**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 16**

**Episodes 1708-1842**

**Episode 1708**

MARTA

*This is bad.*

I had never been so completely terrified in my entire life. My hand was bleeding, my body was bruised, and my hands and legs were bound. My blindfold was still in place, but around the edges of it, I could barely make out some vague, shadowy movements. This didn’t help—if anything, it only terrified me more. I could see things moving, coming toward me, but I’d never been more helpless.

Even when I was trapped with Bert, I’d had full use of my senses, and had never been tied up.

Water lapped at my feet, soaking through my socks and leaving a deep chill in my bones. I was standing in the body of water. But there was no rush of water, so I knew it couldn’t be a stream or river. It had to be a lake, or…

A pond.

*Oh, god, please don’t let it be* that *pond.*

But now that I thought about it, the wavering light seeping through my blindfold, casting everything into eddying shadows? It was coming from below, not above.

A shrouded, almost layered voice just behind me commanded, “Rise! Join me!”

The hair rose on the back of my neck.

*This is really, really bad…*

“Help me!” I screamed. “Someone, help me!”

There was no response. No one rushed in to save the day. My captor didn’t even respond to my plea. Didn’t tell me to shut up. Clearly, they weren’t worried about anyone finding me out here, about getting caught in the middle of whatever it was they were doing. While panic blurred the edges of my mind, dread slipped down my spine. I strained at the bonds around my wrists and ankles.

Nobody knew I was here. They probably didn’t even know I was missing at all. It wasn’t like Lilac could tell—

My heart froze.

*Lilac.*

My mind flashed back to seeing him crumple to the floor in my bedroom. *Is he okay? Is he here? Will he be able to find me?*

A chill washed over me, and I felt ghostly hands brushing over my skin, wet and cold. They felt nothing like Lilac’s ghostly touch. These belonged to the spirits from the pond. The ones who couldn’t go home. Were they being released from the portal? Was that why I’d been brought here? To draw the spirits out?

A thousand voices ripped through me all at once in a discordant harmony that left my ears ringing. I tried to clap my hands over my ears, but my bound hands couldn’t cover both of them.

“What do you want?” I called out to the voices.

That layered voice, the one belonging to my captor, replied. “I want everything—and I *will* have it all.”

I shook my head helplessly. “I don’t understand. Why me? Let me go!”

“Silence!” they barked. “You were unknowingly interfering with our witch mark, but once that weak werewolf pack left and took you with it, our connection to the spirit realm had time to grow. Now, you’re the one drawing them out.”

I’d never wanted any of this to happen, and whoever this person was—if they were a person at all—they shouldn’t be interfering with the spirits. If I’d learned anything, it was that the spirit realm was supposed to *stay* in the spirit realm.

*Not whatever’s happening here.*

Another wave of chilling, ghostly energy washed over me.

I licked my dry lips, then cleared my throat. Terror was threatening to paralyze me, but I couldn’t just sit by and let this happen. “You have to stop. You don’t know what this could do!”

Something—or someone—slammed into my shoulder. I never saw them coming, and I hit the ground hard on my other shoulder. White-hot pain lanced up my arm, shoulder, and neck, and I gasped, clenching my teeth to keep from crying out.

“Shut. *Up*,” the voice hissed.

Pain hugging every breath, I struggled against my bonds. The blindfold slipped just enough for me to peek around it, and I squinted against the eerie, bright light shining into my eyes. Someone was looming over me, but I couldn’t make out their features around the blinding light.

“Are you Silas?” I asked, despite the fear and pain thrumming through my body. I tensed as the figure leaned in even closer.

It would’ve been so, so easy to go quiet and just let this happen. Some deep part of my psyche even told me to do it, told me to take the path of less pain, since all roads likely led to the same place. I was tied up, wounded, cold, and could barely see. I was outnumbered, and judging by the sheer magic humming in the air, I was outclassed as well. Nobody knew I was missing, and if they did, they clearly didn’t know where to find me.

But I wouldn’t go quietly. I wouldn’t make this easier for them—even if it meant making things harder for myself. I had too much to live for, too much to fight for.

The figure leaned in close, and the bright, wavering, unnatural light sent a new round of chills down my spine.

“I am Silas,” the figure said in that layered voice. “I am everything. I am Letifer.”

A scream slipped through my lips, and I tried to inch away, bound and prone as I was. Icy cold slipped down my arm and shoulder. I was up against the pond. A surge of mystic energy jolted through me, and my body spasmed as pain and the noise of all those spirits consumed me.

My throat was raw. Was I screaming, too? I couldn’t hear myself over the endless cries of those vengeful spirits.

Suddenly I was jerked up into the air again, and held out over the pond. My blindfold slipped again, and I made the mistake of looking down into the pond. I could see the faces of the spirits, rising from the illuminated pond. Horror and dread gripped my chest in a vise.

No, I couldn’t let this happen. I couldn’t let them all come out.

But what could I do to stop it? What could I do against such terrifying, depthless power?

As if reading my mind, the figure spun me around and jerked me toward them. “There’s nothing you can do except be a sacrifice.”

Terror clawed at my insides. I tried to think straight, to hold that disabling fear at bay. This was easily the worst thing that had ever happened to me—worse than Bert, even. But I had no intention of becoming a sacrificial lamb for Letifer.

I just didn’t know how to stop him.

I looked around for someone, anyone, who could help me. A gasp ripped out of my throat as my eyes landed on the bloodied corpses spread out around the pond. That gasp turned to a breathy scream when the bodies rose up, animated by some dark, twisted life force. Their eyes glowed orange.

They looked at me in unison, and I felt the same energy that animated them surge through me. It was… incredible. Terrifying. Awe-inspiring. Intoxicating. I knew that I could easily lose myself in the feeling. That I could dive headfirst into the energy and be gone, forever.

An icy chill washed over my feet, jolting me back to myself. Letifer had put me back down, and I was standing at the edge of the pond—between a sea of spirits, a wall of revenants, and Letifer himself.

I didn’t know how I was going to survive this.

*No, I have to figure this out. This can’t be the end. Did I suffer through Bert and everything else just for it to end like this?*

Was this how my life was supposed to play out?

“It doesn’t have to be this way,” Letifer said, his layered voice almost soft now. The power that thrummed through the air gently caressed my face. “You could be an asset. You could have everything you’ve ever desired.”

I gritted my teeth.

*Not like this*.

I shook my head. “I didn’t survive fifty years with a psychotic poltergeist only to fall into the hands of someone like you.”

The figure held out a glowing hand. “This is your last chance.”

“Fuck off,” I spat. “If I’m going to die, it’ll be as myself and not one of your puppets.”

The power in the air took on a harsh edge, almost painful as it wrapped tight around me. “I’ll have to kill you if I want to control you.”

“Then do it.”

I wasn’t afraid of death. Never had been. I’d always had a strange relationship with it—maybe even before my life had turned upside down, I’d known that death was just part of the journey. A shepherd, guiding a spirit on to what came next.

To me, facing death was like greeting an old friend, one I’d seen here and there, but hadn’t had a chance to catch up with in far too long.

Maybe I’d join the other spirits.

*Lilac could guide me*. My mouth curled up into a small smile.

And then I remembered his kiss, the warmth of his lips, his skin, the slow-simmering excitement I felt every time we were together—the feeling of being alive that I’d been deprived of for so long.

I wasn’t ready for death. Not yet. Not now.

My life was worth fighting for.

Letifer’s energy was suffocating, now, like it was trying to crush me, pull me under, force me to submit by any means necessary. It forced me backward, into the pond. Water skimmed over my ankles, then my knees, then my hips. The spirits of the pond pulled me in, and my knees buckled.

The water was up to my chin now, and it took everything I had to keep my head above the surface.

Suddenly, a powerful wave of energy surged through the pond, rippling the water. The spirits let go, stopped pulling me under, and a low growl echoed through the forest.

And then I looked up and locked eyes with a familiar wolf.

**Episode 1709**

“I’m going to have to break up with them, aren’t I? For real?”

The words came to me as a rhetorical question, maybe a sort of dark joke. Like, *the three of us are doomed to be miserable—together or apart. Isn’t the universe a prankster?*

But as soon as I heard the words out loud, I was struck by the sheer dreadful inevitability of it. The unavoidable truth. The question had a very clear answer, and it wasn’t funny at all.

I needed to break up with my mates. Maybe we could never be truly happy together, but if they could be just a little less *unhappy* away from me, wasn’t it worth a try? The last time I broke up with them, I’d made the mistake of sticking around the pack, and we’d all been stuck together, completely miserable, with no escape.

But if I really, actually broke up with them, then left and didn’t return… Maybe then, they’d have a shot at moving on.

Except, the thought of breaking up with my mates—of staying away from Xavier, who had changed my life, from Greyson, who had changed *me*… I couldn’t bear it. Especially now that we were under siege by dark magic. It was too much to even think about.

How could I tear myself away from my mates, the two men I loved most? The two halves of my heart, of my soul? Tears burned in my eyes, and I tried to blink them away.

*Stay strong, Cali. If you can’t even bear to* think *about this, how are you ever going to be able to actually break things off?*

My mom wrapped her arms around me, and I hugged her back, allowing a few rogue tears to slip down my face. No matter how bad things got, my mom’s arms always felt like safety. When she released me, I wiped my eyes, and she sighed.

“Oh, Cali. You have nothing to feel guilty about—you haven’t done anything wrong. This is beyond your control, and as hard as it must be for Greyson and Xavier, too,” she said, “I’m sure they understand that. This *due destini* thing has quite a hold on all of you.”

She hugged me again, and I let out a shaking breath. “Thanks, Mom. I… I don’t think I’ve decided what to do yet.”

She released me, and I stepped back, feeling slightly better. It didn’t change anything, of course, but it was nice to be able to breathe around the heartache digging into my chest.

She squeezed my hand and gave me a sad smile. “I know you, Cali. This decision might not be easy, but I know you’ll ultimately do what’s best for everyone. Even if your options are tough, I know you’ll do the right thing.”

“Thanks, Mom.” I gave her a shaky smile and headed downstairs.

Her words rang through my head every step of the way. Everything she’d said made a whole lot of sense, but I was still torn about what to do. The whole idea of sharing had seemed like a good compromise, a way to keep everyone on the same side, but in reality, it was revealing an ugly truth: Greyson and Xavier didn’t want to share me. They each wanted me to themselves, and they were never going to stop fighting over me.

I wished I could talk to Lola about it, the way we used to talk before things had gotten so crazy. But she was still upset with me. She wouldn’t even talk to me.

*There’s one more thing I’ve screwed up. And one more thing I need to fix.*

I needed Lola back in my life, almost as much as I needed my mates. Lola and I were practically sisters and had been for years—since long before I’d learned I had an actual blood-related sister.

Speaking of my sister… Maybe this was something that sisters could and should talk about?

*Where’s Artemis?*

I searched the kitchen—no sign of her—then headed toward the stairs to the basement. Maybe she and Rishika were working out. On the way, I passed the open door to Astrid’s room. She was prone on the bed, and Torin was next to her, his hands glowing with blue light as he worked on her.

I poked my head in. “How is she? I know she was hurt by a revenant.”

Torin blew out a breath. “I wish I could tell you. My healing powers aren’t half as strong when healing a wound caused by a revenant.”

Astrid smiled up at him. “I’m feeling much better, Torin. You’re selling yourself short. You’ve healed me—now you’re just stressing over nothing.”

“She does look good,” I admitted. And it was true. Astrid looked vibrant and healthy—like she’d never even been hurt in the first place. “You should cut yourself some slack, Torin. Whatever you’ve done, it’s clearly working.” My eyes met Astrid’s. “Can I get you anything?”

“I’d love a cup of hot leaf water.”

“I’m on it.”

As I made my way to the kitchen, Torin followed me out.

“Did you want some hot—” I stopped short, shocked by his appearance. I’d never seen Torin look so ragged, so completely exhausted.

“I don’t know what to do,” he said. “If anything happens to Astrid—” His voice broke.

I pulled him into a hug. “Torin, you have nothing to worry about. Can’t you see that she’s getting better? You’ve already done your part.”

He pulled back, and his throat worked as he nodded. “She does look better, but I just can’t shake this feeling that she’s worse off than she’s letting on. She’s my best friend—I probably would never have come here to your world without her by my side.”

“She’s your ride or die,” I said softly.

“My what?”

“A very good friend—the kind you’d do just about anything for.” I smiled softly. I knew exactly how he felt about Astrid. I felt the same way about Lola. And the thought of losing her, of losing our friendship, was just too much to consider. I cleared my throat. “Astrid will be okay. Everyone’s keeping a close watch on her.”

“Thanks.” Torin nodded, wiping a tear from his face. “I appreciate it. Why is it that I can heal people’s wounds, but I can’t do anything to help with heartache and loss?”

I was struck speechless by his question, and he headed back to Astrid without waiting for an answer. I wished there was something I could do to comfort him.

I made tea for Astrid and placed it on a tray, along with a cup of Mrs. Smith’s white chocolate mocha. It was Torin’s favorite, and our resident healer was in desperate need of a pick-me-up. Hopefully it would help him feel even a little bit better.

I returned to Astrid’s room and found Torin in the exact same position he’d been in when I’d first stumbled onto them—by Astrid’s side, holding her hand.

Astrid sat up and smiled as I set the tray on her nightstand. “Oh, thank you. This is perfect.”

Torin, on the other hand, was more subdued. He took his cup with a nod of thanks.

I left them alone and stepped out into the hallway to resume my search for Artemis. We were in need of some girl talk, even if I was the one who did all the talking.

I’d only made it a few steps before I was grabbed from behind.

I squeaked and spun around, still wrapped in my captor’s arms, only to find Xavier smiling behind me. I breathed a sigh of relief, and then smacked his chest. “Are you coming to check on Astrid? She’d doing bet—”

But he was already in motion, dragging me along by my arm until we stood alone in a spare bedroom. He kicked the door shut.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad Astrid’s recovering, but I came to find you. To keep you from doing something you’re gonna regret.”

My brows lifted, and I pulled away, my stomach sinking. I had a feeling I knew exactly what he was talking about, and I couldn’t handle the weight of his eyes on me. “Don’t look at me like that.”

Undaunted, he reached out and pulled me back in. “I know you’re thinking about breaking up with me and Greyson.”

I tugged my arm back to break his grip. “I haven’t made up my mind yet.”

He didn’t even seem to notice how I struggled to break free. He just pulled me back in again and again, his scent and the heat of his body washing over me. And like some Pavlovian reaction, my body flooded with all the feelings I wasn’t supposed to be having right now. Something beyond the strength of his arms was drawing me in, a force I knew better than to succumb to. Not while I still had so many unsettled feelings for the man in front of me.

But Xavier just smiled. “Guess what, Caliana? You’re not going to break up with me.”

**Episode 1710**

MARTA

I stared at the wolf at the edge of the pond. Its chest rumbled with a deep growl. I knew this wolf, somehow. But what I didn’t know was whether it was here to help me or kill me.

*Maybe killing me would be a mercy at this point. I’d rather have my life ended by this wolf than by Letifer.*

The spirits overcame their shock and started to tug me under the water again. They felt stronger this time, more insistent—as if they were trying to make up for lost time.

I was no match for their strength. I tipped my head back, and the water covered my ears, my hairline, my eyes. I drew in a deep, deep breath. How long could I hold it for? And was it even worth trying? If this wolf wasn’t here to help, then I was as good as dead already. I was going to drown in this horror-filled pool from hell.

The water engulfed me, and the magical energy of the pond wrapped around me like an old friend.

*I can use it to fight back*, I suddenly realized. I’d drawn on this power before—when I’d fought York and Artemis. Maybe I could use it to break the spirits’ hold on me, to crawl my way back out of this watery tomb.

But could I channel the energy before my lungs gave out? The cold water obscured my vision. I wouldn’t have known which way was up if not for the icy grip pulling me down. My lungs started to burn, begging for one sweet gulp of oxygen.

*Don’t panic. Don’t breathe. Just focus!*

I squinted my closed eyes, willing myself to tap into that well of power. Another surge of energy radiated through the pond, this time from me. The spirits’ grip on me broke, my bonds were severed, and I rose to the surface, kicking as hard as I could to reach the air before my lungs gave out.

I broke through the surface, and cold, sweet oxygen burned its way down my throat. I couldn’t get enough of it. Movement flashed in the corner of my eyes, and I turned to see the wolf charging toward me. There was something so familiar about it, though I couldn’t quite put my finger on what. Something about its eyes. Something non-threatening. Something I’d seen before.

Something that made my stomach flip-flop. Something that gave my heart a bittersweet ache.

My eyes widened as recognition plowed into me. *Lilac.*

*It’s Lilac’s wolf!*

Before I could process this, before I could even draw in another breath, a thousand icy hands gripped my body and yanked me back beneath the surface of the pond.

Letifer’s voice cut through the pond, not dampened in the least by the water separating us. “Kill her!”

*No!*

My lungs ached, and panic clawed at the edges of my mind, but I tapped into that energy again—faster, now—and with another jolt of energy, I broke free once more.

But Letifer was waiting for me this time. My head broke through the surface, and I got exactly one breath of air before I felt a hand, firm and unforgiving, shoving my head underneath the water.

I flailed and spluttered, trying to reach the surface again, but not quite making it. Amidst the sound of the spirits crying out for me, the water splashing, and my own defiant, desperate cries, I heard a wolf howl, followed by a deep splash.

This time, when Letifer shoved me beneath the surface, I felt a broad, warm form beneath me, pushing me back up. Lilac’s wolf was trying to save me.

A new sense of hope sparked within me. I wasn’t alone. Not anymore. And if Lilac was willing to fight for me to live, then I could fight too. I gathered up the spirit energy in the pond and struck back at Letifer with all my might.

His hold on my head slipped, and with Lilac lifting me to the surface, I managed to get my footing on the muddy ground near the edge of the pond. I wrapped my hand around Letifer’s legs and threw my weight forward, catching him off-guard and sending him careening into the mud.

I didn’t hesitate. Adrenaline and spirit energy pulsing through me, I scrambled on top of him and sank everything I had into pummeling him. All my fear, all my dread, all my worry for the people I cared about, and all my hate for the evil force that had been looming over us for far too long…

“I’m never going to join you!” I screamed as I punched. “I’m going to stop you! This world isn’t yours!”

His head snapped back from the force of my punch. I blinked and hesitated, surprised by my own strength. I didn’t know if it came from the spirits, or if this deep well of power was something I’d always had.

Behind me, I heard the growling and tearing sounds of Lilac’s wolf fighting the spirits from the pond. We were locked in a full-on battle to the death—it was them or us.

I chose us.

My fingers wrapped tight around Letifer’s throat, surging with power. It was time to end this—

A sharp, blinding pain lanced up my side, and I let out a desperate cry, my grip on Letifer’s neck slipping. I collapsed and rolled off him and onto the ground, clutching at my side.

Letifer rose to his feet like a demon before me—a force of light and dark magic with no end and no beginning.

He laughed. “Did you really think you were any kind of match for me?”

His foot made contact with my stomach, and I flew backward into the pond, the air knocked out of my lungs. The spirits were there to catch me in their icy grip, to pull me back down into the water.

My lungs wrenched open in desperation, and cold, cold water poured in. I fought against the spirits, desperate to reach the surface, to expel this icy hell from inside me, but Letifer was there, his hand as unforgiving as stone as he kept my head below the water.

Each second was agony wrapped in panic as I thrashed beneath the surface of the pond, fighting and losing. Fighting and dying, too panicked to reach that well of spirit energy. I was helpless, and, I realized with a deep sadness, I’d reached the end.

*This is it. I’m drowning.*

*I’m going to die.*

*I’m dying right now.*

I stopped fighting. The pain in my chest was ebbing away, replaced by an icy numbness; my limbs were too heavy to move. And that panic gave way to a resigned sort of calm.

I was dying, and there was no way around it.

But at least Lilac was here with me. At least I wasn’t going to face Death alone.

Through the murky darkness, I could just make out Lilac’s wolf. I reached for him. I wanted to feel him one last time before we met on the other side, warm and solid beneath my hand.

My fingers brushed against him, and he jerked in my grip. The pond lit up around me as an energy surge passed from me to Lilac. My vision started to fade, and Lilac’s wolf began to glow.

