am part of you. I can give you more power than you have ever imagined.*

“Leave me alone!” I screamed, slamming my hands over my ears. “I don’t want this!”

*I don’t care what you want!* the voice shrieked.

My hands were shaking, and I gripped the side of the shower stall. “I’ll stop you.”

The voice laughed, the sound echoing horribly inside my head. *You’re not strong enough.*

I looked up—horrified—as the water falling from the showerhead turned from clear water to thick, black sludge. I yelped and jumped back, out of the way of the falling chunks of mud.

The voice was still laughing its horrible, high laugh in my head.

I gripped my head with both hands, fisting handfuls of my hair, the pain in my head almost unbearable. “Please. Please stop. Please leave me alone. I’m begging you.”

*Soon.*

“Please—”

*Soon I’ll have everything I want.*

My vision wavered suddenly, and then everything was awash with a very bright light, like I was looking at the shower walls through a heat haze. I took a deep breath, trying to fight off the dizziness, but it was no good. The darkness was closing in, and there was nothing I could do to stop it as the cold tile floor rushed up to meet me.

When I opened my eyes again, the shower was turned off, and I was standing in front of the mirror. My eyes were black as night, and they stared calmly back at me in my reflection.

When I spoke, my voice was low and steady, without any of the uncertainty I’d been feeling. I had no more doubts. I knew exactly what to do.

I smiled at myself in the mirror. “It’s time to put our plan into motion.”

**Episode 1703**

XAVIER

“What the hell is she doing?” I asked.

“I have no idea,” Big Mac answered, her voice low, her eyes never moving from where Didi hovered, a foot above her bed. “But this magic feels… different. Ancient. Can’t you feel it?”

Next to me, Cali nodded. “I can feel it.”

“There’s something about it, the way it’s moving through her and through the air—it’s like it’s been trapped for so long in the spirit world that now that it’s finally awakening, things could be… *unstable*.” Big Mac looked pale.

“Unstable? That doesn’t sound good,” I said, watching as Didi’s long black hair floated weirdly beneath her.

“No, I can’t imagine it would be,” Big Mac murmured.

“So what the hell should we do?” I demanded. “I’m guessing there’s got to be an option that isn’t just standing here.”

Big Mac shook her head, like she was trying break out of a trance. “We need to stop her before she does something irreversible.”

Like “unstable,”“irreversible” didn’t sound good.

“Okay,” I said, “so let’s stop her.”

I started forward, but I didn’t get far. Almost immediately, I hit some kind of invisible barrier and was pushed back. Hard. I stumbled back a few steps, barely catching myself before I tumbled to the floor.

“Xavier!” Cali gasped, reaching for my arm. “Are you okay?”

“You can’t stop her by force,” Big Mac snapped, sounding annoyed. “This isn’t a boxing ring.”

She stepped forward, lifted her hands, and began to chant. The words were low and musical, a spell of some kind. The wind in the room started to grow frantic, moving Didi’s hair and the zooming books faster and faster.

I turned to Cali. We didn’t know how this might go, and I didn’t want Cali here if it went south. “You need to get your ass out of here. Now!”

“No way!” she said, pulling her eyes away from the tiny tornado of the bedroom. “I’m not leaving you here alone.”

“Cali—”

“I’m Fae,” she reminded me stubbornly. “I might be able to help. You might need me.”

I wanted to argue further, but just then Big Man stopped chanting. She let out a strange, strangled grunt, then stumbled backward.

“Big Mac!” I called, reaching out to catch her before she fell. “Are you okay?”

She was pale and sweating, and she shook her head as I helped steady her. “I can’t stop her with magic—not with my magic, anyway. I don’t even know what this spell is, or why she’s doing it, so I don’t know how to counteract it.”

“Didi!” Cali called, turning toward the bed. “Didi! Can you hear me?”

As if in answer, one of the hovering books changed direction and came shooting straight at Cali. I grabbed her and pushed her against the wall, shielding her with my body. The book rocketed into my back, just below my shoulder blade, and I grunted with the pain of it.

“Xavier!” Cali cried, grasping my shirt in fear.

I glanced over my shoulder to see if there were any more books coming my way, and was surprised to see Didi looking over at me. Her eyes were glowing—not orange, thankfully, but black, like onyx lit on fire. As I watched, she slowly sank back down to the bed, and the strange wind stopped blowing through the room. All at once, the hovering books thumped to the ground and the strange symbol on the floor darkened, then disappeared.

Very cautiously, I stepped away from Cali, and we all looked at Didi, who looked back at us.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, sitting up and frowning.

Anger flared in my chest. My back throbbed where the book that had tried to bash Cali’s head in had hit me, so I wasn’t in the mood to be grilled by this ancient witch. “What are *we* doing? What the fuck are *you* doing?”