*What’s happening?*

The very last of my strength gave out, and Lilac’s wolf slipped through my fingers.

*No!* I wanted to hold onto him until the very end. I tried to speak, tried to form words, to tell him not to leave me, but then Lilac, a powerful light emanating from his eyes, leapt from the water with a deep growl.

The spirit hands pulling me down all trembled, then released me. I used the last bit of my strength to kick my way upward. I breached the surface and collapsed at the shallow end of the pond, coughing and choking and heaving up what felt like an ocean’s worth of cold water.

When I finally lifted my head, my body chilled and so weak I could’ve fallen asleep right there on the muddy bank, I saw Lilac’s wolf fighting Letifer.

Lilac was a blur of movement, illuminated by his own glowing eyes, and Letifer hissed suddenly, hunching over his side. Lilac must have bitten him.

I slowly crawled toward them. I couldn’t let Lilac face Letifer alone.

Letifer threw Lilac off, and he yipped in pain as he hit the ground and skidded backward. Radiating pure hatred, Letifer lunged for Lilac. I threw up my hand, channeling every ounce of power I could muster, and blasted him away.

My relief was short-lived.

The revenants were rising around us and closing in. And we were outnumbered—we couldn’t even hope to fight them. I didn’t even have the strength to lift my head.

Lilac’s wolf scrambled over to me, gently gripped me in his jaws, and then flung me onto his back. I instinctively wrapped my arms around his neck, holding on for dear life as he raced away. I glanced back. The revenants were hot on our heels.

*Can we outrun them?*

**Episode 1711**

*Why must Xavier torture me like this? Why does he have to be so goddamn hot? And why can’t he just let me go?*

I backed up—or at least I tried to. Locked in Xavier’s arms, he only let me back up a couple of inches before I hit the wall of his grip at my back.

“Xavier,” I breathed, trying like hell to ignore the pull between us. “You are in no position to dictate what I’m going to do—or not do. This is my decision, not yours.”

He laughed. The bastard. Here I was, trying to be strong and make a hard choice, and he was *laughing at me.*

“Do you really think I’m just going to sit back and let you make the worst mistake of your life?” he asked, leaning in. “Haven’t you learned by now? You can try to put distance between us, but it won’t work—I’m not going anywhere, tiger. Not without you.”

His lips were so close, so tempting. All I could think about was grabbing him by the collar of his shirt, pulling him down to my level, and kissing him until all my worries faded away. I felt so torn, so annoyed, so aroused.

*Which is probably exactly what he’s* trying *to make me feel.*

“What are you doing?” I asked. I kind of hated how breathless I sounded. How obviously he affected me.

I could’ve sworn his chest puffed out a bit. My Alpha mate was feeling very proud of himself right now. He brushed the hair away from my eyes, then stroked his warm, callused fingers down my cheek. “I meant what I said—I’m not going to allow you to break off anything with me.”

Aroused or not, my inner independence roared to be recognized. “That’s not your call! This is my life, and my decision. What we’ve been doing, it’s dangerous. You and Greyson are at each other’s throats, and I can’t choose, and it’s better if we just—”

He pressed one of those fingers to my lips. “Cali.” He breathed my name like it was his favorite prayer. “I *hate*—and that’s probably too weak a word to describe it, but it’s what I’m gonna use—I *hate* that I have to share you with Greyson. I won’t try to pretend that I’m okay with it, but if the options are sharing you with my brother or being cut out of your life? Well, I can’t let you push me away. That’s too much to sacrifice.” He leaned in, tilting his head down.

I expected to feel his lips pressing against mine, but instead he dipped lower, brushing a featherlight kiss against that sensitive spot on my jaw, just below my ear.

“You’re my everything, baby,” he whispered.

I trembled from head to toe. With desire, with anger, with fear for being the cause of more tension between Xavier and Greyson. I wanted Xavier so, so badly. That pull between us was practically humming with lust, wound just as tight as I felt.

*I can’t give in to this. He’s playing me. He’s trying to melt my defenses—and dammit, it’s working.*

I put my hands on his chest—his muscular, sculpted chest—and tried to push him away. He took my hands in his and twined our fingers together, not letting up one little bit. “Cali, we’ve tried this before, remember? And none of us were happy to be ‘broken up.’ What makes you think this would be any different? Give me three good reasons.”

I took a deep breath. Three reasons. I could do that.

I paused for a moment to clear my head, which was becoming increasingly difficult with Xavier practically wrapped around me.

Three reasons? I had a million, but I wanted to pick the strongest ones. So, I’d start with the obvious.

“Sharing me is tearing you and Greyson apart,” I said.

Xavier shook his head. “Even without you in the picture, we’ve never liked each other.”

That was a cop-out if ever I’d heard one. “And I’m making that wor—”

He cut me off with a deep kiss that left my head spinning. If I hadn’t been locked so securely in his arms, I might have toppled over when he pulled back and whispered. “Next.”

*Bastard.*

I swallowed roughly and tried to get my bearings again. Okay, reason number two…

“If I accidentally choose one of you, the other could die,” I said, my voice weak. This, to me, was the very worst part of the curse. The fact that as long as I was with either or both of them, their lives were hanging in the balance. If anything ever happened to either one of my mates because of my own stupid mistake, I would never be able to live with myself.

Xavier’s gaze softened, and he leaned in again. “That’s why we agreed to share in the first place.”

“But it’s still dangerous—” My voice broke on a breathy moan. Xavier’s lips were moving down my neck, driving me to the edge of madness and making it really freaking hard to have this conversation with him.

“Next,” he whispered.

I put a hand against the door to steady myself as I scrambled to come up with a third reason. *Come on, Cali. Reason number three. It’s not that hard. Weren’t you just thinking that you had a million reasons why this is a bad idea?*

Finally, I found it. “What about the pack?” I blurted out.

“What about them?”

“I mean… just look at what this is doing to them.”

He shrugged. “The pack will survive. Besides, you’re more important to me than any pack.”

This time, when his mouth landed on my chest, just below my collarbone and heading downward, I was too breathless to even try to argue. This man was driving me crazy with his heady assault of lust and logic. I had no defense against that combination. Maybe if we’d just been talking, I would’ve been able to hash it out with him, and he would’ve come to understand my perspective. But trying to have a debate while my lady parts were screaming for him?

Yeah, that wasn’t going so well.

He broke away from the trail he was making down my chest and looked up at me, his lips quirked. “Any other arguments?”

Despite myself, a breathy bubble of laughter slipped through my lips. I knew my reasons were good, and that keeping my distance was probably the smart thing to do. But right now, I couldn’t bring myself to care about being smart.

He was winning this argument against me, damn him. And damn me, because I didn’t mind one bit. If I thought about it—and thinking wasn’t exactly easy right now—it had always been a struggle to wrap my head around how I felt about him, to find that balance of primal desire and reasoning.

Plus, I liked it when he took charge like this. I always had.

And I didn’t want him to stop.

*Fuck.*

So instead of pulling another Very Good Reason to the forefront of my lust-clouded mind, I tipped my head up and captured his lips with my own. His groan of approval vibrated through me and went straight to my center.

Xavier pulled me up so that my legs were locked around his hips, and he pressed me against the closed bedroom door. One hand wrapped securely around my waist, and the other twined through my hair as he kissed me.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, giving back as good as I got. All my worries, all my inhibitions were gone. Now, all I could focus on was how badly I wanted my mate. My hips rocked against his, separated by our layers of clothing, and he let out another one of those maddening groans.

“Fuck,” he rasped. “I need you, Cali.”

His mouth trailed down my neck and chest, then he freed his hand from my hair to tug my shirt over my head and picked up where he’d left off. When his mouth wrapped around my nipple through the thin, lacy material of my bra, I gasped and ground my hips even harder against him.

Xavier’s hand anchored itself on my hips as he untangled me from his body so that I was standing on my own two feet. For a moment, he just drank me in, his pupils blown wide with desire.

“Why’d you stop?” I asked breathlessly.

His swollen lips curved up into a smirk. “Because you look good enough to eat.”

*Oh, my god*.

And then my Alpha mate knelt in front of me, his lips trailing over my stomach and across my hips. He reached for the button on my jeans, a question in his eyes.

I nodded so hard that my head nearly popped off my neck.

He unbuttoned my pants, then tugged the zipper down. Then he leaned in again, kissing and tonguing at the nearly exposed skin just above my panties. My fingers twined in his hair.

“Xavier,” I moaned.

Suddenly, Mace’s voice echoed from downstairs. “Xavier! Greyson! Get down here *now*!”

**Episode 1712**

LOLA

I blinked, then my jaw dropped. “*Irma?*”

Why was the headmistress of Tottenville Academy tied up and unconscious in Emmett’s trunk?

My mouth opened and then closed, and the only response I could muster was, “What the *hell*?”

Emmett rushed over and slammed the trunk shut. “Don’t worry about that.”

I rounded on him. “What the hell did you do to Irma?”

He grimaced. “I’ll explain everything. It’s just sort of complicated—”

“Uh, I think I can put the pieces together pretty well, thanks. You obviously kidnapped the head of a prestigious school.”

I couldn’t help but grimace at the thought of Irma, tied up and captured like some kind of animal. Sure, I wasn’t exactly her number one fan—after all, she had threatened to expel me a few times. But kidnapping? Had Emmett lost his mind? I wanted *no* part of this. It was bad enough that Jacqueline had followed me home like a stray puppy.

Vampires were coming out of the woodwork left and right, and it didn’t escape me for one moment that my home was still a werewolf pack house—not a vampire halfway house! And certainly not a place to bring kidnapping victims! I’d thought Emmett was trustworthy, at least insofar that he could make a serum to cure revenant magic, but maybe I’d been wrong to give him that much credit.

Maybe I could rescue Irma. Maybe that would put me on her good side once and for all.

I hesitated. *Does Irma even have a good side? Or will she just blame me for this? That would be right up her alley, actually.*

Either way, I couldn’t just leave her tied up in the trunk. I had to help her somehow.

I reached out to open the trunk again, but Emmett stepped smoothly in front of me. “Okay, so it’s not what it looks like. I mean, it is, sort of. But it’s not as *bad* as it looks.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “So you *didn’t* kidnap Irma?”

“Well, no. I did. But I did it because I care.”

“*Right*. Because kidnapping is definitely a traditional hallmark of affection.”

Emmett’s lips pursed in that way they did when he was finding something—or some*one*—particularly troublesome. It didn’t take a professor to guess who.

“I was surrounded by all the revenants,” he said. “You were there, too. You know what it was like, right?”

I nodded, thinking back to that terrifying night. It had been like something out of a zombie movie, and a night I didn’t want to think about if I didn’t have to. “Yeah, it was… pretty scary. And Irma was *leading* them.”

“*Leading* *them*? When I found her, she was dazed, and I tried to talk some sense into her. When her eyes flashed orange, I had no choice but to knock her out and take her here. She wasn’t going to leave, not in that state. I knew it was only a matter of time before she became a revenant too. I brought her here—against her will—for her safety.”

I shook my head. “Do you have any idea how messed up that sounds?”

“Yes.” He sighed. “But I don’t care. It’s the truth.”

“I can’t believe you’d do that to someone, much less someone you claim to care about.”

“Please, Lola. I know this doesn’t cast me in the most favorable light, but it was the only way to save her. Sometimes you have to be cruel to be kind. I wasn’t just going to leave her there, but I also didn’t relish the thought of killing her when she became a revenant. So I sort of… panicked.”

“Understatement.” I eyed the trunk. “What are you going to do now? What happens when she wakes up?”

As if on cue, Irma’s voice called from inside the trunk. “Where am I? Help!” A pounding sound echoed along with her voice, and soon the trunk of the car was denting outward.

“Okay, we have to let her out.” I shoved Emmett aside and opened the trunk.

Irma’s arms were still tied, but her legs were curled up against her chest. That must have been how she’d managed to create a gigantic hole in the trunk. Her eyes widened. “Lola Spillane? Get me out of—”

BAM.

Emmett slammed the trunk shut again.

I turned to him, aghast. “What the *fuck*?”

The cool, level-headed vampire professor I remembered from Tottenville suddenly looked like a boy with his hand caught in the cookie jar.

“Don’t let her out, Lola. Please.”

“Um, we have to! One, she recognized me and now is going to blame me for this. And two, it’s not like she can live in your trunk! What is your plan here?”

Emmett held his hands up in front of him. “I’ll figure this out! Just give me some time to think!”

I had never seen him look so completely panicked. And honestly, it made me feel a little panicked too. I needed to calm him down. He was useless like this. Actually, he was worse than useless. Right now, he was a liability. How were we supposed to get him to use his serum to cure the revenants when he looked like he was moments away from running off into the woods and disappearing?

*What the hell is going on to make him act like this? Is he upset about the revenants? Or the fact that he just kidnapped his boss?*

Emmett paced back and forth in front of the trunk, muttering to himself while Irma screamed for someone to help her and made new dents in the car. Sooner or later, she was coming out of that trunk, whether we opened it or not.

I grabbed Emmett’s arm—and was instantly zapped by a megadose of vampire heat. My mouth went dry, and my heart skipped up into double-time. Suddenly, I felt hot and achy all over, like I had a fever and Emmett was the cure.

He stopped pacing and looked at me. I watched his pupils dilate, watched some color seep into his pale cheekbones. Was he being affected by my heat too? He was frozen under my touch, but he didn’t try to back away.

He looked so vulnerable, now. Vulnerable, but hot AF. His hair was mussed from where he’d been dragging his fingers through it, and his face was flushed. He bit his lower lip, and it took everything I had to not straight-up moan.

“What the *hell* is going on out here?”

Jay’s commanding voice cut through me like a spear made of ice. I shoved Emmett back and turned to face my mate as he approached.

My vampire heat suddenly had a new target to lock onto, and boy did it like what it saw. *Jay*. My mate. All I wanted was to grab him and take him right then and there, with Emmett having a mental breakdown two feet away and Irma fighting to get out of the trunk.

“SOMEONE HELP ME!” she screamed.

I blinked. *Irma.* Right. Shit.

Jay sidled up to me and put a possessive arm around my shoulders. It sent delicious shivers down my spine.

Jay looked at the trunk, then asked Emmett, “What’s going on there?”

“Nothing,” Emmett said quickly. Too quickly.

“Okay…” Jay said, his brows lifting. “Are you ready to get to work, then? There’s a lot going on.”

“I just need to set up my lab and—”

“Emmett brought an unexpected visitor!” I blurted out, then raced over to pop open the now very dented trunk.

Irma glared at me. “Professor Emmett Laurence!” she called. “Get. Me. Out. Of. Here. NOW!”

Jay’s eyes widened. “What’s she doing here?” He turned to Emmett with a snarl. “Either you tell me what’s going on, or you’re going to have an entire pack house on your ass.”

This Alpha behavior from Jay was so fucking hot, but since it seemed banging him until the sun rose was off the table for now, it was probably best to not let things get out of hand. I stepped between them, planting a hand on Jay’s chest. “It was a misunderstanding.”

“Oh really?” Jay scoffed. “What, did you mistake Irma for a suitcase?”

He reached in and cut her bonds before helping her out of the trunk.

“Finally, someone with manners,” she muttered. Then she glared at Emmett. “I hope you have an explanation for this, Professor.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I just… panicked.”

Irma did not look impressed. “There will be consequences for this! I’ll revoke your tenure!”

“You two can hash that out later,” Jay said. “Right now, we need Emmett to get to work on the serum. We’ll set you up in the basement.”

Emmett nodded, and our merry little group started toward the house.

“And this is where we’ll be staying?” Irma wrinkled her nose. “A werewolf pack house?”

“We’re all making sacrifices right now,” Jay deadpanned.

We approached the porch. “Why don’t we sneak into the basement?” I said.

Jay stopped. “Why do we have to sneak?”

“Xavier was pretty prickly about it.”

“And Greyson—” Jay’s brows drew together, but before he could say anything else, the front door slammed open and Greyson’s voice boomed from the entryway.

“Where the *hell* do you think you’re going?”

And then, before anyone could explain that this was Emmett, Greyson shifted and made a beeline for the professor.

**Episode 1713**

GREYSON

I slammed into the vampire, knocking him to the ground and pinning him there with the weight of my wolf. My leg smarted with the exertion, but I couldn’t let it bother me. I couldn’t let that stupid wound show any sign of weakness right now.

Pushing through the pain was the only option.

“I think there’s been a misunderstanding,” the vampire began, his voice wheezy from the pressure on his lungs.

I snarled at him in reply and showed off the razor-sharp teeth that could end him in a second. He quieted down real quick.

“Professor Laurence!” an unfamiliar voice cried out. “Don’t fight back! Play dead! Perhaps he’ll leave you alone!”

Oh shit, this was the professor? Couldn’t Jay or Lola have showed me a fucking picture of him?

“He’s a werewolf, not a grizzly bear,” Lola said.

“Of course not. You’re not supposed to play dead with a grizzly bear.”

It was then that I noticed another vampire—a woman wearing rumpled clothes—standing behind Lola and Jay and watching me with wide eyes.

*What the fuck? There’s another one of them? Who is she?*

If this nerdy guy was the professor, who was this woman? What was going on? Jay hadn’t mentioned anything about her. Why was this pack house such a huge goddamn magnet for chaos? And since when did members of my pack hang out with a bunch of rando vampires?

Lola was a special exception. She always would be because she was once a wolf, and she was Cali’s best friend. But no good could come of werewolves and vampires being in such close proximity. Just ask Xavier.

“Excuse me,” said the vampire professor under my foot. “If we could talk about this for a moment, I think you’ll see—”

I snarled and snapped my teeth again, and his mouth snapped shut. I would do the talking.

“Greyson, don’t hurt him!” Lola rushed over. “Emmett is here to help us.”

“I am,” Emmett wheezed. “Here to help, that is.”

“He’s not a threat, and neither is Irma.” Jay gestured to the vampire behind him.

Anger gave way to curiosity—and then annoyance. First there was Mace, shouting for Xavier and me like we were at his beck and call. The Blue Blood Alpha had sounded pissed off, too. No surprise there—Mace was always whining about something.

But now Lola and Jay were, what? Smuggling another vampire into the pack house? I still had no fucking clue what was going on, and as Alpha I should have been the first to know. This wasn’t acceptable.

I stepped away from Emmett and shifted back to my human form. “Someone explain to me why you were about to bring in an unauthorized vampire!” I gestured to Irma. Nobody answered, so I tapped into that Alpha tone and bellowed, “*NOW*.”

“Okay, okay!” Lola rushed forward, her hands held out in front of her. “We totally didn’t know that she’d be coming. It was a bit of a surprise, to be honest. Emmett had to knock her out and put her in the trunk—it was a whole situation.”

Just like that, annoyance shifted back into barely controlled fury. “And?” I snapped.

Lola’s eyes went wide as saucers. “And since Jay said you said it was fine, and Xavier did too, I figured what was one more vampire?”

I gave both Lola and Jay my most intimidating glare. She’d asked Xavier about the professor too? Wasn’t Jay talking to *me* enough? The true Alpha? “In the future, if either of you have any questions, you come to me first. Not Xavier. Got it?”

Lola nodded, and Jay gave a grunt of assent. I could tell he wasn’t pleased to see me throwing my weight around, reminding them that his best friend was about as low on the totem pole as he was.

I sighed. “I have to go deal with Mace, but rest assured, if your *guests* do anything I don’t like, they will be dealt with. Swiftly.” I eyed Emmett and Irma meaningfully. “And permanently.”

I stormed back inside. God, this day was just getting better and better. I hated the stench of vampires, and I knew I’d said I would deal with it, but that was because Jay had said Emmett could help us. I wasn’t looking to take in every wayward vampire in the area.

*Ugh. Maybe I should just shift and live in the woods like I did when I was a Rogue. Xavier would love that.*

I found Mace with Xavier in the kitchen, and I walked in just in time to hear Mace bitch about “nothing getting done.” Even if you discounted our less than stellar history, the Alpha trying to push me around never failed to make my hackles rise.

Xavier was leaning casually against the wall while Mace bitched. When I walked in, my brother’s eyebrows rose the slightest bit, like he was more amused than anything else, knowing that I was going to have to bear the brunt of Mace’s outburst.

I held back a growl to the best of my ability as I approached Mace. I knew he was justifiably upset over Pip’s death, but I couldn’t hide the irritation seeping into my voice. “So, what’s your problem?”