“What—” she began.

“Are you trying to curse us or something?” I demanded.

Didi’s dark eyes widened in shock. “No, of course not. Why would you think that?”

“So, we’re just supposed to think it’s pure coincidence that you were doing this spell at the same time three revenants attacked this house?” I spat furiously.

Didi frowned. “Revenants?” She looked at the three of us in turn. “They came here? Where are they now?”

“They’re… They’re gone now,” Cali said. “But they hurt one of our friends.”

Didi looked down. “I am very sorry,” she said quietly.

Big Mac looked unconvinced by Didi’s performance. “What was that spell you were performing? What was it for?”

Didi looked up, her dark eyes wide. “You must know that I would like to help you, but it is very hard for me to believe that the man I once loved with all my soul would do the evil things you have described to me.” She pressed her lips together. “I thought that if I could somehow commune with him, perhaps I could get some answers.”

Rage made my whole body burn white hot. “How dare you try to call forth something as evil as Letifer into this house! You put us all at risk,” I snarled.

Big Mac shook her head, looking defeated. “This was probably a mistake.”

“What?” Cali asked.

Big Mac gestured at Didi. “All of this. Bringing a dark witch here. Giving her the benefit of the doubt.”

Didi stood from the bed. She wasn’t particularly tall, but she had presence, and it filled the room. “I will ask you to excuse yourself!” she thundered. “I never asked for this. Not for any of it. To be ripped from death and to be brought here. I never asked to be a pawn in your fight with Letifer.” Her dark eyes were sparkling like flint as she glared at us. “You say I am a dark witch, but for all I know, it is *you* who wish harm upon me and others. For all I know, you are working to deceive me, to enlist my help to destroy the only man I have ever loved.”

I stared at her, flabbergasted.

“*What?*” I spluttered. “How the *fuck* did you manage to turn all of this around on us? We never wanted to get involved in this Orb shit! This Orb is the worst thing that has ever happened to any of us. My life has been torn apart because of the Orb. My pack has been torn apart because of that damn thing. How dare you—”

Cali stepped forward, her hands raised for silence. “Didi is right.”

“*What?*” I gasped.

She shook her head. “She’s right. I’ve been in her position before, where I was in a brand new world and I didn’t know who I could trust, even people who were claiming to be my family.” She turned to Didi. “I’m sorry we’ve been so hard on you. I know none of this has been easy on you. Thank you for being patient with us.”

This was all complete bullshit, but it seemed to work for Didi. She stopped glaring, at least, and started to look slightly mollified. The tension in the room seemed to ease.

But Big Mac—lord love her—still looked suspicious as she looked over at Didi.

I gritted my teeth, biting back a litany of angry accusations I would have liked to add to Cali’s speech.

“So,” I finally managed, “did your spell even work? Were you able to contact Letifer?”

“I’m not sure…” Didi said slowly. She furrowed her brows, looking confused.

“What do you mean, you’re not sure?” Cali asked.

“It was peculiar, actually,” Didi said.

“What was?” Cali pressed.

“Well, I didn’t speak to him, but I did feel Letifer’s presence. But he felt… *anchored* to something.”

“To Silas?” I asked quickly, trying to get to the answers I’d come for.

“No.” Didi shook her head. “To a person nearby.”

I frowned. “How near?”

“Very close,” Didi clarified. “It felt as though this person might have almost been with me here, in the house.”

I was shocked into silence at this. How could this be? Could Silas be here? In the house?

I glanced at Big Mac, whose expression was grim.

This wasn’t good. At all. We were going to have to deal with this situation now. We couldn’t wait on this—not even for an hour. Lives were in danger. This was the moment for me to prove that I was Alpha material. What better time for me to step up and prove to everyone—especially Cali—that I had it in me?

“Listen,” I said, turning to Didi, “we can’t beat around the bush anymore. We have to be clear about allegiances if anyone’s going to survive this. Either you’re with us or you’re against us.”

Didi looked at me, confused. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what you mean.”

“It’s real simple,” I said. “Either you help us stop Letifer and Silas, or we’re sending you back to the spirit realm.”

**Episode 1704**

VIOLET

Walking slowly toward the shed in the moonlight, I couldn’t help but feel really nervous. Was it possible that Charlie was really pissed at me? He’d obviously seen Zachery kiss me—but it had only been on the cheek! And I’d tried my damnedest to avoid it altogether. Any idiot could have seen that!

But… *did* he see that?

I’d tried to mind link with him again, just to make sure he knew, but he hadn’t replied, which made me even more worried.

When I opened the rotted door to the shed, I glanced around the dark forest, making sure no one was around to see me disappearing inside. But the coast looked clear, so I slipped through.

“Charlie,” I breathed as the door swung shut behind me.

He was already there, standing near a window so grimy it barely let in any moonlight from outside. But even in the dimness, I could see that his back was toward me, and he hadn’t turned around as I’d entered.

Taking a deep breath, I started in on my prepared speech. “Listen, I know things got really weird back there. I mean, they started out weird, but they took a weirder turn at the end for sure. But, Charlie, you have to know that I did *not* give Zachery any signals that I wanted that kiss—or *anything* from him. You know him, he’s just not great at picking up on cues. You have to understand that, right? I mean, I said yes to one date and he filled his pockets with condoms! And by the way, I forgave you for that condom thing, so you have to be understanding about this, right? Fair is fair.” I paused for a moment, trying to gauge his reaction, and I saw in the darkness that Charlie’s shoulders were shaking.

What the hell? Was Charlie crying? I narrowed my eyes. No, he wasn’t crying. He was *laughing*!At me!

When he finally turned around, his face was flushed with the effort of laughing so hard, so quietly. “Wow, Violet, you sound really worried. I mean, I don’t blame you—one of Zachery’s sloppy cheek kisses is bound to have that effect—”

“I can’t believe you!” I snapped, annoyed. “How could you let me ramble on like that?” I demanded, stepping forward to slug his arm.

But Charlie was faster than me; he grabbed my arm and pulled me toward him. I tried to yank my arm away, but he wouldn’t let go. We had a brief, silent struggle, and I would have won, but I took a step and tripped over a fallen rake in the dark and stumbled forward, falling into Charlie’s chest. An instant later he had his arms around me, and an instant after that, I realized that was just what I wanted, too.

“I’m sorry about how awful tonight was,” Charlie said, his voice muffled as he pressed his lips to my hair. “I should have figured out a way to get us out of it.”

“Yes you should have,” I snapped, snuggling closer. Maybe I was still a little annoyed.

Charlie chuckled and pulled back so he could look into my eyes. “Okay, but do you forgive me?”

I rolled my eyes. He’d given me his half-smile, and he knew I could never stay mad when he smiled at me like that. “Yeah, I forgive you if you forgive me.”

Charlie’s smile grew, and he leaned down and pressed a soft kiss to my lips. “This is how it should have been tonight. All I could think about all night was how much I wanted to be on that date with you.”

“I know. Me too,” I said, holding Charlie even tighter.

I felt like I was going to float away, and Charlie was all that was holding me steady. It was almost overwhelming, being with him like this. I’d been missing him so much, more than I’d even realized. He was more than a boyfriend—he was my mate, and I needed him. I reached up on tiptoes to kiss him again, and while this kiss started soft, the heat rose between us, fast.

My fingers snaked into Charlie’s silky hair as his kiss became rough and hungry. I hadn’t noticed he was walking me backward until I found myself being pressed hard against the rough wall of the shed. His hands were at my waist, moving up my spine, running along the sides of my breasts. They were everywhere, and I wanted it. We’d been so far away from each other for so long, and now it felt like I couldn’t get close enough to him. I didn’t want to hold anything back, and as I arched my body against his, I knew that I wasn’t going to. Not tonight.

As I ran my hands around his waist near his belt, I felt a sharp edge graze my thumb and looked down. It was the corner of the condom sticking out of his pocket. I pulled away from Charlie’s kiss and held it up.

“Should we put this to good use?” I asked, cocking an eyebrow up.

Charlie looked from me to the condom, then his face broke into a wide smile. “*Absolutely*.”

He dove back into me, lifting me as he kissed me, and I wrapped my legs around his waist as I kissed him back. But just as I started fumbling with the buttons of Charlie’s shirt, a shrill alarm sounded that made us both freeze.

Charlie let out a frustrated sigh. “It’s curfew,” he muttered.

I looked around, feeling like I was just waking up. “How long have we been in here?”

Charlie grinned down at me. “A while, I guess. Doesn’t feel like it though, does it?”

I shook my head. “I don’t want to leave you. We get so little time together. Let’s just stay here all night.”

He shook his head sadly. “You know we can’t, Violet. It’s too dangerous. Especially for you. But we can mind link when we’re in bed and talk more.”

“I don’t want to *talk*,” I murmured, pressing close.

Charlie gave a groan that was almost a laugh. “I know, me neither. But it’s for the best. When we do have sex for the first time, I want it to be somewhere a little more romantic than this old shed.” Charlie looked around. “Though I have to admit, I’m starting to grow kind of fond of it.”

I laughed. “I know, I know. Okay.” I carefully put my feet back down on the ground. “We should probably leave one at a time.”