The Blue Blood Alpha rounded on me, his teeth bared. “We built all these pyres, and for what? Pip deserves more than a half-assed memorial. Yet neither the Redwood Alpha nor his brother seem to give a fuck.” His eyes narrowed. “Maybe Xavier was right. Since you’re clearly not taking your Alpha role seriously, maybe it’s time for a change.”

It took everything I had not to lash out at Mace and Xavier—in that order. Instead, I took a deep breath and speared my brother with a look. The bastard didn’t even pretend not to smirk. Where the fuck did he get off, taking his grievances about me to Mace? What went on here was none of Mace’s business.

I turned back to Mace and met him dead-on. “If the accommodations here aren’t up to snuff, you’re welcome to leave anytime you want. Nobody is keeping you or your pack prisoner.”

Mace’s nostrils flared. An Alpha knew a challenge when he heard one, and Mace was no exception. “I’m not going anywhere, but perhaps it’s time to let a real Alpha take command.”

My eyes narrowed. “Are you threatening me? And before you answer,” I added quickly, “let me remind you that I have been nothing but understanding and generous to both you and your pack.”

He scoffed.

“I hope I can count on your cooperation,” I continued, “but I’m not going to rush blindly into a fight. If you want to risk what’s left of your pack to take on Silas and the revenants alone, then you can do it—but not while you’re under my roof.”

Xavier snorted. “You mean *my* roof. It’s my house.”

I sighed. *Will my brother ever grow up?*

“What’s your plan then?” Mace pressed. “Do you even have one?”

“We’re still trying to figure out what we’re dealing with,” I reminded him. “Silas has threatened to kill me, along with everyone else. So until we know how to defeat him, I’m not going to risk my pack. And if you want to protect *your* pack, you should keep that in mind.”

Finally, the Blue Blood Alpha fell silent. The victory was small, but I relished it all the same.

Xavier snorted. “Great plan. I love it when the Alpha’s words of wisdom are that we’ll ‘figure it out.’ Brilliant, Greyson.”

I ignored his comment. I didn’t have the energy to get into it with him right now. If he had any better ideas, he wasn’t speaking up with them, was he? Just like him, too. Always making comments like that but never offering anything concrete.

I just shook my head and stormed back up the stairs to my bedroom. My leg ached with every step, a never-ending reminder of everything we—both myself and the pack—stood to lose if we couldn’t get ahead of this revenant-slash-Silas clusterfuck.

*Fuck*.

Maybe there was some truth to Mace’s accusations, after all. Things *were* getting out of control. We were practically in lockdown here, hiding out from revenants, taking on vampires… Were we making any progress at all? Or were we just in a free fall? The long plummet before the final impact?

I sighed as I pushed open my bedroom door, stepped inside, and shut the door behind me. I needed to do a better job of reining everyone in.

I leaned back against the door, closing my eyes. My head was pounding in time with my wounded leg.

*Will this day ever end?*

Suddenly, all the hairs stood up on the back of my neck, and I got the sinking sensation that I wasn’t alone. I opened my eyes.

Shaine was standing by the windows, his eyes so dark they looked black.

“You didn’t listen, Daddy. There are consequences when you don’t listen.”

**Episode 1714**

XAVIER

After Greyson punctuated his hissy fit with a dramatic exit, I was left to bear the brunt of Mace’s anger. And there was a lot of it. Honestly, I would have been more than happy to let Greyson take the lion’s share. Most of this was his fault, anyway.

By the time I was finally able to escape back to my room, my body was humming with annoyance. This was such a fucking joke. If Greyson would just put me in charge, then none of this would be happening. I’d be the one calling the shots, telling people what to do, mounting our defense against Silas and the revenants.

Hell, I’d actually be able to come up with a plan if Greyson wasn’t constantly getting in my way. If I were Alpha, then Greyson would be able to skulk off into irrelevance, and everything would be as it was supposed to be.

*I should talk to Rishika later. We should probably start up the training again for everyone, just in case.*

I wasn’t entirely sure how to effectively train anyone to fight a ghost, but I was confident we could figure it out. Our training program had saved a few lives the last time we’d faced off against Silas—no reason to think it wouldn’t do the same thing this time around, revenants and ghosts or not.

*Maybe Marta can be our secret weapon against the ghosts…*

I didn’t relish the idea of throwing her into battle—she was basically a kid, after all—but desperate times and all that.

I passed Greyson’s closed bedroom door on my way to my own room and briefly considered trying to talk to him. There was so much to discuss—the impending war, Lola bringing in that vampire teacher who’d allegedly cured a revenant, Cali wanting to break things off again…

I thought back to my moment with her down in the spare room. I’d meant every word I’d said—as much as I hated sharing her with my brother, I’d do it gladly if it was the only way for me to be with her.

For now, at least.

Greyson, I was sure, felt the exact same way. It was a shame, really, that we’d never gotten along. We had so much in common. Maybe a little *too* *much* in common. Maybe that had been the problem all along.

Greyson was losing his grip on the pack. I could see it. Mace could see it. Anyone who was even half paying attention could see it. I just hoped he figured things out before he dragged the whole pack down with him.

I continued on to my bedroom and pushed the door open. Cali sat up, her face flushed. When Mace had so rudely interrupted our moment, I’d told her to meet me in my bedroom, that we’d pick up where we’d left off.

Part of me was honestly a little surprised to see her here. She’d been working so hard at talking herself out of being with me earlier, I’d half-expected her to have put up those walls again while I dealt with Greyson and Mace. But then again, she was pretty flustered.

I smirked to myself at the thought, but it was short-lived. Honestly, I didn’t know for sure if I’d convinced her that she shouldn’t give up on sharing. I’d seen the pain in her eyes when we’d first started talking. She hated seeing Greyson and me fighting.

*I guess I’d better try to cool it with him—at least when Cali’s around.*

I didn’t want things to be any harder on her than they already were, and I didn’t want to lose her. I probably shouldn’t have needled Greyson with Mace, either, but that was water under the bridge now.

“Is everything okay downstairs?” Cali asked.

I nodded. “You don’t have to worry about anything. Mace was just blowing off some steam.”

She nodded too, and silence set in as I approached her. It was a heavy silence, not quite awkward, but far from comfortable. Sexual tension simmered in the air between us, and suddenly I didn’t give a shit about Greyson or Mace or being Alpha or anything except how much I wanted my mate.

I stopped right in front of her. “Hey.”

“Hey back.”

Silence took over once more. Her eyes were fixed on me, and she watched me with a look I couldn’t identify, some heady mix of desire and worry and love and dread, all wrapped up in a bow.

I couldn’t stand the tension between us—at least not while we weren’t doing anything about it.

“So, you waited for me,” I said.

Her gaze skittered down to my lips. “I probably shouldn’t have, but—”

I knelt in front of her and captured her lips in a sweet kiss. If she was bothered by my chosen method of interrupting her, she didn’t let on.

“But it’s inevitable, right?” I said. “That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. You can break up with me now, you can break up with me in ten years, but it’s always going to be you and me at the end of all this.”

I brushed my lips over hers before dragging my mouth over the curve of her jaw and down her neck. She let out little whimper-sighs that went straight to my cock, and I teased her neck with my lips, drawing in her scent, savoring the heat coming off her soft skin.

“Xavier,” she moaned softly, clutching at my shoulders. “We… We can’t.”

I made a noise of dissent in my throat. “I’m showing you that we *can*.” I lifted her chin. “I will always love you, Cali. Nothing has changed that, and nothing ever will.”

I leaned in, and our lips connected again. I felt her body soften slightly, felt her lips give in as I deepened the kiss. For a while, we did just that—kiss while that tension slowly built between us, shifting from something oppressive and uncomfortable to a gentle desperation, crackling and intensifying, a spark in a dry field, ready to burn the world down for just one more kiss, just one more taste.

She broke away from my mouth, her pupils dilated and her cheeks a pretty shade of pink. She looked to die for. “What should we do?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

“You don’t have to do anything,” I whispered back. I captured her lips again, gently pushing her down onto her back and moving down her body. She tried to sit up, tried to pull me back up to her, and I caught her wrists in my hands and pinned them to her sides as I continued.

“I’ve got you,” I whispered. “You’re safe. Don’t think, just feel. Feel how good it is between us.”

I let go of her wrists to tug her shirt over her head, and then I picked up where I’d left off, savoring the taste of her skin, the sounds of her moans, careful not to push too far, too fast, but also not go so slow that she had time to think about anything except how good I was making her feel.

I knew Cali, my tiger, and I knew she was worried, scared for me, for Greyson. Just like I knew that said fear came from a place of deep love. The feeling was mutual—except I was way more terrified of losing her than anything else. I could face anything in this world as long as Cali was at my side.

As long as she didn’t keep fighting what was growing between us.

I peeled her clothes off, and then settled on my knees in front of her spread legs. God, I would never get tired of tasting this woman, or the sounds she made as I brought her to the edge again and again.

Her fingers twined in my hair, tugging sharply, and she called out my name before her back bowed and she was lost to the rush of pleasure I’d given her.

I would have happily stayed down on my knees for Cali, but she pulled me on top of her, and after a brief moment of stripping away my own clothes, I sank into her and gathered her tight in my arms as we began to move together.

And just like that, the humming, tightening, crackling tension shifted, no longer desperate and hungry and ready to burn. As long as I was here with my mate, our bodies curled around each other, I was happy. Truly happy.

Cali’s breath hitched again, and her legs tightened around my hips. She was close, and she wasn’t the only one.

I reached between us, where our bodies were connected, and gently rubbed circles on that bundle of nerves I knew would take her over the edge. “Come for me, Cali.”

“Xavier!”

Her body locked onto mine, and I was lost.

When we came back down to earth, I gathered her in my arms and kissed her forehead. She held me tight, like she was afraid to let go.

I looked down at her, brushing her hair away from her face. She was so beautiful. “I love you,” I whispered.

She looked up at me, her eyes brimming with too many emotions to parse. “I love you too.”

We settled against my pillows as a new silence wrapped tight around us.

Something wasn’t right.

I should have felt happy. I should have been completely over the moon, but I wasn’t. And Cali was clinging to me like she thought she was never going to see me again.

I glanced out the window, toward the dark night.

*Why does it feel like something’s wrong?*

I tightened my arms around my mate.

It felt like something bad was coming.

**Episode 1715**

MARTA

My arms wrapped around the powerful neck of Lilac’s wolf, I held on for dear life as he raced away from the army of revenants, away from Letifer in the form of Silas, and away from the ghost pond where he had tried to drown me.

Just thinking of that long fight for my life, and how close I’d come to losing it—multiple times—made my body tremble, made my breath hitch. I squeezed Lilac’s wolf even tighter. And then I froze.

*Should I be worried about choking him?*

He wasn’t alive, exactly, so he didn’t need oxygen. But… he clearly wasn’t entirely dead either.

If I *was* choking him, though, he didn’t let on. He was racing through the woods so fast the trees and bushes blurred around us. He dodged branches, leapt over rocks, waded through streams, and all the while he carried me on his back as easily as if I weighed no more than a feather.

I risked a glance behind us, worried that the revenants were just a step away. They hadn’t given us much of a head start back at the pond. But the woods were dark and silent. No footsteps crackling over the leaves, or flashes of orange eyes.

The movement of the wolf beneath me was beginning to make my head spin, so I looked ahead, then buried my face in Lilac’s neck, breathing him in. He smelled just the same as he did in his corporeal human form.

It was amazing how he could move through the darkness. Werewolf night vision had to be just as good as a vampire’s. The panic clutching at my chest began to loosen. For the first time since I’d been knocked out and dragged out of my bedroom, it really seemed like things might be okay. The pain in my side was lessening too, no longer a sharp pulse with every jolt of Lilac’s wolf beneath me.

My grip around his neck loosened, and I started to slide a bit. His wolf jostled me more, and I struggled to regain my tight hold on him. Was I losing strength? Had all the channeling I’d done back at the pond drained me like it had before?

No… This felt different. This wasn’t my strength—it wasn’t my aching, tired limbs ultimately failing to hold on. It was…

It was Lilac’s wolf.

His fur shimmered in the moonlight, and then began to fade. *Oh no. What’s happening?*

“Lilac,” I called, my voice still rough from all the screaming and my near-drowning. “What’s wrong?”

Suddenly his wolf disappeared, and there was nothing but air beneath me.

I hit the ground *hard*. My body skidded across the dirt, tumbling until I smacked into a tree and the breath was knocked clean out of me.

For a long string of seconds, I lay on the ground at the base of the tree, wheezing, whimpering, staring up at the moonlight-dappled leaves. Everything hurt. *Everything*. The world spun around me, and spots appeared in my vision.

*Am I blacking out?*

No! No, I couldn’t do that. I couldn’t stop. I had to keep moving. The revenants and Letifer were still out there, and staying here was as good as giving myself up to them.

“Marta?”

I turned my head slightly, wincing at the bolt of pain that shot down my neck and shoulders. It was Lilac, in his ghostly human form. He knelt down beside me.

“Are you okay?”

A rush of emotions hit me. I wanted to scream at him that no, I obviously was *not* okay. I wanted to burst into tears and weep out all the panic and dread and pain and horror I’d experienced tonight. But most of all, I wanted to wrap him in my arms and never let go.

But moving at all was difficult, so the best I could do was force myself to sit up and hesitantly reach out one bleeding, shaking hand to him.

*Am I dreaming right now? Is he really here?*

Then I felt his ghostly skin brushing against my fingers, and I didn’t hesitate to lean in and kiss him. My body protested the movement, but I didn’t care. Within seconds, Lilac appeared again, in the flesh, and that little burst of strength burned out. I slumped back, completely exhausted, practically delirious.

If this was a dream, I didn’t want to wake up.

I expected to hit the ground, but instead I fell into Lilac’s arms. He held me upright when my strength failed me and pulled me into a tight hug. He let out a shuddering breath. “I… I thought I was going to lose you back there. Are you hurt?” He grimaced. He must have realized it was a fairly obvious question. “I mean, like, badly hurt?”

I shook my head. This all felt so unreal, and I was too emotional to speak. I didn’t trust my voice.

I took a deep breath, then hesitantly reached up to stroke his cheek. “Are you really here?”

He nodded. “I am. Really and truly. I lost you for a while, and my head still hurts, but I never gave up looking for you. I’m glad my wolf was able to find you.”

I looked around, wincing as the muscles in my neck protested. “Your wolf… It was here, but it vanished.”

He looked at me with unspeakable sadness in his eyes. “I know. I… I was hoping I had my wolf back, but… being a spirit, we’re two separate entities. All I want is to be reunited with him.” His voice broke, and he cleared his throat. “It’s fine. It doesn’t matter. The important thing is that I have you back.”

“You *saved* me.”

His lips quirked upward. “I hope you didn’t seriously think I wouldn’t. I mean, come on. I’m a ghost. It’s not like I have anything to lose.”

My mouth tried to smile, and then it twisted into a grimace as a sob wrenched its way out of my chest. “That’s not funny.” I sniffed, tears spilling down my cheeks. “I would never have forgiven myself if something happened to you.”

He stroked a few tears away from my cheeks. “Something still could. The revenants are probably still on our trail.”

“Then we need to get going.” I gritted my teeth as I tried to stand, and Lilac was right there next to me, bracing me and letting me lean on him.

“Are you sure you can walk?” he asked, worry pinching his expression. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but you don’t look so good.”

“I have to walk.” I leaned against his chest, trying to muster up my strength, and his arms wrapped tight around me. Back at the pond, I’d felt so alone. For most of my life, I’d felt alone. But now I wasn’t. Lilac’s wolf had saved me when I’d thought I would die all by myself. And now Lilac was here, practically keeping me upright.

I didn’t know what I’d do without him.

I lifted my head and captured his lips in a soft kiss. My fingers clutched at his shirt, and I deepened the kiss, savoring the warmth of his skin, the sensation of his lips moving against mine. He kissed me back with even more desperation, more hunger, more heat.

I might not have asked for Lilac to be tethered to me, but now I couldn’t imagine life without him by my side. I owed him everything—owed him my life, a couple times over. And I knew that I would give my own life if it meant saving him, and I wouldn’t regret a thing.

I broke away from the kiss, and he grinned. “Maybe we don’t need to rush off so quickly?”

I rolled my eyes. We’d just had an honest, emotional, intense moment, and he’d gone and ruined it with a flippant comment. What a deeply *Lilac* thing to do.

“Come on, Mr. Hero.” I wrapped an arm around his shoulder, leaning heavily on him as we continued our journey back to the pack house. We couldn’t be too far away now.

“Did you see what happened back there?” I asked. “At the pond?”

“When I came to, I saw revenants and spirits coming out of the pond.”

I shivered, leaning closer.

“And there was something else,” he added. “A figure bathed in light. Whoever it was, he seemed to be orchestrating it all.”

“I think it was Letifer. He was trying to kill me.” I sighed. “Or maybe it was Silas. I’m not sure. It was hard to make him out.”

“You’ll need to tell the pack what you saw. It’s definitely not a good thing.”

I nodded, clutching him closer. Chills spread down my spine, and not just because of the horrifying memories of the night. It was cold out, too cold to keep going much longer without some heat. We needed to get back to the pack house. Lilac rubbed my arms, trying to warm me up.

The sounds of branches snapping broke through the silence of the forest, and we turned around as the orange-eyed revenants from the ghost pond appeared, marching toward us.

**Episode 1716**

VIOLET

“Get back!” I shoved Sophie behind me.

“Hey!” she protested. “What’s—”

The vampire stepped out of the woods, fixing its dark eyes on me and baring it fangs. Dammit! This was the last thing I needed!

Sophie peeked around me. “Daisy, what’s going—” She cut herself off with a gasp. “Oh my god. Is that a *real vampire*?”

I nodded, still standing in front of her. “In the flesh. Be careful. These things are faster than you think.”

The vampire slowly stalked toward us, its eyes practically glowing with amusement. It thought it was playing with us, that we were easy prey.

It was wrong. And underestimating us was going to prove to be a fatal mistake.

“Daisy.” Sophie clutched my shoulders. “Maybe we should run.”

I shook my head, not taking my eyes off the vampire. “No, I’m going to stand my ground.”

I could take it. I’d taken down plenty of vampires before. I just had to wait until the last possible moment to make my move.

Vampires were deadly fast, even faster than werewolves. And the best strategy for taking one down was to use that speed against them, to surprise them.

I turned my head slightly and whispered to Sophie. “Back away slowly, and then, when the time is right, run like hell.”

“How will I know when the time is right?” she whispered back, fear seeping into her voice.

“You’ll know.”

There was a beat of silence, and then she asked, “Are you going to come with me?”

“Don’t worry. I can handle a vampire on my own. I’ve done it before.”

Admittedly, the last time I’d taken down a vampire, it had been with Charlie, my hunter-slash-werewolf mate. We’d made such a good team. If only he were here now…

“Get moving, Sophie. Remember, back away slowly, and then—”

“No, I’m not leaving you. I’m a hunter too. I’ve been preparing for this moment my whole life. You’ve only been at camp for a couple days. I’m not going to leave you to fend for yourself.”

The vampire, who still hadn’t spoken, eyed us curiously. I couldn’t tell if he was sizing us up, or just enjoying the moment. Maybe he liked to play with his food before he ate it.

“I can handle it,” I hissed. “Get out of here.”

“*No*.”

Gritting my teeth, I half-turned—so that my back wasn’t exposed to the vampire—and shoved Sophie. “Get out!”

Her eyes wide, she slowly began to step back. I could tell she was hating every second of it, but I breathed a sigh of relief when she disappeared into the tree line. Now I could focus on killing the vampire without worrying about protecting Sophie.

The vampire’s eyes narrowed. He must have realized his dinner had just been cut in half, because he snarled and rushed toward me. But I was ready. I leapt to the side at the last second and shifted.

My paws skidded through the snow as I braced myself to charge the vampire. Even though I lived most of my life in my human form, I felt so much more like myself as a wolf. I felt ready to take on the world—and it had been far too long since I’d allowed myself to enjoy my wolf.

The vampire gasped as he recovered, then he slammed into me and the real fight began. Letting my body go loose, I flipped the vampire in midair, allowing his own momentum to betray him. He hit the snowy ground hard as I pinned him down and snapped at his throat, ready to deliver a fatal bite.