Charlie insisted I leave first, and I tried to look normal and not flushed as I walked back to the dormitory. As I was approaching the building, I met Sophie, walking out.

Considering the fact that I’d just been hardcore been making out with Sophie’s crush, it was an awkward moment. But it shouldn’t have been! Charlie was *my* mate, and I needed to remember that.

“Hi,” I said, trying to sound natural.

“Hey,” she said with a smile. “So, tonight was… *interesting*.”

I paused, remembering how keenly Sophie had been watching everything in the car. “Yeah…”

“I think it might rank in the top five worst dates of all time. What do you think?”

It took me a moment, but then I realized: Sophie was extending an olive branch. She wanted to be friends. My instinct was to reject it, because this girl had been flirting with my mate, which I didn’t love, but the more logical part of my brain reminded me that I had a big secret to keep, and it might be a good idea to have more allies around camp.

“Maybe more like top three,” I said.

Sophie laughed.

What was her game?

She looked down at her slippered feet, then up at me. “Listen, I know you didn’t slap Charlie in the car.”

I froze. How did she know that? What else did she know?

“I’ve been watching you, and you’re really strong, and Charlie’s face wasn’t red at all, and it would have been if you’d actually slapped him—”

She was right about that.

“—and I couldn’t help but notice that Charlie had some of your lip-gloss on his mouth.”

Shit.

Sophie sighed. “I get it. You’ve known each other for a while, and you’re both hot—of course you’re into each other. It’s fine.”

She was looking slightly away, but I could see in her eyes that she looked genuinely sad. She must have really liked Charlie—which was understandable—but she was being really nice and understanding about this. I frowned. I didn’t get this, and I didn’t know how to react.

Sophie looked over me. “So just tell me—do you really like him, or is this just a fling?”

“I really do like him.” I took a deep breath. “I love him, actually.”

Sophie let this information settle in. Then she nodded. “Okay. If that’s what Charlie wants, then I have to accept it.”

I hadn’t intended to like Sophie—she was too pretty, and she’d been too flirty with Charlie—but, dammit, I kind of did like her, and I was about to tell her so when a terrible smell reached my nose, almost making me gag.

“Daisy?” Sophie asked, watching my face.

*Vampire.*

My instincts knew it before my brain did, and I only had time to grab Sophie by the shoulders and shove her behind me before a vampire stepped out of the woods behind us.

**Episode 1705**

I stared at Xavier in shock. Had he really just delivered that ultimatum? That either Didi help us, or we send her back to the spirit realm? Was he serious? How did he know if that was even possible? I had seen the toll it had taken on Marta to bring Didi here—would it be safe for Marta to try to return her? Did we even know if there was another way?

“Xavier, you can’t—”

*Cali, stop. Don’t say anything.*

I shut my mouth as I heard Xavier’s voice in my head. I didn’t look at him, but I could feel the power of his presence beside me.

*I need your support here.*

He did need it—I could hear it in his voice—but I was torn. In my heart, I didn’t believe that Didi was our enemy, or working against us, but… I *did* want to support Xavier. I knew that he hadn’t been feeling much of that from me lately, but it wasn’t on purpose. It just felt like lately everything had been spiraling out of control—everything had been a bit too much, and just a bit too hard to handle. I bit my lip and looked over at Didi, who was watching us closely. It wasn’t that I didn’t *want* to be there for Xavier—of course I did—but sometimes he really didn’t make it easy.

Didi lifted her proud chin. “Fine. Send me back.”

Now I turned my shocked stare toward her. That was *not* the response I’d been expecting.

“So, does this mean you won’t help us?” Big Mac asked.

Didi narrowed her dark eyes. “I never said that. But I refuse to be forced to do anything. I am the only one who has the knowledge to make the Orb, but if you want my help, then I must be convinced that you have noble reasons for the request.”

Big Mac cast a pensive look at Xavier.

“That seems reasonable to me,” I chimed in. “If we want her to trust us, then we have to trust her.”

Xavier made a sound like a low growl, but he nodded. “You’re right,” he admitted, though it looked like it hurt him to do so. “What do you need to be able to trust us?”

Didi eyed us for a moment. “Well, I cannot speak to Letifer, but perhaps I can speak to one of these revenants. Perhaps they will tell me what he has been doing.”

“Um.” I frowned. “They’re dead.”

“But maybe we can get you an audience with another of Letifer’s victims,” Big Mac added quickly.

“How?” I asked, looking over, confused.

She ignored me. “We happen to have a very powerful medium in this house. I’m sure she can somehow commune with Pip or Arlo. But we’ll have to take precautions to make sure we’re keeping Marta safe during these communications.” She gave Didi a hard look. “If they’re able to tell you about what happened to them, then will you believe us?”

Didi considered this for a long moment. Then she nodded. “Yes. I think that will be acceptable.”

I sighed with relief. I was glad we’d found a diplomatic resolution that didn’t involve fighting or sending anyone back to a spirit plane. I hated all the tension in the air. It was everywhere—it felt like everyone was getting mad at everyone else all the time. Especially lately. All I could hope was that it was the Orb’s influence, and not… something else.

Which made me think of Lola. More specifically, of my fight with Lola. And of my new decree to Xavier and Greyson. I glanced up at Xavier, who was watching Didi closely. He’d said he understood, but I hadn’t had a chance to really sit down and talk to him about it. I wondered if I should try to explain things to him—really lay out my side of the story. But before I could think about it any further, Big Mac turned to Xavier.

“We need to figure out who you’ll send to get ingredients for the spells to make the Orb. It has to be someone with at least an ounce of judgement and discretion.”

Xavier nodded, and he and the witch stepped out of the room.

Alone with Didi, I looked over at her. She was looking out the window, though I suspected she wasn’t really seeing the dark trees in the distance.

I cleared my throat. “Can I get you anything? Water? Something to eat? Another blanket?”  
 Didi didn’t look over at me. “No, nothing. I am weary. I would like to be alone.”

So I left her alone. Out in the hallway, I stood for a moment, unsure of what to do with myself. I eyed Greyson’s closed door but didn’t move toward it. He probably needed a little more time. So I headed downstairs to look for Artemis, or my mom.

I found my mom in the den, a needle in her fingers, her lap full of something that looked like a satchel. Where in the world had that come from? I’d never seen my mom sew before.

“What are you doing?” I asked, sitting next to her on the couch.

“Sewing.”

“Yeah, but sewing what?” I asked.

“Your dad wanted a bag to carry his clothes around in when he’s a wolf,” my mom explained, her eyes on her work.

I sighed deeply, pressing my fingers to my temples and massaging them.

“I appreciate how prepared Dad’s trying to be.” I laughed and settled back, but as I watched my mom sew, my mind wandered back upstairs to Xavier and Greyson and Didi and my fight with Lola and all the other anxieties racing through my head.

Some of that must have shown on my face, because my mom put down her sewing and looked me squarely in the eye. “Caliana, you tell me what’s on your mind right this moment.”

“What? Nothing,” I lied.

She was not convinced. “*Cali…*”

I sighed. “I told Greyson and Xavier that I needed a break. From them.” I left out why. I was *not* interested in explaining the complexities of the sharing situation.

My mom nodded gravely. “Yes, I’ve been worried about the three of you. Things have seemed very tense.”

“They have? So why didn’t you say anything?” I demanded.

My mom raised her eyebrows. “I have learned that very little is accomplished if I try to tell you anything, my girl. You need to figure things out for yourself.”

“Well,” I said, settling back into the couch cushions and crossing my arms, “I’ve got news for you: I haven’t figured anything out.”

“What do you mean?” my mom asked gently, settling next to me.

Tears sprang into my eyes. “I love them so much, Mom. Both of them. Every time I’m with one of them, I’m not thinking of anyone else. But then I’m with the other one, and it’s like he’s the center of my universe.” I shook my head as the tears stung my eyes. “It’s not even something I’m trying to do. It’s like a switch being flipped back and forth—almost like it’s against my will.”

“Oh, Cali…”

“I want to make both of them happy, but I know that’s not possible. Neither of them will be happy until I actually choose.” I dropped my head as tears fell onto my lap. “I’m a horrible person, Mom,” I whispered.

“*What?*” My mom sat up straight, looking appalled. “Of course you’re not! How could you even say that?”

“No, it’s true.” I took a shuddering breath. “I am. Sometimes I’m relieved about that terrible curse—the one that caused those black veins—because it means I don’t have to choose.”

My mom paled. “Oh, Cali—”

“No.” I shook my head quickly. “That’s not what I mean. I’m not happy about the curse, or the veins, but I’m relieved that it makes it so I don’t have to talk about how hard it is to choose.” I bit my lip. “You don’t know what it’s like, Mom. You get to love Dad—just Dad. You get to support him and listen to him and be dedicated to him. This is awful. I feel like every time I can’t promise my full heart to one of them, it destroys them—but every time I think about not being with one of them, it destroys *me*. I feel like I can’t breathe.”

My mom looked at me, her eyes wet with tears, too. “This is so unfair, sweetheart. I would give anything for you not to have to live this way.” She thought for a long moment. “Do you think it would be better for you to just… be alone?”

The thought made my whole body feel cold, like someone had opened a door and let in the freezing November chill. But I shrugged. “I just don’t see any other choice.” I heaved a shaking sigh. “I’m going to have to break up with them, aren’t I? For real?”