He clawed at me and hissed and snarled and tried to bite me back. The vampire was strong, but I was stronger, and I never wavered. I would kill this fanged beast. I would rip his throat out.

That was a given. Fated, from the moment the vampire had decided to take on what he had assumed were two helpless human girls.

And once I was done with this bloodsucker, once I’d triumphed over him, then I’d figure out how Charlie and I could get the hell out of this camp and be together without worrying about hunters or his psychotic parents.

But first, the vampire.

He was a fast opponent—even pinned beneath me, his movements were a struggle to track. I sank my teeth into his shoulders, into his arm, his chest, but I never reached the target I was aiming for. And then, as my teeth glanced off the side of his neck, just missing the mark, his feet came up beneath me and he kicked me away.

I skidded across the snow, and the vampire was on me, snarling as he tried to sink his fangs into my throat. As he went in for a bite, my teeth sank into his jaw, and he let out a horrifying scream that made my hair stand on end.

I rolled so he was pinned beneath me once more. He was struggling, bleeding, and weakening, but my strength was fading too. It was time to put a pin in this. I reared back and, eyeing the vampire’s throat, bared my teeth.

Branches cracked and snow crunched behind me, and a jolt of dread pulsed through me. *Did the vampire bring back-up?*

I turned to look at the newcomer, but when there was a blur of movement—both coming at me, and moving beneath me. The vampire was going in for the kill.

Suddenly, I was shoved to the side, and something dark and smelling of cedar whooshed past my face. The vampire froze, his mouth open in a deathly grimace, then slumped back. Sticking out of his chest was a wooden stake. I scrambled back and shifted into my human form.

And there she was. Sophie. Panting, her eyes wide as she looked from me to the staked vampire on the ground.

*Holy crap. She staked the vampire.*

And then, a more pressing, more terrifying realization sank in.

*And I just shifted in front of her.*

Sophie’s face paled. “You’re a… a…”

I sighed. “Yeah, I’m a werewolf.”

“Uh huh.” She swallowed roughly. “But also, you’re naked.”

I blinked, then looked down at my exposed body. *Is she seriously more worried about me being naked than about the fact that I’m a werewolf?*

“You… You don’t seem surprised,” I said slowly. “About me being a werewolf.”

Sophie shrugged. “I mean, I am. But I had my suspicions.”

“You suspected I was a werewolf, and you didn’t say anything? Why not? Are you not a hunter?”

Her face reddened. “I, um, I didn’t want to upset Charlie. And I know being outed as a werewolf around here doesn’t really bode well for people. That’s why I never said anything about him to anyone. I’d never do that.”

My eyes narrowed, and if I’d still been in my wolf form, my hackles would’ve been rising. “What about Charlie?”

“I just mean… I know what he is. I know he’s a werewolf.”

She said it like it was the most normal thing in the world. *Not* huge news that could change everything. “You *know*? How?”

“He asked me to keep it a secret, so I did.”

Well, this was just getting worse and worse. Not only did Sophie know *my* secret, apparently she knew Charlie’s too. And he *knew* that she knew. *Why didn’t he tell me Sophie knows the truth?* A wave of jealousy slammed into me. Sophie and Charlie were keeping secrets between them. And that… that just wasn’t acceptable.

But I’d have to deal with it later.

I cleared my throat. “So, what are you going to do now that you know the whole truth about me?”

She blinked, then frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“You know my secret now. Are you going to keep it?”

Before Sophie could respond, footsteps crunched through the snow and Sergeant Pepperdine broke through the tree line.

“Ladies, what are you—” Pepperdine stopped, his eyes widening. He looked at each of us, doing a double-take at my naked body. His eyes practically bugged out of his face as he turned away. He demanded, “Does someone want to explain why there are two of you out after curfew? One of whom is *naked*?”

Silence set in for a beat, Sophie and I looking at each other helplessly. We had no idea what to say or how to get out of this. Was she going to expose me as a werewolf? Even if she kept my secret, how were we supposed to explain my lack of clothes *and* the dead vampire?

Then a knowing look crossed Pepperdine’s face. “*Ah*, I see now. A lover’s tryst.”

Our jaws dropped in unison, and Sophie’s cheeks flamed. Heat crawled up my neck as well. Maybe this wasn’t the worst explanation. Maybe we could just go along with this, and get reprimanded. It wasn’t ideal, but it was a better alternative than being outed as a werewolf.

I licked my lips, “Sergeant—”

Then Pepperdine noticed the staked vampire on the ground. “Wait. What the hell *is* going on here?”

**Episode 1717**

LOLA

“I’m sorry, did you pack your entire freaking laboratory in this box?” I groaned as I helped Emmett lug his boxes of lab equipment into the basement. They were *heavy* boxes, made of thick plastic—tough even for me and Jay to carry, and we were freakishly strong supernatural creatures.

When he reached the bottom of the stairs, Emmett set down the box he was carrying—which, I noticed, was a hell of a lot smaller than my own box—then opened the basement door and flipped on the light.

His face fell, then twisted into full-on glare of disgust. “*This* is what you’re offering me?”

Adjusting my not-so-light box in my burning arms, I peeked around him and into the basement. The basement had recently become Rishika’s woman cave, with exercise equipment slung around the room. Now, all of that had been relegated to one corner of the room to make space for Emmett’s lab. Sure, it didn’t have the ageless beauty or square footage of his lab back at Tottenville, but it wasn’t *terrible*.

“Um… yes?”

Emmett picked his box back up and lugged it inside, muttering, “Is this how far I’ve fallen? Is this the respect my work now garners? I’m not some mad scientist who should be hidden in the cellar—I’m *proud* of my work. It should be embraced, not treated like a dirty secret.”

Irma sauntered down the stairs. She wasn’t carrying any of Emmett’s boxes. She looked around the basement and sniffed. “You should be locked up for what you did to me.”

I shouldered my way past her and finally—finally!—set down the box. I knew there were still several more in Emmett’s car, waiting to be carried down, and I was already so *done* with all the bickering.

“Irma, you’re not at Tottenville anymore,” I said. “This is my pack house—and if you’re not careful, you’ll find out just how much werewolves hate vampires.”

Jay came down the stairs behind me and set down another box. I smiled at him.

“I’m the exception, of course,” I said. “Everyone here loves me.”

Irma scowled, and I gave her my sweetest smile in return. It felt good to have one up on the headmistress for once. Back at Tottenville, she’d called the shots and generally made my already difficult transition nearly hellish. But now, the tables had turned.

Emmett let out a pained sigh. “So you’re just going to drop the boxes anywhere? I have a system, you know!”

Jay rolled his eyes and patted my shoulder. “I’ll keep bringing them down, if you wanna make sure they end up where His Highness wants them.”

“I heard that!” Emmett snapped.

Jay shrugged. “I wasn’t whispering.”

He headed back up the stairs to keep bringing down the boxes, while I followed Emmett’s instructions on where to place them and generally ignored Irma’s presence. Every time Emmett got all high and mighty with me, I reminded myself that this hoity toity science diva was probably the key to getting rid of the revenants for good. It was worth putting up with his attitude.

Once Jay brought down all the boxes, Emmett started setting up his equipment. “Did your wolf ever come back?” he asked Jay.

My mate shook his head with a grumble. “No. And please don’t remind me.”

I bit my lip. I knew exactly how Jay felt in a way, and it was awful. I’d wanted to connect with my wolf so badly that it’d driven me to drink that potion. It was why Jay had lost his eye. Then I’d tried to fix the disconnect between me and my wolf, and I’d lost her anyway in that spell…

I pulled him aside and wrapped my arms around him. “If we help Emmett,” I whispered, “he might be able to help you. Don’t forget that.”

“I’m not so sure. The guy seems a little… intense. After all, he kidnapped the head of the school. ‘Mad scientist’ might not be too far off the mark.”

Emmett gave Irma an apologetic look. “For what it’s worth, I am genuinely sorry for the… unfortunate turn of events. I had to get you out of there, or you might have become a revenant—”

“Hey, Emmett,” I interrupted. “Is it possible to make a serum for werewolves? So that they can resist the dark magic somehow?”

“I don’t know, but I’m willing to give it a try.”

“And what about getting my wolf back?” Jay asked.

“Um, well—”

I sighed. “Jay, go easy on the guy.”

My mate crossed his arms. “No, I’m not going easy on him. We’re trusting this guy to come up with some miracle serum, yet he can’t even explain what his other serums do. Doesn’t exactly instill trust in his scientific method.”

Emmett shook his head, his face coloring. “I’m still learning about werewolves! It wasn’t as if I had ample opportunity to work with any prior to meeting you and Lola. I just need to do more research, and then I’m sure the answers will present themselves.”

Jay rolled his eyes. “Yeah, you do that.”

I looked from my mate to my former professor. They both made good points, but couldn’t Jay see that we were all on the same side? Maybe we’d never be besties, but we’d have to work together if we ever wanted to leave the revenants behind us. Jay was usually the level-headed one, so what was happening here?

And then it hit me—Emmett had been a sore spot for Jay ever since things had first gotten bad with my vampire heat. Apparently, he still hadn’t gotten over it.

I pulled Jay out of the room before things could get any more tense.

“I don’t trust that guy,” Jay muttered.

“I know. But for now, we have to give him room to work. Just think of what it will mean if he’s successful. It will change everything. It will give us a real, fighting chance. You have to understand that.”

“So, what, you think we should cut the guy some slack?”

I rolled my eyes. “Isn’t that what I just said?”

“And what about Cali?” His brows rose.

I grimaced. “What does any of this have to do with Cali? Why would you even bring her up?”

He smiled, but it wasn’t a nice one. “She’s your best friend, Lola. And I think you’re mad at me because I defended her.”

My grimace twisted into a full-on glare. “You took her side.”

“I wasn’t taking anyone’s side, and I would tell Cali the exact same thing. You both need each other, and the longer you both refuse to mend things, the worse it’s going to get. She made a mistake, Lola. People make mistakes. You can’t let this ruin your friendship.”

“Why are you *blaming* me?”

He pulled me into a hug, and I stiffened. “I’m not blaming you. I love you, but just because we’re mates doesn’t mean I’m not going to be honest with you. If anything, it means I *have* to be honest with you, even if you don’t like it. Even if the truth hurts sometimes.”

Reluctantly, I wound my arms around his waist. “You’re still supposed to be on my side.”

“I *am* on your side.” He kissed my forehead. “I’m Team Lola all the way.”

Despite myself, I felt my lips tugging up into a smile. It was a good thing he could be so cute, even when I was annoyed with him. *Especially* when I was annoyed with him.

He smiled softly and brushed his lips against mine, and the simple, chaste contact was like a dam breaking inside me. My hands slid up his chest and around his neck, pulling him in closer, kissing him more deeply. The vampire heat had taken over, and it felt like my body was on fire.

I walked him backward toward the basement stairs, and we crashed against the door of a room. I finally broke away from Jay’s mouth, breathless.

“Sorry,” I whispered. “And I’m sorry for being mad at you. I didn’t mean it.”

I leaned in to kiss him again, even though Emmett and Irma were just down the hall, even though anyone in the house could stumble across us at any moment.

I didn’t care. I needed my mate, and to his credit, Jay didn’t seem to mind either. He picked me up, and we made out like horny teenagers until heavy footsteps coming down the stairs broke our focus.

I pulled away from Jay’s mouth with a wet sound, panting, and looked up to see Greyson standing a few steps up.

Jay put me down. “Sorry, we were just—”

Greyson waved him off. “I don’t care about that. What’s the deal with this vampire’s serum that Xavier told me about?”

“Oh.” I wiped my mouth. “Um, Emmett’s still working on it, but it looks like it can keep the revenants from taking someone over. Vampires, at least.”

“Well, let’s see about werewolves.” He nodded toward the basement behind us, and Jay and I began to lead him to Emmett’s makeshift lab.

Suddenly, a huge rumble rocked the house, and the walls started to shake. What the hell was happening?! Was this an earthquake?

**Episode 1718**

I snuggled in closer to Xavier. I felt so comfortable in his arms, like nothing and no one could touch me. I wished that I could stay here in this moment forever. I closed my eyes and listened to Xavier’s strong, steady heartbeat as he ran his fingers through my hair. I looked up at him, and he smiled down at me, but there was a faraway look in his eyes. *Is that fear I see?*

“What’s wrong, Xavier?” I asked.

He shook his head, but the look in his eyes didn’t change. “Nothing.” He leaned down and planted a kiss on my lips. “Couldn’t be better.” He flashed a smile, but that didn’t fool me. It was clear that he was only pretending that everything was okay.

With all that was going on, I couldn’t exactly pinpoint what might have him out of sorts at the moment, but something was off, that was for sure. I didn’t want to press him, but if he was upset with me, or mad about something that I’d done—or hadn’t done—I wanted to know what it was.

I rolled on top of him and straddled him, pinning his wrists to the bed playfully and bringing my face close to his. “I know you’re hiding something. What is it?”

He gave me a soft kiss on the tip of my nose. “I’m telling you, I couldn’t be happier, really.”

“Prove it.”

He laughed. “How am I supposed to do that?”

I glanced down at the ugly black veins on his chest. “You’re creative, you can think of something.”

“You’re being silly, Cali. How am I supposed to prove that I’m happy? What? Do I look unhappy?” He reached up and dug his fingers into my sides, tickling me.

I collapsed on top of him in a fit of laughter. “Stop it!” I giggled, trying to catch my breath. He was relentless, and I did my best to block his attack, but to no avail.

I’d managed to grab hold of his left wrist when a low rumble vibrated around us. We both paused. Maybe it was nothing—but I could tell from the look in Xavier’s eyes that he was on high alert.

“What was that?” he asked, gently lifting me off him and getting up from the bed. He slid on his jeans and T-shirt, never taking his eyes off me, as if he were preparing to protect me from whatever was coming. We both flinched as another rumble came, so loud that it shook the room and threw Xavier off balance so that he collapsed on top of me.

*Is it an earthquake?*

Xavier scooped me up and deposited me in the doorway of the bathroom.

“Xavier! I’m naked—I should get dressed or—”

“No time, just stay right there, that way you’ll be safe if something falls. I’m going to go check it out,” he said, yelling to be heard over the rumble.

I opened my mouth to protest—I didn’t want him risking his safety, either. Then, as quickly as it had begun, the rumbling and shaking stopped. Silence fell over the room before a series of chaotic shouts rose up from every corner of the pack house. *Someone might be hurt!* I shrugged on my robe and followed Xavier out of the room and into the hallway. There was no way I was just going to sit there and do nothing—that wasn’t my style.

Xavier and I poked our heads into the other bedrooms. In one, we found Big Mac and Mrs. Smith and Torin, tending to Astrid. They looked shaken, but okay. We ran into Didi, Kira, and Mace as they came rushing out of their respective rooms.

“Hey, you guys all okay?” Xavier asked.

“We’re good,” Mace said.

“Yeah, we’re fine. Is everyone else okay?” Kira asked, Didi hovering beside her.

“Yeah, so far so good. We’re checking around,” Xavier said.

After we’d checked all of the upstairs bedrooms, Xavier and I headed downstairs just as Greyson, Lola, Jay, Jacqueline, and two other vampires I hadn’t seen before emerged from the basement, their eyes wild with fear.

“Are you okay?” Greyson asked, rushing to my side. He took in the sight of me in my bathrobe, obviously naked underneath. I wondered if he was putting two and two together, realizing that I’d been with Xavier. I knew that Greyson knew how difficult it was being between the both of them, but I didn’t need to flaunt that in his face.

“I’m okay,” I replied, avoiding his gaze.

He gave me a stiff nod, then turned to the others. “Everyone calm down, we’re all right.”

“Was that an earthquake?” Mace asked.

I wondered. I remembered learning about fault lines in school. Maybe the pack house was sitting on one?

“That was no earthquake,” Big Mac said, her gaze narrowed as she looked around the room, as if trying to suss out the culprit. “I sense dark magic—it was stronger before, during the rumbling, but I can still feel remnants of it in the air.”

*Dark magic?* I looked around. *Where the hell is Artemis?*

Everyone gasped when a blood curdling scream pierced the air.

“That came from outside!” Kira said.

We all rushed out the front door. I breathed a sigh of relief when I caught sight of Artemis slipping in to join the group. *At least that’s one question answered.* I turned back to face the woods, just in time to see Marta emerge and come running toward us. She was waving her arms wildly, and her eyes were wide with terror.

“They’re coming!” Marta screamed. “We have to run!”

“Who? Who’s coming!” I shouted back, fear welling up inside me. From the look on Marta’s face and the terror in her voice, I knew it had to be something bad.

“Everyone, hang back,” Greyson ordered as he ran toward Marta. He took her by the shoulders and held her at arm’s length while she fought to get past him. “Calm down, Marta. What’s going on? What happened?”

“The portal, it’s open,” Marta shrieked. “We can’t stop it. We have to get out of here.”

Big Mac stepped between Greyson and Marta and pulled Marta aside, an uncharacteristic look of tenderness on her face. “It’s okay, Marta. You’re with us, now. You’re safe. We won’t let anything happen to you. Now, tell me exactly what happened.”

Marta gestured wildly at the woods behind her. “Letifer—he opened the portal, and spirits were trying to grab me and pull me under in the pond. I managed to get away and fight him and his revenants off—with Lilac’s help—but the revenants regrouped fast, and they’re coming. There’s too many of them for us all to handle.”

Marta was shivering, soaking wet from head to toe. Torin dashed into the pack house and returned with a thick wool blanket that he wrapped around Marta’s shoulders.

Big Mac turned to look at Kira, and my stomach tightened as I took in the look on her face. *Is that panic in Big Mac’s eyes?* I shuddered and turned to Xavier, who was regarding the entire scene with a stony look on his face. “What do we do?” I asked him.

“*You* don’t do anything,” Xavier shot back.

“This is my pack, too!” Why was it that everyone felt the need to treat me like some damsel in distress who couldn’t possibly handle herself—or be of use in a situation like this? *Haven’t I proven myself over and over again?*

“Cali—” Xavier began, but before he could finish, Mace started growling, his eyes fixed on the tree line.

Without a word, Mace shifted, nearly knocking me down in the process. We all followed Mace’s gaze, and I gasped and took a step back. A stream of orange-eyed revenants was pouring out of the woods, their expressions blank and bone-chilling.

Mace snarled and dug his claws into the ground, preparing to lunge into action.

“No, wait!” Greyson yelled as he struggled to hold Mace back. “Don’t be stupid—don’t you see how many there are?” He turned to address the pack. “Everyone, shift, but follow my lead. Don’t do anything until I make the first move!”

I couldn’t help the fear that gripped me as I looked at my mate. What about his leg? *Is he hurt? He looks a little pale… Is it hurting more than he’s letting on?*

My heart raced as we watched a seemingly endless stream of revenants come ambling out of the woods. They didn’t seem to be in a hurry. *How can they be moving so slowly and still be so creepy?* I looked around, stealing confidence from the intimidating air of the pack of werewolves that surrounded me, all waiting for Greyson’s word.

“How many of these assholes are there?” Big Mac said, just as a beacon of light cut through the woods, bathing the approaching revenants in a strange glow. The light was heading straight for us as well, but the closer it got, the dimmer it became.

I narrowed my gaze, trying to focus in on the light, which was in the shape of a person. *Is that Silas?* I stepped forward and narrowed my gaze, attempting to confirm my suspicions. It was him all right, but he didn’t look ghostly. He looked… full. Present. *Real*.

Silas stopped before his crowd of revenants, and they grouped around him, their gazes fixed straight ahead.

Silas smiled. “What, you aren’t going to welcome me home?”

**Episode 1719**

VIOLET

If Sophie revealed to Sergeant Pepperdine that I was a werewolf I’d have only two choices: fight or flee. I stared at Pepperdine, trying to keep my expression blank, and also trying not to sneak a glance in Sophie’s direction. *Oh god, she’s totally going to blow my cover.*

My anxiety train was derailed when Pepperdine shrugged out of his jacket and held it out to me. “Put this on, young lady.”

“Thank you, sir,” I said, mentally allocating Pepperdine a few cool points. The only thing worse than possibly being outed as a werewolf to a werewolf hunter was being naked while it happened.

Pepperdine crossed his beefy arms. “You two can offer an explanation any time for why there’s a dead body here.” He aimed a finger at the wooden stake. “And who does that belong to?”