**Episode 1706**

MARTA

I paced the dim room, walking swiftly from one side of the small space to the other, trying to work through the last argument I’d had with Lilac, but my thoughts were spinning themselves into a senseless jumble. Nothing I’d said had managed to change Lilac’s mind, and I couldn’t think of any new arguments. He’d just been so insistent on taking on the darkness that was afflicting me, but… I just wasn’t sure if it was safe. I looked down at my hands, which looked mottled and diseased. They were cold, too, like the blood had stopped flowing into my fingers. I flexed them, trying to reintroduce circulation.

No good.

I sighed and dropped my hands to my side. I wasn’t getting anywhere wearing a path into the hardwood floor of my room. I needed to talk to Big Mac. Maybe she would have some ideas.

My fingers were stiff, so I fumbled my gloves back on and pulled my door open, expecting to have to search the whole house for Big Mac. But, to my surprise, I found her just outside my room, standing with Xavier, speaking to him in a hushed voice. I walked over, intending to wait until they were done, but they looked up, ending the conversation before I could hear anything. What was going on? There always seemed to be something with these people…

“I’ll see you later,” Xavier muttered, then walked away as I joined them.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt,” I said to Big Mac, watching Xavier go.  
 “It’s fine,” Big Mac said shortly.

“I just wanted to tell you something—”

“I was actually just about to come find you,” Big Mac said, speaking over me.

“Really?” I swallowed nervously. Was it because Big Mac knew what Vander had just told me—about how I’d been disturbing the balance? “Why? What about? What’s up?”

“I need you to try to commune with Pip.”

This was not the answer I’d been expecting, and I stared at the witch, shocked. “*What?* Pip? Why? I mean, no.” I shook my head. “No, I won’t.”

Big Mac frowned. “Why not?”

I shifted on my feet, uncomfortable, but figured I might as well tell her. “I had a visit from Vander. They said I’d been upsetting the balance by using my powers to open the portal so much.”

“What?” Big Mac looked even more confused.

“It makes sense if you think about it. You said I was a bridge, which makes me think that my powers are connected to the portals between this world and the next.” I shook my head again. “No, I won’t try to contact Pip. Not after what Vander said. I can’t risk it.”

Big Mac sighed and rubbed her head. On closer inspection I could see she looked tired. “That actually does make sense. But this does pose a bit of a problem for us.”

“What does?”

“Well, we need to find a way to speak to Pip or Arlo.” She frowned, thinking hard. “Maybe Kira and I could find a way to commune with one of them. It might be safer that way, anyway. We’re experienced witches. We can control the powers we use.”

I bit my lip. “So you agree with Vander, then? You think it’s possible that I’m tearing the world apart?”

Big Mac looked up at me, surprised. Whatever she saw in my face made her dark eyes soften. “I don’t know, Marta, but what I do know is that whatever you are doing, you’re not doing on purpose. Your power is… difficult to understand. It’s strong. I’ve never seen anything like it.” She paused. “How are your hands?”

“They’re not great,” I admitted. I worried the finger of a glove. I didn’t want to show Big Mac what they looked like, but I knew I had to, so I pulled them off.

She sucked in a harsh breath. She lifted them carefully with her own hands, looking closely. “We should do what we can now to stop the spread of this.”

“I think we should do the spell for me to absorb the dark energy,” Lilac added.

I jumped in surprise. I hadn’t even realized he was next to me. Then I gritted my teeth. “We haven’t decided if that’s the best course of action yet.”

Big Mac looked up at me. “Well, having only heard your side of that argument, I’m going to assume Lilac wants to absorb the energy.”

I almost lied, but I knew I’d never hear the end of it from Lilac. “Yeah,” I admitted. “He wants to do the spell, but I’m not so sure.”

Big Mac raised her eyebrows. “It’s hard to accept help when you’ve been on your own for as long as you have.” My expression must have been one of shock, because she smiled. “Trust me, I know. But sometimes we do need to let others help us out.”

I looked down at my hands and nodded. I knew she was trying to help, but Big Mac didn’t understand what the real problem was. My hands were awful, but the larger issue was that I had finally admitted—to myself, at least—that I had some very real feelings for Lilac.

Was that what was messing everything up? Was that what was making me feel so uncertain? Had I really been so deprived of human interaction for so long that I’d developed real, serious feelings for a *ghost*?

Big Mac dropped my hands. “Well, if we’re going to try to contact Pip, I need to go find Kira. If we’re going to attempt a séance, it’s going to take a lot more preparation with the two of us than it would with you. I’ll see you later.”

Feeling suddenly useless, I watched Big Mac head downstairs. Slipping my gloves back on, I headed back to my room.

“You’re going to have to stop being so damn stubborn,” Lilac growled at me, following me in. “I’m a ghost, remember? Nothing can happen to me. I can’t die again.”

“You’re being foolish,” I snapped. “Stop pretending like you don’t know that there are things worse than death.”

He was quiet for a long moment. Longer than was normal for him—because he hardly ever shut up. Then I felt the cool, light pressure of his hand on my shoulder.

“Thank you for caring about me,” he whispered.

“Your sister does, too,” I said. “She texted to have me tell you she misses you. I’m still a messenger with her thousands of miles away.”

Lilac shook his head. “No Marta, I mean no one has cared about me like this,” he said stepping closer. “It makes me feel… alive.”

I dropped my head as my throat tightened, and I clenched my teeth against a sob. A few days ago, all I’d wanted in the world was to bring Lilac back to life. And now we were talking about using him as a vessel for the dark energy that was infecting me? How did we get here? How had everything gotten so messed up? I tried to hold them back, but it was no good, and tears started to course down my cheeks.

“Marta,” Lilac said, shaking his head. “Don’t.” He reached out to brush the tears away, but his hand passed right through me. He was too incorporeal to touch me.

That made me cry harder.

“Please don’t cry for me,” he said. “I can’t stand it.”

“I can’t stop,” I said shakily.

Lilac wrapped his arms around me. I didn’t know how he could do it, but he could. I could feel the pressure of him, and I didn’t push him away. I needed to be held, just then—even if it was just by a ghost. I leaned into him as the sobs quieted down. Then I looked up at him just as he looked down at me, and somehow—without exactly meaning to—we were kissing.

It was soft and sweet, but hungry and aching, too. In the back of my mind was a voice reminding me that this wasn’t a good idea—that I shouldn’t be doing this. Vander had warned me that nothing good could come of this. But I ignored the voice. It felt so good to be in Lilac’s arms, to be held by him, to be kissed by him. And in that moment, he was corporeal again. I didn’t know how I knew, but I knew. I slid my arms around him and tightened my hold on him. I didn’t want to let him go. Not now, not ever.

But suddenly Lilac pushed into me, hard. He let out a grunt, as though surprised, and slid out of my arms and to the floor at my feet.

I looked down at him, then up, and my mouth dropped open in horror. Where Lilac had been standing a moment before, York now stood, orange eyes glowing like burning suns, a baseball bat clutched in his cold, dead hands.

My scream was barely out of my mouth before it was cut off by something hard and cold, clamped over my mouth from behind. An instant later, the world went dark.

**Episode 1707**

ARTEMIS

I didn’t need a flashlight as I led the way through the gathering dusk. I could have walked the route blindfolded. I knew the way. I could feel it in my bones. The pond pulled me toward it—the portal called to me. My time had finally, finally come. After all this time, all the pieces had fit into place. I had been patient, and soon it would be time for me to lay claim to more power. Letifer’s power had been growing, and it was time to claim it. We’d already wasted enough time—it was time to act.

The trees thinned, and I could smell the dark, deep water in the air. I smiled as I glimpsed the dull glimmer of it through the trees. We were almost there.

Behind me, York grunted as he hauled the large duffle bag along the leaf strewn ground. The late autumn leaves crunched beneath it as it tracked over the dark earth.

The night was cold and silent, but I was filled with energy and heat. I was finally taking one of the biggest steps toward gaining power and opening the portal. And with the portal open, those who dared to defy me would pay—and pay dearly. Once I had my full powers, they would bow down before me. Once the portal was opened again, Letifer could take the steps to once more take all that was his—all that should have been his in the past, the present, and the future. The living and the dead.

As his mistress, I would make sure it happened.

I stepped into the clearing next to the pond and looked around. The sky had been overcast for days, but as though it knew the deep significance of tonight, the sky had cleared, revealing a bright, nearly full moon that shone just overhead. The pond lay as it always did, still and unmoving, a perfect mirror for the sharp, reaching evergreen trees that surrounded it. And the cold, bright moon cast its dull shine on its surface. The pond threw back a reflection, but that wasn’t what it was. It was a window. And now was the time to throw that window open.

Standing for a moment, I drank in the night air, letting the coldness fill my lungs. I wanted to remember this night forever. The sharpness of the air, the silence surrounding me.

I stepped forward, to the very edge of the water, and bent. I cupped my hand and let the water fill my palm. Power coursed through me, and I reveled in the triumph. It was so near—so very, very near. Almost at hand. The water fell from my hand back to the pond, making no nose, creating no splash.

Standing again, I turned to York. “It is time.”

He bowed his head. “Yes.”

“Call your brothers and sisters.”