Sophie raised her hand. “It’s my stake. We were attacked by a vampire, and I took him out, sir,” she said, pride shining in her eyes.

“Oh, is that so?” Pepperdine said, raising an eyebrow. “Then why didn’t he turn to ash?”

“Um…” Sophie looked at me, her expression begging for assistance.

I looked down at the body, dumbfounded. Pepperdine had a point. Why *hadn’t* he turned to ash?

“Uh, we know, but, well…” *Shit! Think! Maybe I could tell him that this type of vampire exhibits a delayed ash effect? Is that a thing? Maybe it is, since all the things I don’t know about vampires could fill a book.*

Realizing that I wasn’t going to be of any help, Sophie strutted over to the body. Judging by the smug look on her face, she’d regained her composure. “What, should we show you the fangs? Why would we lie?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out,” Pepperdine replied. “Sophie, you’ve always been one of my best students, but I’m going to have to write both of you up—you’re out here after curfew, and one of you…” He cleared his throat. “One of you was caught in a state of undress.” He looked at me and cleared his throat again.

*How much more embarrassment can I take? I just want this night to be over!*

I sighed and pulled Pepperdine’s jacket tighter around me. I peered at the body lying at our feet.

*Why the hell is he not a pile of ash right now? All vampires turn to ash after they’re staked, don’t they? Was the stake not… stake-y enough? Wooden enough? Maybe the stake was made of imitation wood.*

I looked closely at the stake, plenty sharp and fancy-looking, like it had been polished. I was no expert on wood, but the stake seemed legit. Plus, I imagined that hunters wouldn’t risk cutting corners by having a fake wood stake. If anything, they would have the best stakes in the business.

“Listen, Sergeant Pepperdine—I know what this looks like, but Sophie and I weren’t engaging in some sort of… late night tryst, or anything.”

Pepperdine shook his head and glared at me, clearly not buying what I was selling. “Save it. You can put it all in your report.”

I rolled my eyes. *My report?*

We all turned when we heard the sound of footsteps approaching. Pepperdine peered out into the darkness. He looked like he was ready to take down anything else that might come our way. I held my breath, waiting. If there’d been one vampire out here, there could be more.

Relief washed over me when I spotted Charlie. He was out of breath, and his eyes lit up when he saw me.

“Are you okay?” He was almost at my side when he tripped over the vampire, crashing to the ground beside the body. “Whoa! What the hell is going on here?” His eyes were as wide as saucers, and he rolled away from the body like it was a dead rat.

“Come on, Kim, stop contaminating the crime scene!” Pepperdine shouted, taking Charlie by the collar and hefting him to his feet like he was a ragdoll. I didn’t think I’d ever seen anyone do that in real life. “What are you doing out here past curfew, young man?”

“I was in the dorm getting ready for bed when I heard something.”

“You heard something?”

Charlie nodded. “Uh yes, heard something strange. I was just trying to be a good hunter—just like you taught us, Sergeant Pepperdine.”

*Wow, you’re laying it on thick*,I mind linked to Charlie.

He shot me a quick look and then trained his gaze back on Pepperdine, who was now stooped down and scribbling in his notebook as he studied the body.

Charlie made his way over to stand beside me and Sophie. “What happened?” he asked.

“This vampire came out of nowhere and attacked us.” I looked over at Sophie. “We took care of it.”

“Took care of it?” Charlie replied, his voice low.

“Yeah, took care of it. And… I might have… you know,” I mouthed, “… shifted.”

Charlie shot an anxious glance at Sophie, who confirmed my screw-up with a nod. “Yup, I saw the whole thing.”

Charlie gasped, but recovered nicely as Pepperdine looked up at us. “Sophie, come here. This looks like your family stake, Miss Slayton.”

Sophie groaned and went to join him.

Charlie took me by the arm and led me out of earshot. “What happened, Violet? You let Sophie see you as a wolf? What were you thinking?”

“I had no choice! It was either become vampire chow or fight the only way I know how. In my defense, I thought Sophie had left.”

“Well, you could have picked a worse person to blow your cover to. I’m more worried that you could have gotten hurt.”

“Aw. You’re so sweet, Charlie Kim,” I said. It took everything I had not to plant a big wet kiss on his perfect lips. We exchanged a charged look.

“Now that Sophie knows, maybe we should seriously think about getting you out of here,” Charlie said.

“Me? But what about you? Shouldn’t you be considering leaving camp?”

“Why?”

I glared at him *Why? Really?* “You know why. And speaking of—why didn’t you tell me that Sophie knows you’re a werewolf?”

Charlie hesitated, looking majorly uncomfortable. I could see the wheels turning in his head, probably trying to come up with an answer that wouldn’t make things worse. “About that…”

Before he could finish the thought, Pepperdine called Charlie over and he hustled away, no doubt happy for the interruption.

“We’re not done talking about this,” I called after him, before he made it out of earshot.

“Hey, sorry about all this. I didn’t mean to cause any trouble between you two,” Sophie said, coming to join me.

I nodded and looked at her closely. She really did seem sorry. I thought back to when I’d first laid eyes on Sophie on Instagram, posing with Charlie. I’d hated her without ever having met her, just because she’d been spending time with Charlie while I hadn’t been able to. Now that I was getting to know her, I was starting to like her—I only hoped that she could be trusted.

“It’s not your fault, Sophie,” I said. “Thanks for helping me out with that fangster.”

“Well, I had to do something—I couldn’t just let it kill you. Even if you are a…” She glanced back in the direction of Pepperdine and Charlie, then back at me. “A *werewolf*,” she mouthed.

*Hmm, not sure how to take that.*

“You know, ever since I met Charlie, I’ve been reassessing my opinion of werewolves,” Sophie added.

“Really? Well, Charlie’s a great guy, so if anyone could change your mind, it’d be him.”

It still irked me that Sophie had learned about Charlie being a werewolf, but I couldn’t help but think about how cool it would be if Iris could accept werewolves as readily as Sophie.

We watched in silence as Sergeant Pepperdine hoisted the vampire’s limp body onto his shoulders. “Come on, back to camp!” he barked.

Sophie stopped me before I could follow. “Don’t worry. Your secret’s safe with me. I would never tell anyone.”

I forced a smile. “Thanks, Sophie.”

*That’s exactly what someone who planned to blab it to the world would say.*

We all walked ahead of Pepperdine, keeping our mouths shut and exchanging eye rolls while he lectured us.

“Hunters must honor the curfew,” he said. “That is one of the main rules of hunter camp. Daisy, you’re new, but these other two should know that. It’s not safe for you all to just be roaming around with no one knowing where you are. We have rules because rules keep you safe. And Sophie, you took a vamp down this time, but vamps are sneaky, crafty little buggers. Next time you might not be so lucky.”

*Is he ever going to shut up?* And then he did, but not before uttering a loud grunt. We turned to see that the vampire wasn’t draped across Sergeant Pepperdine’s shoulders anymore. He and Pepperdine were throwing quick, fierce jabs at each other. The vampire was quick on his feet, but Pepperdine was amazing in action, and doing his best to defend himself, and us, against the vampire.

As good as Pepperdine was, that didn’t stop my stomach from twisting with sudden fear when I saw the vampire’s eyes flash a familiar, bright orange.

**Episode 1720**

GREYSON

Once again, I was face to face with Silas. He had a smile on his face as he stood there surrounded by his army of revenants. The look in his eye was frightening and turbulent, and I had no doubt that he’d finally come to destroy us by any means necessary.

This was the last thing I needed right now, of all times, but I had no choice. Fuck my leg, and most of all, fuck Silas.

I knew that the pack was waiting for me to do something, to say something. I could feel their stares boring into my back. I glanced around at the scene before me, blinking multiple times, trying to confirm that this wasn’t just another vision or dream. I jumped at a tug on my hand. *Cali?* No. Not Cali. Shaine. I thought I’d left him behind when I rushed out earlier, but no, there he was, staring at me with those strange, penetrating eyes.

Shaine tugged at my hand again. “Grandpa wants you. Come.”

*This can’t be happening! Not now!* I yanked my hand away. *Can anyone else see him?* I looked around. No. They couldn’t see him. They were all either looking at me or Silas. Shaine was my own personal hallucination. *Lucky me.*

“What do we do?” Cali asked, her eyes brimming with fear. I hated seeing her like this. No matter what, I had to protect her.

I pried my gaze away from Shaine. *Hang out here if you want to, kid, but I’m going to do my best to ignore you.*

“Stay back!” I shouted at Cali as I looked her in the eye, attempting to put on a brave, calm face.

I knew that she’d been with Xavier earlier—the bathrobe said it all. It had bothered me so much that it had taken every fiber of my being to keep from mentioning it to her. She’d just told us that she thought it was time to stop sharing. Or had she meant that it was time for her to stop seeing *me*? I pushed that thought out of my head. She wouldn’t do that to me, and now wasn’t the time to be thinking about this. I needed to take charge, and fast.

I took a look behind me. The pack was all shifted and ready, just like I’d asked. I hadn’t shifted just yet, but I was ready to do so at a moment’s notice.

“Hey, you good?” Xavier asked, coming to stand beside me. He hadn’t shifted yet, either, and his eyes were plastered to Silas and his revenants even as he spoke to me. I knew that he was keeping an eye on them in case they made any move to advance on us. Right now, they were all holding steady, which was peculiar in and of itself.

I flinched as Shaine tugged on my hand again. “Come.”

I glanced quickly down at Shaine, keeping my expression neutral, then I locked eyes with Xavier. “Ready to get this fight started.”

Xavier shifted, growling at Silas, whose smile widened in response. I looked at Cali. I could tell she was itching to do something, anything, to fix everything, to protect the pack, but there was no way I was letting her get in the middle of this.

“Please stay out of this, Cali,” I said. I knew that she hated to be told that, but there were plenty of pack members—including Mace and his pack—here to handle whatever Silas planned to throw at us.

“Greyson, don’t do that. Don’t count me out. You know that I can help. You’ve seen what I can do—”

“Cali, dammit, listen to me! Trust me. The best thing you can do is stay close to your parents. Protect them!”

“Fine,” Cali said, her eyes misting over. “Please be careful.”

I shifted and reveled in the power I felt coursing through me. I knew that I could do this, that I could take on Silas. I had no other choice.

I mind linked with the packs. *Follow behind me, but don’t attack until I give the word.*

I took a deep breath and led the pack forward with Xavier right by my side. Shaine sprinted over to Silas and took his hand. I took a quick count of the revenants as they formed a line and began to move toward us. There were a shit-ton of them. We were outnumbered. The odds weren’t in our favor, but I was still confident that we could handle it. I thought back to all the battles I’d fought in my life. Many of those fights had felt impossible to win in the beginning, but I’d faced them all the same, and I was still here to talk about it.

Silas raised a hand, and the revenants halted their advance, their burning orange eyes staring blankly ahead.

“Grandfather wants to avoid a fight,” Shaine said to me.

Silas patted Shaine’s head. “Greyson certainly raised you well, grandson.”

*This is a trick. I didn’t raise this strange boy. He isn’t even real. Is Silas real, for that matter?* I snapped to attention at the sound of Mace growling behind me. He pushed past me, making a brisk beeline for Silas and the revenants.

“Oh, my boy, haven’t I taught you anything? You’re just going to stand there and allow another Alpha to break ranks and defy your orders?” Silas said, the wicked smile still on his face.

*Stand down, Mace!* I shouted through the mind link.

I wasn’t going to let Silas’s words get to me, but Mace needed to wait until we were ready to mount the attack. If we didn’t handle this perfectly, we would be overcome by Silas and the revenants in no time. Mace was still dealing with his grief over Pip, and he wasn’t thinking straight. It was up to me to keep him safe, because he wasn’t acting with any regard for his own life.

*Why? Why should I stand down? What are we waiting for? It’s now or never.* Mace growled.

“Are you sure, my son, that you want to start something that you can’t finish? Something you can’t win?” Silas said, ignoring Mace’s outburst.

*Fuck you, Silas!* Xavier called out.

*Just trust me, Mace!* I said.

Mace barked a frustrated growl as he fell back into place behind me. Silas and the revenants just stood there, watching. Shaine’s words echoed in my head—*Grandfather wants to avoid a fight.* Why? Why wasn’t Silas attacking? Wasn’t that what he wanted? He’d done nothing but terrorize us since he’d reappeared in our lives, popping up around every corner, running us out of our other pack house.

*We can put an end to this right now!* Xavier said to me.

*Wait. Let’s see what he’s playing at.* My eyes remained riveted to Silas as I tried to determine what his goal was for this latest visit. I couldn’t figure it out. Silas had never been easy to read.

“I’m glad to see my sons together—glad to know that you’re here because of me. Without me to focus on, both of you would be at each other’s throats, all because of your mate.” Silas said “mate” like it was a dirty word. “We don’t have to be at odds with each other,” Silas said, his voice a gentle echo that seemed to come at us from all sides. “You’re my sons, and this was my pack. We can be united together again. We can get everything that the Redwood pack deserves, and more! All you have to do is join me and forget your mate.”

*Fuck this. We have to fight!* Xavier mind linked.

*Yeah, wipe this fucker and his minions off the map!* Mace chimed in.

There was nothing I wanted to do more, and the need for action made my muscles ache, but even shifted I couldn’t shake the logical part of me that knew the odds were heavily stacked against us. If we tore out of here, all teeth and claws, we’d be facing a massacre.

“No, we don’t have to fight. If we do, there will be so much bloodshed, so many wasted lives,” Silas said. Despite his words, I knew that Silas couldn’t have cared less about spilling blood. Shaine rose onto his tiptoes to whisper in Silas’s ear. Silas nodded. “We should reach a deal. Negotiate. Perhaps it’s the right thing to do.”

Is that what Shaine told him? Who was pulling the strings?

Xavier’s wolf growled low in his throat. He didn’t react to Shaine… Could he still not see him, even now?

*No way in hell we’ll do that*, I said. But there was a part of me that wanted to consider it, if it meant that I could keep the pack safe and intact.

My mind was racing a mile a minute. I didn’t know what to do. This was one of those moments when being an Alpha was unbelievably hard. My decision would decide our fate, determine the trajectory of the rest of our lives—including whether or not we’d have a life to live.

*Maybe we should consider it*,I mind linked to Xavier. *We’re outnumbered by a lot, Xavier, there’s no guarantee that we’ll come out of this alive.*

*Are you crazy? You actually trust that he’ll keep his word?* Xavier retorted. I could hear the exasperation in his tone, and I more than understood where he was coming from. Silas had never shown himself to be trustworthy, and he’d done nothing but terrorize us and anyone who came into his path for as long as I could remember.

“I’ll give you some time to decide what you want to do,” Silas said. “But don’t take too long. My friends here are hungry.”

**Episode 1721**

XAVIER

I chuckled darkly to myself. It was just like Greyson to be this naïve. We’d beaten Silas before, and we could do it again. I had no doubt about that. The alternative was absolutely batshit crazy, in my opinion. Negotiate with Silas? Stupid. *Silas is a monster. You can’t negotiate with evil*,I thought to myself. Why couldn’t Greyson see that? What were we waiting for? I took a look at the revenants flanking Silas. Yes, there were a lot of them, there was no denying that, but even though they were mysterious and looked tough, they were easily dispatched.

Greyson shifted back to human.

“I don’t want to talk about this here, in front of everyone,” he whispered to me. “You and Mace come with me. Big Mac, Kira, let’s go inside.”

I tamped down my annoyance. I was in no mood to take orders from Greyson. As far as I was concerned, he wasn’t even thinking straight. Plus, Cali was watching. Still, I had to admit that Greyson was right about one thing—whatever we decided to do, we had to do it as a united front. I cast another hate-filled glance at Silas. *How can this…* thing *be my father?* I felt no connection to him at all. He was only a dangerous thorn in my side. Always had been.

“Stay shifted!” Greyson called out to the others. “Assemble by the house, keep an eye on them, and stay ready to attack.”

Mace and I shifted back as we walked into the house with Greyson. Cali was close behind.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

Silas’s demands echoed in my head. He wanted us to join him and abandon Cali, another reminder of how little Silas understood his sons, despite all his bluster. I ran a finger down her cheek. I’d never abandon Cali in a thousand years.

“Greyson wants to talk rather than fight.” I tried to keep the annoyance out of my voice, but it was hard to hide my distaste. If it was up to me, we would be heading toward Silas, not in the opposite direction.

“Well, that doesn’t sound like a bad thing.” Cali’s eyes had lit up at the prospect.

Of course she was hoping that everything could be wrapped up with some neat little discussion. She didn’t know Silas at all.

“My brother’s a fool,” I snapped. “You can’t negotiate with someone like Silas.”

Before Cali could respond, I turned to join Kira, Mace, Greyson, and Big Mac in the living room. Cali was right by my side. I wasn’t at all surprised that she had insinuated herself into this discussion, but at least that way I could keep an eye on her.

“Whatever we discuss here today, I want you all to keep in mind that the final decision will be mine and mine alone. Is everyone clear on that?” Greyson said.

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, is Mr. Alpha feeling threatened?” I said, before I could stop myself.

Greyson gave me an icy stare. I shrugged.

“We need to fight!” Mace shouted. “The longer we wait, the longer Silas has to prepare.”

“Mace, I get how you feel, but this is a special situation. Silas isn’t alone. He has all those revenants by his side. We still don’t know exactly what they’re capable of, and rushing into battle with them could be a mistake that gets us all killed,” Greyson said.

“I thought of something,” I said. I ran and ducked my head outside to call Jay in. He shifted and joined the rest of us in the living room. “Jay—that professor that came here, the vampire. He has a serum, right? Do you think we could inject everyone to give us all some sort of resistance to the revenants?”

If Greyson wasn’t going to try to come up with an alternative that didn’t involve some sort of truce with Silas, then I would.

Jay shook his head. “I don’t think that’s an option at this point. There are still too many unanswered questions about the serum,” he said reluctantly. “Sorry man, but I don’t think we can count on the serum yet.”

“Shit,” I said. What the hell were the damn vampires doing here if they couldn’t help us when we needed them?

“We could at least *listen* to Silas’s demands,” Greyson said.

“Seriously?” I couldn’t believe Greyson was still considering hearing Silas out. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to know that Silas was up to something. There was no doubt in my mind that his appeal to negotiate was a ruse, and that he had something awful up his sleeve. History tended to repeat itself. Why Greyson didn’t realize that was beyond me, and it was an obvious sign that Greyson wasn’t fit to hold the role of Alpha.

“Hear me out, Xavier. Fighting might not be the right thing for the pack. Are we prepared to lose more of our people? Because that’s exactly what will happen if we fight.” Greyson turned to Mace. “Pip could be just the first of many if we’re not careful, if we don’t think this through.”

*God! I should’ve taken Greyson up on his offer to be Alpha. He’s being so weak right now. Even weaker and dumber than usual.*

“Greyson, are you even listening to yourself right now? What kind of Alpha runs away from a fight? At the end of the day, we’re werewolves!” I said.

Mace clamored his agreement beside me.

“You’re right, Xavier. We *are* werewolves,” Greyson shot back. “And we’ve survived in a hostile world by being smart and learning to control our impulses. Just because we can fight, just because we can hold our own, doesn’t mean that we should take that route in every situation. Not when we have other options. If listening to him even makes him *think* he has the advantage, we may be able to lull him into a false sense of a secur—”

“You call negotiating with Silas an option?” I snorted. “If Silas gets what he wants, he’ll just ask for more. Don’t you get that? He wants everything. He wants to kill us all. He won’t stop.” I stared into Greyson’s eyes, trying to communicate to him as clearly as I could that falling for Silas’s latest ploy would destroy the pack quicker than an all-out fight ever could.

“He’s right, Greyson. This guy killed Pip, and now he wants to negotiate? Why would I ever agree to that?” Mace growled.

Greyson’s eyes flashed. “You don’t have to agree. If that’s what I decide—”

“I have an idea!” Big Mac yelled, fighting to be heard over Greyson and Mace’s heated exchange. “We might be able to create a spell to keep them out, but it would require a lot of power,” she said. Everyone went silent, listening intently to even the possibility of a solution that could give us the edge we so desperately needed. “On the surface, the spell is very simple.”

“Do you mean a barrier spell?” Kira asked.

“Yes, that’s the one. I did a variation of the spell when I tried to stop Artemis from taking the Orb. When the vampires descended on us, I used it to keep Cali trapped in the house.” Big Mac shot a pointed glance at Cali. “We could use it to buy more time, to protect us from Silas while we decide our next move. That way, he loses a bit of his power. We can’t let him call the shots.”

I wasn’t sure how much faith I had in witches, or that whatever they could concoct would be a match for Silas. At least if we fought, we had a clear path to victory: kill Silas, problem solved. If we did that, there would be no need for barrier spells, negotiations, any of it. I knew from experience that once witches got involved in something, everything got muddled. *Would having two witches make things better, or worse?*

“Are two witches even enough to take on Silas?” I asked Big Mac.

“We have three,” Big Mac said. “Didi.”

“I don’t know…” I began. Didi was practically an uninvited guest, and we didn’t know much about her. We had no idea what her true motives were. She’d been Letifer’s lover, for shit’s sake—how did we even know if she wanted to help us? That she wouldn’t turn on us the first chance she got?

“Big Mac, I’m not sure if this sounds like a good idea,” Greyson said.

“I know it seems risky. Didi is, indeed, a dark witch, but I’ve spent some time with her, and nothing about her suggests that she’s evil, or that she would do anything to hurt us. We might not have any choice but to take the risk if we want the barrier spell to be powerful enough.”

I glanced at Cali. Her hands were clasped and pressed against her lips, and I could see the concern in her eyes. I knew that she felt some sort of connection with Didi and was protective of her. I wondered what she thought about all of this.

“If we want to go this route, we need to get started now.” Big Mac turned to look at Greyson. “So, what’s it going to be?”

**Episode 1722**

CHARLIE

Instinctively, I put an arm out in front of Violet and Sophie protectively to usher them back as I started to shift.

“What are you doing?” Violet called out, her eyes on my wolf paw.

*Shoot, she’s right, I can’t expose myself in front of Sergeant Pepperdine.*

I hid my paw behind me as I shifted it back. I was a hunter, after all. Might as well fight like one.

“We have to help him!” Sophie shouted.

Violet and I flanked Sophie as we moved toward the confrontation. I was impressed. Pepperdine was holding his own, using moves that I’d never seen before. The vampire was moving so fast that he was a blur most of the time—and his strange glowing orange eyes were enough to give anyone pause—but Sergeant Pepperdine was blocking all the vamp’s strikes and doing a great job at keeping the vampire at arm’s length in an effort to stop him from sinking his teeth into his throat. Still, the vampire showed no signs of fatigue, but I couldn’t say the same for Pepperdine. He wouldn’t be able to keep up with the vampire’s pace for long.

“Stay back, you three!” Sergeant Pepperdine shouted as we advanced closer. “I can handle this!” Just as the words left his lips, the vampire lunged, his fangs inches away from his throat. Sergeant Pepperdine landed a quick punch that changed the vampire’s course, but that was too close to ignore, and I could see the shock in Pepperdine’s eyes.

He was putting up an amazing fight, but it wasn’t looking good for the seasoned hunter. Ignoring his orders to stay out of it, I jumped into the fray and landed a hard strike into the vamp’s lower back. He whirled on me, primed to counter. His glowing orange eyes were disorienting, and in a flash, he leapt on top of me and I fell onto my back. It took every ounce of strength I had to hold him back as he tried to dig his fangs into my neck. We tussled on the ground, my arms straining to keep the vampire away. I was surprised by his strength. All vampires were extraordinarily strong, but this one was way stronger than any of the others I’d encountered. It was clear that the glowing orange eyes weren’t the only sign that this was no ordinary bloodsucker.

Sophie launched forward and tackled the vampire off me. I rolled away and tried to catch my breath. The vampire tossed Sophie off him like she weighed nothing at all, and she crashed to the ground a couple of feet away.

Violet grabbed the vampire from behind and clasped her hands around his neck, trying to choke him. The sight of my mate holding onto the vampire for dear life was enough to send a surge of rage-filled adrenaline through me. There was no way I would let Violet get overpowered by that fangy monster. I punched the vampire in the side of the head with all my might, and he hissed and collapsed at Violet’s feet.

Sergeant Pepperdine was on him immediately, kicking him and punching him and trying to bind his hands with a pair of zip ties that he pulled out of his belt. We all did our part to try to help subdue him. Sophie recovered and threw herself onto the vampire’s back, trying to keep him on the ground. The vampire hissed again and flung Sophie away as he broke free from Sergeant Pepperdine’s hold.

Before he could get to his feet, Violet was on top of him, trying to wrestle him back down to the ground. I panicked. There was no way that Violet was any match for this vamp—not without shifting. I was just about to leap to her aid when Pepperdine shoved me aside, whipped a stake from his boot, and sprang at the vampire with his arms raised over his head and a determined scowl on his face.

Pepperdine thrust the stake deep into the vampire’s shoulder. He hissed and stumbled backward, his churning eyes flashing bright orange. A surge of energy shot out from where the stake had penetrated the vampire, sending us all flying. We all hit the ground with a thud, and I recovered just in time to see the vampire scurry off into the woods. *What the hell was that?*

I raced to Violet’s side, helping her to her feet. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

Sergeant Pepperdine clambered wearily to his feet. His face was a bloody, swollen mess, and it didn’t look like he could stand up straight. His arms and neck were covered in cuts and scratches, and he was holding his side and wincing in pain. The vampire had done a number on him.

“Sergeant Pepperdine! Are you okay?” Sophie asked. “He wasn’t bitten was he?”

“Doesn’t look like it,” I said.

Pepperdine waved her off. “I’m fine—it’s not the first time I’ve tangled with one of those crazy buggers,” he said.

Despite his assurance, he was unsteady on his feet and staggered a bit before collapsing against me. I held him up, noticing then that there was blood all over the ground, and smeared on his clothes.

He smiled weakly up at me. “You performed damn well in the heat of battle, Kim. Mark of a true hunter.”

I gave him a stiff nod as I struggled to hold him upright.

“He doesn’t look good,” Sophie said. “We should get him back to camp, he’s bleeding pretty badly.”

“You call this bleeding?” Sergeant Pepperdine said, but again, his words belied the reality of his condition, and he sagged limply against me as I strained to keep him on his feet. The guy was built like a tank, and was just as heavy.

“Did you guys see that vampire’s eyes? What was with that? Do vampires’ eyes always look like that?” Sophie asked as we made our way back to camp.

*Should we tell them?* Violet mind linked to me.

*I think we should. It could be dangerous to keep the hunters in the dark about the revenant threat.*

“Hello? Don’t tell me I’m the only one who saw the glowing orange eyes,” Sophie said.

“No, we saw them all right,” Violet said. “The glowing eyes are a sign that the vampire was a revenant.”

Sophie gasped. “A revenant? I mean, I’ve heard of them, but I never thought I’d see a *vampire* revenant.” She shuddered. “I didn’t think that was even possible, more of a scary story to frighten us as kids.”

“Apparently they’re as real as you and me,” Pepperdine rasped. “That might explain why the vamp didn’t ash-out when it was staked. Just another threat for us to fight,” he added.

Finally, we made it back to the camp. Everyone went on high alert as word of the attack spread. Despite his wounds, Sergeant Pepperdine barked orders at the staff while camp medics tended to him. He refused to be taken to the hospital.

“There’s too much for me to do here,” he said. “This is what we’ve prepared for, and I need to make sure everyone is on point and ready.”

I was impressed by how well organized everyone was. Patrols were dispatched to form a perimeter in the woods around the camp. The hunters looked primed and ready as they headed out in twos and threes, armed to the hilt and looking sharp.

“Charlie!” I turned at the sound of my name to see my mother running toward me. She pulled me aside, her eyes wild with worry. “Are you okay?”

“I’m okay, Mom.”

She ran her hands over my shoulders and my back and down my legs, and only when she was satisfied that I wasn’t hiding a gaping wound did she breathe a sigh of relief.

“Good, I’m so glad. You didn’t expose yourself as a werewolf, did you?” she asked, leaning in close.

“No, Mom, I was careful.” I sounded confident to my own ears, but deep down I was worried about Sophie knowing what we really were. She’d said she liked me and seemed to be cool with me and Violet, but what if she changed her mind? What if she got upset with us and took revenge by telling anyone who would listen that Violet was a werewolf? We’d be royally screwed. Apparently convinced that everything was fine on my end, my mother left me to go check in with the other staff members.

As I rejoined Sophie and Violet, Reggie, Aisha, and Zachery came sprinting up to pelt us with a million questions about facing off with a vampire.

“It wasn’t that exciting,” I said, trying to play it down. “It’s just too bad that he got away.”

Chad, who’d been lurking nearby, came walking up. He sniffed. “Well, he wouldn’t have gotten away if the Chadster had been there.”

Before I could offer a response to that ridiculousness, a staff member came up and separated us into patrol groups. I ended up with Sophie and Violet, and we started off toward the woods.

“Do you think that maybe you and I should slip away and shift, Charlie? We can track vampires better as wolves,” Violet said.

“I vote no on that,” Sophie chimed in. “I’m the exception here—the others wouldn’t hesitate to kill the both of you on sight. Did you know that after your mom gave that speech, Charlie, almost everyone signed a petition to add werewolf fighting techniques to the training program?”

“Well, my mother always did know how to call people to action,” I said bitterly. That was the last thing I wanted to hear.

We had no time to debate further as a loud shout startled us all, and we took off in the direction it had come from. My mind went to the worst-case scenario, that the vampire—or worse yet, multiple vampires—was storming the camp. We’d just made it to the tree line when we came across Aisha and Kate.

Aisha was breathing hard, and it took her a second to catch her breath before she spoke. “It’s Zachery! He’s been taken by a vampire!”

**Episode 1723**

I was getting more worried by the second. There was an army of revenants out there, watching and waiting for Silas’s cue, while Silas was doing what he did best—threatening us to get what he wanted. Marta looked like she’d been through hell, and once again, my two mates were completely at odds. The warm fuzzies I’d enjoyed with Xavier a short time ago were nothing but a distant memory.

“We need to know your decision, Greyson,” Big Mac said, after a few moments of silence had passed.

“Yes, we’ll need time to prepare for the spell,” Kira added.

I watched Greyson closely, knowing that he was under a lot of pressure to do what he thought best for the pack. To his credit, he was putting up a good front. His strong, angular jaw was set, and he looked ready and capable. I believed in him, and I knew he would do the right thing—whatever his decision. But I was still concerned about his leg. I wanted to tell Xavier to stop needling him, but I knew that doing so would only make things worse. Then I remembered our conversation with Didi. Maybe there was yet another option to get us all out of this safely.

“Could we still make an orb and capture Silas inside it?” I asked.

“No, that’s not an option. We never got the chance to gather all the components, and there sure as hell isn’t time now,” Big Mac said. “But thanks, Cali. Let us take care of this, why don’t you?”

“I was just trying to help,” I snapped.

“Fuck this!” Mace hissed. “If you two are too chickenshit to go out there and take care of him, me and my pack will.”

He was getting angrier by the second. I only hoped that Xavier and Greyson would be able to keep a leash on him before he lashed out and did something that got us all into trouble. No matter how hyped he was for revenge, running out and fighting Silas and his revenants hand to hand would *not* work out in our favor.

“In what universe, Mace, could you and your small group of wolves take on Silas and the army he has out there? You’ll get squashed in seconds. I’m running things here, and I’m telling you to stand down. This is exactly what he wants, all of us leaping into action with no plan only to get trampled. We have to think this through. You’ll get your revenge. Trust me,” Greyson said.

Mace rolled his eyes but didn’t say anything else. I was proud of Greyson for standing up to him and putting his foot down like the Alpha he was.

“Okay,” Greyson said after a short pause. “I’ll allow Big Mac and Kira to cast the spell.” He looked around as a wave of murmurs cut through the group. It was a mixed bag. Some agreed, while others—mostly Mace and the Blue Bloods—uttered grumbles of disagreement.

I shifted my attention to Xavier and held my breath, wondering if he was going to support Greyson or not.

I couldn’t tell which way he was leaning by the look on his face—Xavier could be hard to read sometimes—but to my relief, he nodded. “Sure, we might as well give it a shot,” he said.

Greyson gave Xavier a slight nod. “If the spell fails, there will be a fight. We’ll have no choice then. Jay, go spread the word to the others about what we’ve decided, and tell them to stay vigilant.” Greyson said.

Jay nodded and left the room.

“Fair warning, this spell takes some time to prepare,” Big Mac said.

I thought back to Silas’s newest threat—that we only had a short time to decide before he attacked. The threat hadn’t been very precise, so none of us had any idea how much time we really had. I supposed that it was a good sign that Silas hadn’t already attempted to charge the house.

“Okay, so it’ll take a while—any ETA on exactly how long?” Greyson asked.

Big Mac looked to Kira.

“At least ten minutes,” Kira said. “And that’s cutting it close.”

“You have five,” Greyson said. He turned to Xavier and Mace. “You two, join me outside. We need to find a way to stall and give the witches time to get this spell going.”

They headed toward the door, and I followed close behind.

“Cali,” Greyson said, stopping me. “You stay here.”

“Not this again. When will you get it through your head that I’m an asset in situations like this? I should be by your side.” I was going crazy with worry, and feeling extra protective of my mates. I didn’t know what I would do if anything happened to them, and if I could be of any help—like I had been before—I wanted a chance to do so. “Where you two go, I go.”

I was surprised when Greyson didn’t argue. “Fine, Cali. But stay close and follow my lead. This isn’t a game.”

We went outside and moved past the shifted pack members. Silas’s eyes lit up when he saw us, and he smiled—if the strange, crooked shape of his mouth could even be called a smile. Behind him, the revenants waited, their faces still fixed into that creepy blank stare, their eyes burning like orbs of fire. I hoped that whatever Big Mac and Kira had up their sleeves would work. I didn’t even want to imagine how things would turn out if Silas unleashed those creepy assholes on us.

“So,” Silas began. “My sons, are you joining me, or not?”

“Not,” Greyson barked.

An eerie silence fell over us all. The smile slid from Silas’s face, and he stared Greyson and Xavier down, danger crackling through the air like an electric current. I couldn’t help but think about what Silas had said earlier. *Am I making my mates weak?* I thought back to the heated conversation the three of us had shared earlier. I’d really chosen a horrible time to almost break up with them—but was there ever a good time for that sort of thing?

Silas’s eyes flashed angrily, and he pointed a finger at me. “Is your precious Cali worth the lives of the others?”

“Leave Cali out of it,” Xavier growled. He stepped forward, his hands balled into fists at his sides. “If you say her name again, I’ll see you dead a second time before you even hit the ground.”

“See, father? You want Xavier and me to behave like brothers, and as you can see, when it comes to Cali, we’re united.” Greyson stepped forward. “If you threaten her again, you won’t ever speak another word.”

My breath caught in my throat at the cold promise in both Xavier’s and Greyson’s voices. I loved them so much, and I was moved by how ferociously my mates were defending me—against someone as dangerous and deadly as Silas, no less. All I could think was that if Silas did anything to hurt them, I would use my Fae magic to blast him back to hell where he belonged.

“You two are fools!” Silas spat. “Perhaps I shouldn’t even bother with talking any longer. Perhaps it’s time to put an end to this. It’s a shame that Colton isn’t here as well to join you in your demise.” Silas looked at the revenants lined up on either side of him, just as Big Mac and Kira emerged from the house.

*Great! Is the spell ready?* My heart was beating a mile a minute in my chest. I could only hope that their spell would do the job, that they could shut Silas up and turn the tables.

“Well, what do we have here? Have my boys grown so weak that they have to call forth witches to fight their battles for them?”

Didi appeared from behind Big Mac and Kira. “Enough!” she shouted. Didi marched forward, her eyes flashing angrily. There was an audible gasp from Silas, and then for a split second his face changed and it was no longer his face, but one belonging to another man entirely. But then it flickered back into the face we’d all grown to hate.

I wondered if I was having a vision, or if Big Mac and Kira’s spell was already working, but I didn’t think they’d even started yet. *Did everyone else see his face change like that?* I thought, looking around at the rest of the pack.It was then that I realized that Didi wasn’t stopping. She kept walking, heading straight for Silas. I grabbed her arm as she passed by. I was worried for her safety—she had no idea what Silas was capable of.

Didi turned to look at me, and something about the look in her eyes made me release her.

I took a cautious step forward as Didi and Silas came face to face. A chill raced down my spine as they regarded each other silently. Silas stepped even closer to Didi, reaching a hand out toward her before stopping in his tracks.

*What’s that look on his face? He looks… shocked.*

Then Didi spoke. “Hello, Letifer.”

**Episode 1724**

“Letifer,” I whispered to myself as a collective gasp rose up from the pack at the mention of the name. Even just saying it sent a chill down my spine.

I stared at Silas, confused. Everyone knew the man standing before us as Silas—the same man who had made it his mission to terrorize his sons and the pack in his relentless quest for power. So why had Didi called him Letifer? Maybe she was still in shock.

I started toward her, but Greyson pulled me back. “Cali, what did I say? Follow my lead.”

“Is it true?” Didi asked Silas. “Did you do all the things that they said?”

Silas’s expression softened. Maybe this was Letifer after all. I’d never seen Silas look at anybody like he was looking at Didi. “What I did, I did it all for you. Everything has been for you, my beloved.”

“Why, Letifer?”

“For this moment. To see you again. You were taken from me, and I vowed to bring you back.”

“But how? How did you think that you could do that?”

“I sacrificed everything for you, Deidamia.”

“I didn’t ask you to do that!” Didi said, her voice choked with emotion. “Those horrible things you did, you did them for yourself. For all this,” she said, motioning to the revenants. “For power!”

“But I love you! I never stopped loving you, Deidamia.”

“This isn’t love! You’ve lost sight of everything we once held sacred, and you’ve twisted it into something dark and evil. How could you let our love corrupt you? How could you let it make you do these horrible things to these people? Who have you become?” Didi said, glancing back at us where we stood, waiting and watching. Tears were streaming down her face, and I felt like I could feel the hurt rolling off her in waves. I couldn’t imagine how painful it would be to have a reunion with your true love under these circumstances.

We were all shocked at the exchange taking place before us, and I was sure that none of us had expected it. But when I really thought about it, it made perfect sense. It was all about love, this whole time. Love made you do some crazy things. I knew that better than anyone. I wondered, if Letifer and Didi kissed and made up, would all of this terror be over? But would she even want him back after everything he’d done? *Screw magic and spells, what we need is a decent couple’s therapist.*

I couldn’t help but reflect on everything that Xavier, Greyson, and I had been through. What had kept us together through it all was love. Even if my two mates were at each other’s throats most of the time, it was still all about love. So Didi wasn’t crazy. As strange as it was to consider, this was Letifer standing here before us. After a long time apart, he was finally face to face with his love.

“Maybe you two need some time together,” I called out.

Xavier and Greyson yanked me back. *What are you trying to do? Stay out of this!* They both mind linked to me in unison. They were always in sync when they were trying to tell me to mind my business. I wondered when they would realize that I would never stop, that I had to protect the people I cared about, no matter what.

“I’m only trying to help,” I replied, shrugging out of their hold.

“Cali, that’s a horrible idea,” Xavier said.

“I second that,” Greyson said.

“What’s so horrible about it? Really? Don’t you two see that if we take this route, we’ll be able to avoid a bloodbath? Why not give me a chance? It couldn’t possibly make things worse, could it?”

“Yes!” Xavier and Greyson shouted at the same time.

I whirled away from them and crossed my arms, annoyed. No matter what I did, they still didn’t trust me. But I didn’t care—they couldn’t control me. If I saw an opportunity to move things in the right direction, I would take it, not matter what they thought.

“My love for you, Deidamia, has never been purer,” Letifer said.

“Didi, do you feel that way about Letifer?” I asked, sensing an opening. “Didn’t you tell me before that you loved Letifer with all your heart? Maybe you should at least listen to him.”

It was then that I noticed that his face was no longer Silas’s. Again, it had flickered to the other face I’d seen before. It was as if Letifer was showing his true form to Didi. I looked around again to see if anyone else had noticed, but again, I seemed to be the only one. For all I knew, it was a hallucination brought on by the stress of it all.