As York turned, his eyes began to glow. For a moment, the silence hovered, and then it was broken by a distant rustle in the woods surrounding us. The rustle grew closer and closer, and then a dozen figures stepped from the woods into the clearing. Their eyes were on us, glowing as orange as hellfire. They surrounded the pond in a ring, like sentries.

“It is time,” I said again, satisfied.

There was a muffled sob from within the duffle bag, and York bent to unzip it. Marta burst free from the bag, wriggling and sobbing and screaming. She might have been trying to say something, but her cries were muffled by the gag across her mouth. Her hands and legs were bound as well, so all she could really do was lie on the cold, wet ground and scream. Her face beneath the blindfold was blotchy with the cold and fear.

I bent and removed the gag, but left the blindfold in place.

“What’s happening?” Marta screamed. “Where am I? Who are you? Why did you bring me here? Why are you doing this?”

She sounded so terrified that a little bubble of doubt rose in the back of my mind. Why *was* I doing this? Marta—who’d never sought to harm me—was lying before me, blindfolded and bound. This couldn’t be right. Surely, this was going too far.

Even as I thought this, I felt Letifer’s rage surging up within me.

*You are angering me, weak one.*

I swallowed, terrified.

*This is why I must seek out a new vessel.*

My stomach clenched.

*I grow tired of this one. So weak, for a Fae. I thought you would be stronger. You disappoint me. It’s disgusting.*

“What are you doing?” Marta sobbed, clawing uselessly at her bonds. “Why did you bring me here?”

“You are the key,” I told her, my voice so cold it sent shivers down my spine.

She stilled. “The key to what?”

“To opening the door, of course.”

She curled in on herself, like she was trying to protect herself from something—as if she could. “Why are you doing this?”

I narrowed my eyes as I looked down at her defenseless form. “The same reason anyone does anything: for power.”

Looking away from Marta and back toward the water, I took a deep breath. I knew what I had to do. I pulled off my clothes and dropped them at my feet, then stepped toward the water, and then into it. I barely felt the icy chill against my skin. I lifted my arms toward the moon’s cold, pale face and began to speak the words. I didn’t know what they meant—they just came to me, came *through* me. I only knew that the language was ancient.

As I spoke, the light of the moon reflected on the pond seemed to grow brighter and brighter.

“Help me! Please! Someone! Can anyone hear me!” Marta was screaming into the cold night air. “Please! Help me!”

No one would hear her. We were too far from the house. Her cries were useless, so I ignored them. It wasn’t worth it to even tell her to stop. I had other things to focus on.

I looked around the pond and saw the glowing eyes of the revenants on me. “You! All of you! You have been saved for this time, and for this reason. It is time for you to fulfill your final purpose.”

Moving as a single body, all the revenants pulled long-bladed knives from their belts.

Marta sobbed harder, screaming now.

As one, the revenants lifted their hands and slit their throats.

They fell to the ground in heaps, like the bags of bones they were. Blood poured from them, and I watched greedily as it ran in rivers downstream, into the pond, where it disappeared into the blackness of the water.

I turned to York, the last remaining revenant. “Bring the key.”

Marta screamed as York grasped her wrist. She twisted and tried to get away, but it was no use, of course. He dragged her across the rough, rocky ground, then tossed her into the pond at my feet.

“Please!” she screamed. “Please! Let me go! Don’t do this!”

I ignored her and looked at York. I reached up and smoothed my fingers down his cold cheek. “You have served me well.”

“Yes, mistress.”

“You have been my most faithful servant.”

He smiled. “Yes, mistress.”

I rested my hand on his still chest for just a moment, then held out my hand. He pulled a knife from his belt and placed it on my palm. Without another word, I swung my arm and slashed the knife across York’s throat. His blood sprayed like a geyser, streaking across my face, my naked breasts, and down my body.

Marta screamed as York’s warm blood dripped onto her, and then again when his body splashed into the pond next to her, then again—louder still—when I used the same knife to slash her palm.

I held her hand out, letting her blood drip into the water so it mixed with the blood of all the others. As soon as the first drop of Marta’s blood hit the water of the pond, the reflection of the moonlight brightened even more, so much that I nearly had to squint to look at it. I dropped her hand and moved forward, so I was bathed in the light, covered in the blood of my revenants.

Marta was still sobbing, still calling for help, but I could barely hear her. All I could hear now was the rushing in my ears. The feeling of oncoming power was nearly overwhelming. I closed my eyes and leaned back, opening my heart up to the light of the cold, lifeless moon just over me. It was so close tonight that I could nearly touch it.

Now was the time. From deep, deep within me, I called to my power. I could feel the change happening around me. When I opened my eyes, the light was still bright, but it was no longer coming from the moon above, but from below.

The portal was opening.