“Cali, I’m warning you, it’s not a good idea to get in the middle of this,” Xavier whispered. “Remember when we asked you to stay safe, and out of the way? That’s *not* what you’re doing right now. You’re putting yourself in the middle of something you don’t understand and getting completely in the way.”

“Or maybe I just realize not everything has to end in a fight,” I hissed at him.

“I do still love Letifer,” Didi replied. “But this isn’t the same man. He might look and sound like the man I once worshipped, and he’s saying all the things that the man I loved would say, but that man has been replaced by a monster.”

*Whoa, Didi’s not making this easy. Did she really just call her true love a monster? It’s hard to turn that around…*

“Monster is a little… strong… don’t you think, Didi?” I said, seeing our chances to end things peacefully slipping away.

“Is that you how you see me, my love? As a monster?” Letifer asked, his voice pained.

“Yes, that is how I see you. No matter how much I wish for it, I don’t see the man I knew, the man I loved and cherished, standing here before me today.”

I was starting to suspect that Xavier and Greyson were right, and that my plan wasn’t going to work. That would’ve been too easy, too… *perfect*, for love to be the one thing that solved the Silas problem that had been dogging us for so long. Didi certainly wasn’t helping, that was for sure.

“Maybe you aren’t looking hard enough, Deidamia,” Letifer said. “It’s clear that you’ve had your vision clouded by the lies and speculations of your newfound friends, here. They are only looking out for themselves, my dear, don’t you see that? They care nothing for you.”

“That’s not true! And we didn’t lie!” I shouted.

“Cali, stop it. What’s your problem?” Greyson said, pulling me back.

“Prove it,” Didi said to Letifer. “Prove to me that you’re the same man.”

“How can I do that? Tell me, what can I do to convince you?”

Didi pointed to the revenants. “Send their spirits back. Give them peace! End this senseless war. If you love me, if you really are the man I once knew, you will do this for me.”

“You don’t mean that. Wouldn’t you rather reign beside me? With our powers combined, imagine how unstoppable we would be.”

Didi spat into the dirt, her eyes flashing as she took a few steps back from Letifer, shaking her head. “I never wanted power for its own sake. You understood that once upon a time, but I suppose that man is long dead. Listen to yourself, Letifer. These are the rantings of a madman.”

“I assure you, I am completely sane,” Letifer said coldly. “This is your last chance. Come with me now, before it’s too late. You must understand that whether you come willingly or not, I’m going to take you.”

*Okay, the romance may be a little dead here.* Fear raced through my body. I was wrong. This wasn’t love, this was… a hunger for possession. This was a hunger for power that could not be stopped, even in the face of love. I’d completely misread things. Silas, Letifer—what or whoever he was—had no intention of ending things peacefully. He was even awful enough to take Didi against her will. If that was how he treated someone he claimed to love, I was terrified to see what he had in store for us.

Greyson and Xavier planted themselves in front of me.

“Get back!” Greyson shouted.

For once, I listened, and took a few steps back. As much as I hated to admit it, I did feel better with Greyson and Xavier in front of me, protecting me, even though I knew that I could hold my own if things came to blows—and was that what it had come to, finally? Was this the battle that we’d been waiting for? I shivered at the thought as I once again considered how outnumbered we were. I was scared for us, scared for my mates.

“I’m not a thing to take, Letifer. You aren’t the man who had my heart. I don’t know who you are—but I know now that you aren’t him!” Didi shouted.

“Then you can die with them!” Letifer snarled. His face flickered, and once again it assumed the likeness of Silas, the face we knew so well, the face that signaled suffering and violence for the pack. There was a split second of silence as things seemed to move in slow motion, and then with a wave of his arms, Letifer ordered the revenants to charge.

**Episode 1725**

VIOLET

“What do you mean, Zachery’s been taken by a vampire?” I asked Aisha. She was shaking like a leaf and breathing in short, loud bursts as her gaze bounced unsteadily between me, Sophie, and Charlie. She kept looking back at the woods, like she was afraid that the vampire would come running at us at any second.

“I mean that—we were starting out on our patrol when this… *thing* swooped out of nowhere and snatched Zachery and dragged him away. We acted as fast as we could and went after them, but we lost their trail almost immediately. We have to save him!”

*Do we? Do we* have to *save him?* I thought to myself, nearly shuddering at the memory of our double date from hell. Having him out of our hair would certainly solve our whole dating problem… I snapped out of it. I couldn’t be that person. Zachery wasn’t that bad; he just wasn’t my type.

“Where did this happen?” Charlie asked. “Maybe we can pick up the trail if we work together.”

Aisha nodded briskly. “Follow me.” She raced off in the direction she’d come from, all of us keeping pace behind her.

*Remember, we can’t reveal ourselves as werewolves, so no shifting. They won’t have a clue about who we truly are unless we show them. So, don’t show them, please.* Charlie mind linked to me.

I thought for a second about how Charlie had almost shifted himself when Sergeant Pepperdine was attacked by the vampire, but I decided not to bring it up. He was only trying to keep us safe, after all.

*I get it. Trust me, we’re on the same page—but just so you know, I didn’t have much of a choice before. How was I supposed to know we would be attacked by a revenant-vampire?* I mind linked back.

*I understand, Violet. I wish I could have been there to help—and I would’ve loved to see your wolf.* Charlie flashed me a meaningful look as we picked up our pace, and despite the circumstances, I felt the heat of a blush warming my cheeks. I liked hearing that, though I still couldn’t help but wonder why he hadn’t told me about Sophie knowing that he was a werewolf.

*I’m not about to bring it up now*,I thought to myself. *But I’m not about to drop it, either!*

If we could ever get a calm moment of privacy between us, I planned to get to the bottom of why he’d kept such a secret from me. It wasn’t like him.

We ran until we’d made it way past the place where Sophie, Charlie, Pepperdine, and I had tangled with the vampire earlier. Even thinking about it turned my heart rate up a notch.

“It happened right here,” Aisha said, stopping suddenly and pointing to a thick cluster of trees in front of us. “It was so quick. One minute we were talking about how exciting it would be to stake the vampire that attacked you guys, and the next minute Zachery was being dragged away into the darkness.”

“We should pair up,” Charlie suggested. “That way we can cover more ground, see if we can pick up on anything.” Charlie gave me a pointed glance, and I knew which partner he had in mind.

But before I could make a move, Aisha grabbed Charlie. She was still extremely freaked out, and I couldn’t blame her. Vampires were unpredictable, extremely dangerous, and famously savage. Add the revenant factor into the mix, and you were up against a relentless killing machine that barely went down even after being staked.

“The only way I’m going looking for that thing is with Charlie by my side,” Aisha said, clinging to Charlie’s arm. “He’s the most experienced vampire hunter here.”

*Does every girl in this damn camp have the hots for Charlie?* I thought. I was little irked, but I knew that now wasn’t the time for jealousy. I understood what was at stake here. No pun intended.

Sophie smiled over at me as the groups split up. “Looks like it’s you and me.”

Before we parted ways, Charlie gave me a look full of longing.

*It’s okay*,I mind linked to him. *Aisha needs you more right now.*

Charlie and Aisha headed off in one direction while Sophie and I went in another. We stayed low, and Sophie had her stake—cleaned off from our last battle—at the ready in her hand.

“There’s something I don’t quite get, Daisy,” Sophie said. “If you like Charlie, why are you dating Zachery?”

I sighed, trying to find the right words. “We’re not really dating.”

“Oh, really? It looked like a date to me.”

“It wasn’t.” I hesitated, wondering how much to tell her. “The way that whole double date came together was an accident. It was a way for Charlie and me to keep his mother from discovering that we’re still an item.”

“That must suck.”

We fell silent at a scurrying sound off to our right. We stopped, put our backs together, and turned in a slow circle, gazing out into the woods and listening for any sounds that could signal that someone—or something—was approaching. I concentrated, doing my best to pick up a scent—and vampires certainly had a lot of scent to pick up. When I was convinced that there wasn’t one nearby, I gave Sophie a slight nod, and we continued on our trek.

“So, his mom really doesn’t like you, huh? I don’t understand why, Daisy. You seem so nice.”

“Thanks Sophie, I appreciate that. And I should let you know that my name isn’t Daisy—it’s Violet.”

“I kind of figured that out,” she said, smiling. “Daisy instead of Violet? You couldn’t have picked a more obvious undercover name.”

“Yeah, well, it was all Iris’s idea. Long story. So, if you don’t mind keeping yet another secret…” I said. I didn’t know exactly why I’d revealed that, but my real name was a less dangerous secret than me being a werewolf, and Sophie already knew all about that, so what was the harm at this point?

Sophie nodded. We didn’t talk for a while, our focus restored to the matter at hand as we made our way through the purplish darkness of the woods. I glanced over at Sophie, a thought tickling at the back of my mind. “So, now you know all of my secrets… Maybe I should learn a little more about you.”

“Yeah? What do you want to know?”

“How do you feel about Charlie?”

Sophie opened her mouth to reply, but then snapped it shut. “I… uh…” She seemed flustered. “Well, the truth is, I liked Charlie from the moment I saw him.”

I thought about the Instagram photo they’d taken by the lake. “Liked? Just how much did you like my boyfriend?”

“I can’t deny it, I was into him. Especially after this whole thing where we went ice skating and I fell through the ice…”

“What? Wow, that sounds really scary.”

“It was, and Charlie—he saved me. Kind of hard not to fall for someone who literally saves your life,” Sophie said. “I know there’s been some confusion there, between Charlie and me, but as soon as Charlie made it clear that he was into you, I backed off. I hope you believe me… Daisy.” She flashed me a warm smile. “I think you and Charlie are great together, by the way.”

“Thanks, Sophie. I guess I can’t blame you for catching feels, but as far as I’m concerned, we’re good. I even think—” I stopped short and lifted my nose to the air. There it was. The smell of death and decay. “There’s a vampire nearby,” I whispered.

Sophie stared at me, perplexed. “How the hell do you know that? I didn’t hear a thing.” She took a quick glance around.

“Trust me,” I said, not wanting to remind her that I was a werewolf.

Sophie narrowed her eyes and nodded. “I understand.”

I grabbed Sophie’s hand and concentrated, following the scent. I turned at the sound of voices. “Wait, did you hear that? Sounds like Zachery.”

We broke into a run, and before long, we found him. He was on the ground, struggling to free himself from the hold of an orange-eyed vampire.

“Let him go!” Sophie shouted, her stake raised high above her head. I had to admit that she knew how to handle that thing—she was fearless.

The vampire turned to look at us, surprise written across his face. Without another beat, he lunged at us, his fangs out and dripping with saliva. *Ugh. Gross*,I thought as I readied myself to send him flying.

Before the vampire could reach us, Zachery launched himself up from the ground and yanked his stake from the holster at his belt. With an impressive flourish, Zachery staked the vampire through the back so hard that the sharp tip of the stake emerged through the vampire’s chest. The vampire let out a blood-curdling wail and fell at Zachery’s feet. Zachery stared down at him, stunned. Then he looked up at us, a slow, proud smile spreading across his face.

“Did you see that? What a fucking rush! I slayed a vampire! Me! Zachery P. Stanislaski, vampire slayer extraordinaire!”

And then he grabbed me, pulled me into a hug, and kissed me.

**Episode 1726**

XAVIER

I shifted into my wolf and threw myself in front of the rest of the pack. I knew that Cali was right behind me, and I hoped she’d stay that way. I wanted her safe, but I couldn’t believe what she’d pulled, even after all of Greyson’s and my appeals for her to stay out of it. The revenants were charging forward, their formerly blank stares now lively, dangerous, and aimed straight at us. It was inevitable, things turning out this way. It had been a complete mistake for Greyson to think that we could avoid going toe to toe with the revenants and the hybrid Silas-Letifer asshole leading them, but I’d known from the very beginning that we would end up here, fighting for our lives.

This was all too familiar, like a life I’d already lived. Fighting my father was a matter of muscle memory, though it was under quite different circumstances this time around.

*Letifer is who he is, but he’s wearing Silas’s face, and I’m not sure that there’s any difference between the two men beyond that.*

It didn’t matter. Two evil men were trying to wreck the only good things I had in my life, and I wasn’t going to let him. Them. Fuck, this was confusing and only made me want to kill him all the more. Destroying two birds with one stone.

*Attack!* Greyson ordered, and just like that, we launched into action.

The pack howled into the air as they advanced, snarling and baring their teeth at the advancing throng. I knew that this was going to be a tough battle. There were so many of the revenants, and Letifer had shown himself to be a formidable force. I took a few deep breaths, trying to mentally prepare myself for what was to come. *How am I going to make sure that I protect Cali and the pack?*

The air lit up with a loud crack of magic. I turned toward the sound, wondering what had caused it. Then I spotted Didi in the thick of it all, her hands in the air and bolts of blue lightning crackling at her fingertips. The lightning bolts shot straight up for miles and pooled across the sky, covering us all in brilliant blue light.

*This must be the spell!* And boy, what a spell it was turning out to be.

I saw Big Mac and Kira come up beside Didi, their fingers aimed at the sky, lightning bolts crackling at their fingers and joining in with those Didi had just sent skyward. The bolts joined together and churned in the sky before forming a dome, its sides arching down to the ground.

*GET BACK!* I mind linked to the pack. We all began a quick retreat toward the house. I looked around for Cali and spotted her a few feet in front of me, losing her footing. I hurried over to her and scooped her up as I sped toward the house. We all watched as the walls of the dome reached the ground, sending a vibration through the earth beneath our feet.

Still, the revenants pushed forward, and some of them had made it under the dome just in time before it came down. Others weren’t so lucky and had been sliced in half by the electrified walls. It was a horrific sight, even though they had it coming. I looked behind me. Letifer was on the other side of the dome. It was still strange to see Silas’s face on what I assumed was Letifer’s spirit. Whichever of the two men held dominance over the being, I was happy to see him on the other side of the wall.

*Figures. That might not be Silas, but it’s such a Silas move, letting the good little soldiers do all the work for him.*

Cali was holding tight, and we both took survey of the revenants that had made it inside the dome. We needed to get rid of them, or we were fucked for sure. The revenants who hadn’t managed to make it inside were still running at us, their bodies making sickening cracking sounds as they hit the walls of the dome like birds hitting a window. I allowed myself to breathe just a bit easier. We’d done it. We were safe from Silas and the bulk of the onslaught, but at what cost? Where would Letifer’s destruction go next? Or would he just wait around for the spell to break? Would it? I had no time to consider it further as I watched two revenants come speeding toward me and Cali. I wasn’t sure what to do. *Can I take care of these fuckers with Cali on my back?* I braced myself, just as Greyson leapt between us and the approaching revenants. He tore both of them to pieces with a fast, savage attack.

“Greyson!” Cali screamed. I bristled at the sound of my brother’s name coming from her lips. I was the one who’d scooped her up and rescued her, but it was Greyson she called out for. Typical.

*Xavier, get her out of here! Protect her.*

*What do you* think *I’m doing?* I snarled at Greyson through our mind link, not able to stop myself from arguing with him, even in the middle of this chaos. I was so tired of this play Greyson was making at being the one in the charge, the one who called the shots, even when it came to how I safeguarded my own mate. *I don’t need to be told!* I added. *I’d die to protect her, without a second thought!*

I shot away from Greyson, heading back toward the house, comforted by Cali’s weight on my back. I raced onto the porch and let Cali climb down. *Please, for once, do as I say and don’t leave the safety of the house. It’s dangerous for you to be out here!* I mind linked to her.

“Watch out!” Cali screamed.

I turned just as a revenant leapt on top of me, its vice-like fingers clenching around my front legs and pinning them to the ground, nearly wrenching them from their sockets in the process. I fought to break free, but the revenant held tight, all the while trying to bite me in the shoulder while its other hand scratched and clawed at me like it was trying to tear me to ribbons. I spun out of its grip, but it quickly regained the advantage, leaping on top of me and wrestling me back to the ground while its mossy teeth snapped at me. I was trying my best to twist my legs out of its hold when Cali blasted the revenant clear over the porch railing with her Fae powers. I smiled up at her, ignoring the stabs of pain radiating through my shoulder.

*Damn, you’re sexy when you do that*, I told her through our mind link

Cali glared down at me. “I wasn’t trying to be sexy.”

*You’re right, you don’t have to try.*

“Uh, I don’t know if you noticed, but there’s a battle going on out there!”

I turned to look, groaning as I picked myself up off the ground. What I saw made me proud to be part of the Redwood pack. Together with the Blue Bloods, they were working in sync to finish off the last of the revenants that remained inside the dome, tearing them limb from limb and effectively halting their attempts to get to the house. I shifted my gaze to where Letifer stood, watching us through the dome, his face twisted into a tortured scowl. I wished I could get through the dome and finish him off.

Torin had come out into the yard to help injured pack members back into the house. I watched him with pride before I turned to see Greyson approaching at a fast clip. Our gazes met, and we both shifted back to human as he walked up onto the porch.

“Hey, are you both okay?” Greyson asked.

“I’m fine,” Cali said, and her eyes went to Greyson’s leg. His wound had opened up, and blood was oozing down his leg. Cali opened her mouth, no doubt to address it, but my brother was quicker to speak.

“They look a little worse for wear,” he said, nodding toward a few wounded pack members sprawled out on the grass. “Would you go help Torin take them in so we can get them patched up? If any of them were bitten by the revenants, we might have another Arlo-Pip problem on our hands.”

Cali nodded and went over to them. I doubted she would drop the issue of Precious Greyson’s injury, but my mate was never one to deny help to those in need.

Remembering Emmett, I headed into the house. “I’ll be right back,” I called over my shoulder.

I rushed through the kitchen and down into the basement and found Emmett in one of the rooms there. I was impressed—he’d managed to set up a full-fledged lab in a fairly short amount of time. Emmett sat hunched over a table, holding two steaming test tubes at eye level.

He looked up in surprise when I came in. “You’re naked.”

*Astute observation, asshole.* “Hey, what’s the deal with the serum?” I said, ignoring his statement. “We’ve got some revenant bites on our hands—we need it.”

“What happened to you?” Emmett asked, his eyes on my shoulder. I looked down. *Shit, I’m bleeding.* The fight with the revenant had been so intense, I’d barely noticed that it had managed to wound me so badly. But I remembered the sharp pain I’d felt there, right after the fight.

Emmett stepped closer, examining the wound. “It looks like a bite mark. What bit you?” he asked, looking up at me with his gaze narrowed.

“Never mind. Where’s the serum?”

Emmett held up a vial. “I’ve made several batches, but I’m still not sure that it’ll work on werewolves. It might even harm them. I still need to run some tests to be sure.”

*There’s no time for tests!* I grabbed a syringe from the table and offered up my arm. “Test this.”

**Episode 1727**

I finished up helping Torin bring in the badly injured pack members and then made a beeline for Greyson. If he thought I could forget my concern for him and his clearly not-healed injury, he was dead wrong.

“Greyson, are you okay? Your leg is bleeding again.” I had to stop myself from reaching out and caressing his cheek. I hated this. Being worried for both of my mates but unable to truly care for either in the heat of the moment lest it set the other off. I wanted to throw my arms around Greyson, but I knew Xavier could come upon us at any moment. And as much as I wanted Greyson, I could also feel myself pulled to check on Xavier after the battle. Was he all right? *This is literally the worst feeling in the world.*

“Yeah, Cali, I’m okay. It will heal over again.”

“But—”

“I have to admit, I was worried when you risked yourself like that. Don’t you understand what it does to me when you do stuff like that?”

“Despite what you and Xavier think of me, I’m not helpless. I have my Fae powers, and I just used them to save Xavier.”

“I get it, Cali, but I still want you to be careful.” Greyson gave me a gentle squeeze on the arm before heading off to check on the pack.

I sighed. I was still shaking the slightest bit as the last of the adrenaline drained from my body. I needed to find my family, make sure they were all right. I found my mom in the living room talking to my dad, who looked completely rattled.

“If I were a werewolf, an official werewolf, I could have defended my family,” my dad said. “We needed all the help that we could get, and I was useless, cowering inside the house and watching all the people I care about go up against death itself.”

“Calm down, honey. You held down the fort in other ways. I, for one, am happy that you weren’t out there in the middle of all that fighting. I would’ve been worried sick,” my mom said.

“Me too,” I said. I gathered both of them into a warm group hug. “I’m so happy that you’re both okay.” I worried about them as much as I worried about my mates, but at least with Xavier and Greyson, I knew they could take care of themselves—for the most part. I looked around. “Has anyone seen Artemis?”

“No, actually. We went looking for her when the fight started, but we didn’t have any luck,” my dad said.

Worry spiked through me. “That’s not good. What if something happened to her?”

“Oh, you know as well as I do that Artemis can handle herself. She’s a warrior at heart; she knows how to defend herself,” my mother assured me.

Despite her words, I could see the worry on her face.

“I’ll find her,” I promised.

I left the living room and ducked my head into the den, and then into one of the studies near the rear of the house. No sign of her. I was happy to see that most of the pack had come out of the battle unharmed. They were camped out all around the house—in the common areas and tucked into bedrooms, resting or being tended to. The place was buzzing with activity.

I peered through the window at the dome, wondering how long the magic would hold. *Maybe I should ask the witches.* I went upstairs but found no sign of them. Maybe they were still outside? I ran down the stairs and out to the front yard, where I saw Big Mac and Kira comforting Didi. I was heading straight for them when I heard a pounding sound coming from the dome. Everyone turned to look. It was York, caught on the other side of the dome as he pounded his fists against it, his orange eyes casting an eerie glow. Behind him, Letifer—or was he Silas at the moment?—stood watching, his arms crossed, not saying a word. It was all giving me the creeps.

I walked over to stand beside Big Mac. “Any idea how long the spell will hold?” I asked her as we both kept our eyes on York.

Big Mac shrugged. “I wish I had a definitive answer, but I don’t. There’s a chance it could last indefinitely—as long as Letifer doesn’t use any dark magic to destroy it. We don’t know.”

I looked at Didi. She was clearly heartbroken—and how could she not be? I wanted to comfort her, but first, I had to find Artemis. I continued to look around, passing by Torin, who was busy healing one of the Blue Bloods. I gave him a nod, and he nodded back. He looked tired, but hopeful. He was such a good Fae, and the pack was damn lucky to have him.

I turned at the sound of my name being called. Artemis! I rushed over to her, unable to ignore the fact that she seemed to be walking with a limp. *What happened to her?*

“Artemis! Did you get hurt in the battle? Did a revenant bite you?”

“It’s nothing to worry about,” she said as we embraced. “Are Tom and Orla okay?”

“They are,” I replied. “But I want to see your leg—maybe Torin can heal it?”

“Later. Right now, I want to talk to Rishika.” Without another word, she headed off, leaving me perplexed. She’d seemed a little distant. Maybe it was because of the fighting? We were all probably a little beside ourselves after going through that. Maybe my mom was wrong, and Artemis wasn’t as tough a warrior as we thought.

I returned to Big Mac, Kira, and Didi. Didi looked even more forlorn than she’d been a few moments ago. She kept shooting quick glances at Letifer, and every time she did her eyes would water and she’d bury her face in her hands. I looked at Big Mac, who was patting her awkwardly on the head, like she was a dog. Maybe leaving her with Big Mac hadn’t been the best idea. She wasn’t exactly the sensitive, nurturing type—though she’d done well at comforting Marta earlier. I thought back to how freaked out Marta had been. It was a shame that she’d had to go through that. *It’s a shame that we all had to fight off Letifer and his revenants*, I thought as I looked around the yard.

“White chocolate mochas for all,” Mrs. Smith said, coming over to join us. She shot me an apologetic look. “Sorry, Cali, I didn’t bring one for you—I didn’t see you out here earlier when I was counting heads for orders,” she said. “But if you hang around for a second, I can make you one! They’re good for morale, I hear.”

“It’s fine, Mrs. Smith.” I looked down at Didi and smiled at her. She looked away, buried her face in her hands, and began to sob. “Just make sure Didi gets one—your mochas always make me feel better, so hopefully they’ll take Didi’s mind off things for a few minutes.”

I left them again to go look for Xavier. Where had he gone? I’d seen him go rushing into the house earlier, after I’d left him and Greyson to help Torin with the injured pack members. I hoped that everything was okay. That fight with the revenants had been pretty intense before I’d managed to blast that revenant away, and while I hadn’t noticed any injuries, it didn’t mean that he hadn’t sustained any. I could only hope for the best. I wanted to find him and thank him for helping me during the battle. It had felt nice to know that he was looking out for me, even in the heat of things.

Giving up on finding Xavier for the moment, I went back over to check on Didi. She was still sitting cross-legged on the ground, and I stooped down so that I was face to face with her. Her cup of white chocolate mocha sat steaming beside her, untouched.

“Didi, are you okay?”

She didn’t respond.

“You know, I’m really appreciative of the spell. Everyone is. It was exactly what we needed in order to regroup, not to mention the fact that it cut the revenants’ numbers in half, so we didn’t have to deal with them all at once…” I trailed off into an awkward silence.

It was true enough that I was happy for the protection of the dome, but I couldn’t help but wonder if we were trapped inside it. *Are we stuck here now? Are there any loopholes to get out of it if we need to? It isn’t like we went to the grocery store to pick up supplies before this… If we’d known about it, maybe we could’ve picked up a bunch of packs of instant noodles or something.* I made a mental note to check in with Torin about our food reserves. There were a lot of mouths to feed in the pack house, and most of the pack members were big and beefy, with appetites to match. It was hard enough to keep stocked up even under normal circumstances.

“Maybe I should forgive him,” Didi said. “Maybe that would have stopped all of this!”

“No, Didi, you can’t blame yourself. This is all Silas—er—Letifer’s fault. He’s made decisions, and clearly the ones he decided to make aren’t in anyone’s best interest but his own.”

“I know, but if I could’ve prevented this… I should do something about it.”

I gathered Didi into a hug. I was about to remind her again that this wasn’t her responsibility when an even louder banging echoed around us. It felt suspiciously like the “earthquake” from before. We all snapped to attention, even Didi, who sprang to her feet. We looked through the dome. A mass of revenants had gathered at York’s side, and they were all banging their fists against the dome.

As we watched in horror, they all raised their fists in unison, and with a loud bang, brought them down.

Then, there was a loud crack.

**Episode 1728**

The revenants kept banging on the dome wall. I watched in horror as the crack in the dome spread.

*Oh no! NO NO NO NO!*

Behind the crack, Letifer grinned triumphantly, like the horrible fucking monster he was. Did he have a reason to gloat, though, or was he bluffing? Was there a real chance that the dome could collapse? *Is this really happening?*

A shot of fear ran through me at the image of the dome cracking and everyone pouring in.

“Brace yourselves!” Greyson bellowed. Everyone in the pack tensed, and then Big Mac sprinted into action.

“Kira, Didi!” she barked, running toward the edge of the dome, the other two witches right behind her.

My heart racing, I watched as the three of them joined hands and started chanting, their eyes closed. I had no idea what they were saying, but their rhythm was unstoppable.

They suddenly sent out a blast of magic, and the dome sealed itself back up. A second later, the witches’ chanting became louder, and they sent out a powerful purple blast that knocked Letifer and his horrible revenants away from the dome. The impact was instant, the earth under my feet shaking from the magic.

*Witchcraft!*

It was truly incredible. I was vibrating with excitement as I watched the three witches. They were practically radiating power, and I was so impressed that I kind of wanted to be one of them. Like, if there had been a club, and I could’ve joined up and become a witch right at that moment, I would have been all for it. The badassery was out of control!

“Well,” Sage said sheepishly, breaking the silence among the pack. “That’s one way to deal with the revenants.”

The entire pack—even Greyson and Xavier and Mace, the serious Alphas—exhaled in relief. Some of us chuckled at Sage’s comment, myself first and foremost. But then I saw Big Mac’s expression as she marched back toward us.

“What’s going on?” Greyson asked her sharply.

She glanced between him and Xavier, while Didi and Kira waited a couple of feet behind her. “We’re secure for now, but there’s no telling how long our defenses will hold.”

I swallowed roughly. The witches had bought us some time, but the threat was far from over. I held my breath when I saw that Letifer and the revenants had already rushed back to the dome, lurking like piranhas. I could see Silas—*Letifer*—glaring at Didi. The woman seemed ready to burst out crying. How could she look so angry and sad at the same time? *Gah*.

This had to be torture for her.

“Thank you for doing your best,” Greyson told Big Mac gruffly.

I looked up at him, anxious. “What are we going to do now?”

Before he could reply, Xavier came up to us, his eyes fixed on me. “Cali—”

“You should get back to the house,” Greyson interrupted, staring at me as well.

My stress levels lowered for just a moment, just so I could get really mad at Greyson. “My god, how many times are we going to go through this? How many times do I need to tell you that I’m *obviously* not going anywhere?”

And then, *wait for it*, Xavier spoke up. And *guess* what he said!

“Greyson is right—”

“See?” Greyson pointed at his brother.

“—for once, he’s right,” Xavier amended, and his jab made Greyson roll his eyes. “The point is, you really need to get back to the house.”

*These boys are just not listening to me!* I thought, frustrated and pissed off.

“For the actual millionth time, I’m not going back inside,” I declared. “I’m never going to run—not when I can help the pack.”

The moment I uttered the words, I couldn’t help but glance at Greyson’s leg. He’d been bleeding and limping slightly, earlier. Was it still hurting him?

“Cali, aren’t you exhausted fighting us on this?” Xavier asked, his expression grim.

“How can we focus in battle if we’re constantly worrying about you?” Greyson continued.

As always, it was kind of shocking to see them agreeing on something, but I stood my ground.

“I think the question here is, aren’t *you* *guys* exhausted saying no to me? I have Fae magic, and I can use it. By now, you should know that there’s no way I’m going to go back inside, close the door, and pray for the best. If there’s even a tiny chance that I could help either of you, I’m going to take it.”

My mates glanced at each other, silent.

*Could this be?*

Could they have FINALLY realized that this was a battle they were never going to win? I was the most stubborn person I knew, and also very determined to be helpful, so I didn’t even know why they kept bothering to tell me what to do. If they were in danger and I could do something to help them, I would never sit on the sidelines. It wasn’t who I was.

Greyson was the first to sigh, deeply.

Then Xavier followed.

I looked between them. “Does all this long-suffering sighing mean that you two have finally accepted that I’m the Alpha here?”

Xavier scoffed. “Seriously, Cali?”

“We don’t have time for jokes, actually,” Greyson said grimly. That was shocking, because Greyson loved sarcasm almost as much as I did. He glanced over his shoulder. “It’s clear that the barrier spell isn’t going to hold forever. Letifer isn’t going anywhere. There’s going to be a battle, and we all need to prepare ourselves. Do you realize that, love?”

I nodded firmly.

“I’m ready.” Mace spoke up from a couple of feet behind me, his baritone voice imposing. He was eyeing the revenants with a murderous glint in his eye. “Just let me at them, and I’ll deal with this my way.” He cracked his neck, his jaw clenched.

Right next to him, Ravi agreed. “I’m ready to end this right now. We can take them. We can fight.”

It was obvious that both of them were done playing nice. And I understood where they were coming from—they’d been dealing with this bullshit for so long. I felt the same way, actually. I was ready to just get this over with, do what I needed to do to bring victory and peace to the pack. *Finally*.

“I hate that they can see us,” Rishika said. She didn’t seem as hyped up as the other two. “It feels like we’re trapped in here,” she added, gesturing at the dome. “I get that it’s supposed to be protecting us, but it makes me feel like a goldfish in a bowl.” She looked between Greyson and Xavier and asked, “How are we going to attack them when they’re right there, watching our every move?”

Big Mac scoffed. “Oh? You don’t like the dome?” She raised an eyebrow. “Maybe you would have liked it better if we left you and all the others defenseless?”

Rishika huffed. “That’s not what I meant. Don’t put words in my mouth.”

“That’s true,” Sage piped up. “She never said that.”

“It kind of sounded that way,” Kira replied, crossing her arms over her chest. “It’s not like it was an easy spell to pull off, you know.”

“For free, I might add,” Big Mac said.

“This dome is stalling us, though. Why don’t we just charge toward them and fight?” Ravi asked, and then everybody started to bicker, tensions running higher by the second. Everybody was on edge.

I got that, I really did, but we needed to stick together.

*We cannot let Letifer win this just because we have trouble agreeing on a course of action!* I thought, frustrated.

As if he could hear my thoughts, Greyson spoke the loudest of everyone. “Stop.”

He said it only once, but his voice was full of Alpha command. There was an instant silence in the group. The energy had shifted, each and every person present focused on Greyson. Even the witches.

“There’s no space for us to fight one another.” He pointed into the distance. “The enemy is out there, and we can’t forget about that. We need to stick together.”

There was a sea of solemn nods. And then Xavier said, “I hate to admit it, but this is the second time today that I agree with my brother.”

Greyson nodded. “I’ll figure out a plan. In the meantime, prepare for battle. That’s all I can tell you right now.”

He turned away, and everybody else seemed to feel much less anxious after his display of strength. Still, I couldn’t help but notice that—just like earlier—he was favoring his left leg. For a moment there, I had been soothed myself, comforted by the idea that our Alpha was so powerful and confident…

But was Greyson, with his aching leg, really ready for such a brutal battle?

My heart racing, I hurried up to him, blocking his way. “Wait, Greyson?” I looked up at him, my throat dry. “Are you still in pain?”

**Episode 1729**

XAVIER

I watched as Cali hurried after Greyson. I had noticed that he was limping a bit, and Cali seemed pretty worried about that. She stared at his leg, pointing at it as she spoke.

Even though I didn’t want to get jealous, it was hard to ignore the feeling.

Especially because I was hurting too, actually. Right at the spot where the serum had been injected. But unlike Greyson, I wasn’t letting the pain stop me. It kind of felt like a flu shot. Which I didn’t actually need to get, probably thanks to my werewolf healing. Anyway, the point here was that I wasn’t a weakling like Greyson. And I didn’t need Cali to coddle me…

Even though that would’ve been nice.

Bottom line, I did not like the fact that she was, yet again, fussing over Greyson. What was the point, anyway? There was no chance in hell that Greyson would admit to Cali that he’d been weakened. He’d been putting his pride before what was best for the pack for a while now.

Irritated, I caught up to Cali, just as she asked Greyson, “Are you still in pain?”

Greyson, the liar, waved her off. “I’m fine.”

I narrowed my eyes at my brother. “Are you, though?”

Greyson met my gaze, annoyed. “Yeah. I’m just fine.”

I couldn’t just let this drop—not after everything that had happened, not after everything that *would* happen if I didn’t step in, if I didn’t take control and do what was best for everybody, and not just Greyson’s ego.

“If you’re injured, the pack deserves to know.” I gestured at the group. “They need to know that their Alpha isn’t functioning at his best when there’s a threat literally a few feet away.”

Greyson went rigid. “You think I don’t know what you’re trying to do here? Do you really believe that this is the best time to challenge me?”

Greyson’s anger didn’t intimidate me.

I had never—fucking *ever*—been afraid of him.

“I think you’re the only one with the problem here, brother.” My tone was firm. “The pack is in mortal danger, and if I need to step in to make sure that we all get through this safely, I’m willing to make that call.”

Greyson scoffed and got all in my face, glaring daggers at me. “Your self-righteous bullshit does not work on me, Xavier.”

“I could say the exact same thing about you,” I said, and was taking another step closer when Cali’s voice reached my ears.

“Seriously, guys?”

I flinched. She’d been quiet for so long that I should’ve known that something big was coming—and that was her outrage. She was red-faced, pissed off as she pointed between us.

“You just told the pack that we need to work together, Greyson.” Before I could get too triumphant, she turned to me and declared, “And as for you, Xavier, Greyson is right. Now is not the time to let petty fights get in the way of what’s best for the pack.”

I couldn’t believe this. Or, actually, I could. It wasn’t the first time that Cali had failed to support my bid for Alpha.

“But I *do* want what’s best for the pack, and that’s me. And you, Cali—you’re just taking Greyson’s side, like always.”

Cali groaned, raking her hands through her hair. “Oh my god! This isn’t about sides! How many times do I need to tell you both that?”

I shook my head bitterly. “It might not seem that way to you, but it’s fucking true. You’re not listening to me when I’m telling you that I’ve had some pretty serious concerns about Greyson—”

“And I’ve had some pretty serious concerns about you, asshole,” Greyson snapped.

I ignored him and continued. “This isn’t the first time that Greyson has been seriously injured and lied to us.”

Cali’s face scrunched up in confusion. “What are you even talking about?”

I faced my brother, whose gaze was full of rage. “Did you tell Cali what happened in the woods?”

Greyson clenched his jaw, and Cali stared at him, clearly shocked. “Greyson? What’s Xavier talking about?”

Greyson looked between us, like a trapped rat. It was funny to think of an Alpha that way—but he wouldn’t be one for too long, not if I had a say in it.

“Drop it. Right now,” Greyson told me.

But I was just getting started, and there was no way that Cali would let it go now. “Seriously, guys, what’s going on?” she demanded.

Greyson huffed, peering at me. “Xavier, stop this right—”

“No,” I said simply. “I think she deserves to know. Are you going to tell her, or should I?”

Cali was looking between us. “Greyson? This is freaking me out!”

Greyson shot me another look. *Please. Don’t do this*, he said, through our mind link.

But I couldn’t go back now.

I truly did believe that Cali deserved to know. No more lies.

I pushed ahead. “I came across Greyson in the woods, and he had orange eyes.”

Cali gasped, whirling toward Greyson, her expression astonished. “*What?*”

“It’s nothing,” Greyson said in a sharp tone. He was still glaring at me, clearly infuriated now. “He’s overplaying this for his own reasons.”

Before I could speak, Cali did it for me. “You have *got* to be joking! Greyson, this is serious,” she said, grabbing him by the arm. “You could be infected! A revenant!” Her cheeks were still flushed, her grip on Greyson getting tighter. “Didn’t you see what happened to Pip? She was infected, and then she *died*!”

Greyson turned his attention on Cali, but not before sending me one more venomous look. *I can’t believe you did this. I can’t believe you ratted me out to Cali.*

*I don’t exist just to keep your secrets, brother*, I retorted. *It’s not my problem if you’re weak.*

I was certain that if Cali hadn’t been here, Greyson would have punched me for that last comment. But now, he moved his focus on her, to settle her down. Nobody wanted an upset Cali, especially not during a battle.

“Please don’t listen to him,” Greyson told Cali. “It wasn’t a big deal.”

I scoffed. “Not a big deal? It was clearly important enough that you wanted to hide it from Cali and the entire pack.” I pointed at his leg. “Just like you’re hiding the fact that you’re injured and aren’t up for protecting people!”

Cali looked like the air had been knocked out of her, as if that last part was the worst of it. Suddenly, my arm throbbed. Right at the spot where Emmett had injected me with that serum…

Was I being a hypocrite here?

Was there a chance that I was just as compromised as Greyson and the infection just hadn’t spread yet?

“You need to shut your damn mouth,” Greyson said through gritted teeth, grabbing me by that same arm that hurt.

I hid my flinch and took a step back. “This isn’t over.”

When I turned to walk away, I felt the force of Cali’s attention falling on Greyson. Before I got into the pack house, the screen door slamming shut behind me, I heard Cali yelling at him in the distance. “You have some serious explaining to do!”

He did. But that wasn’t what I was worried about at the moment. I slipped into the bathroom, closing the door behind me before I ripped off my shirt. The injection site was right there, on my arm, but there was no sign of injury. The wound had healed completely, as if nothing had ever happened.

Relieved, exhaling sharply, I flexed my arm and watched it in the mirror. As good as new. I didn’t feel any pain whatsoever. I stared at my reflection, taking a deep breath. I was in top form. I was certain that I could lead, and I was more than ready to take on any enemy, whether that was Silas or Letifer or whatever that fucking thing out there was.

The threat needed to go, and I was the person for the job.

I was fully healthy and healed, and I knew strategy.

Unlike Greyson, who was falling apart under the pressure, and the pain of his injuries.

There was too much at stake to let my brother hold onto power just for his own pride and ego. People’s lives were more important than him feeling good about himself. I couldn’t let him be so selfish. I couldn’t let him risk everything in the name of vanity.

Determined, I put my shirt back on.

Every step I took to get outside was steady. Confident. Powerful. I could’ve taken over the world right now, fueled by the knowledge that I was doing what was best for the pack. For Cali.

When I got to the yard, the mark of a weak Alpha was all over the group.

Everybody was still milling about anxiously. The calm before the storm was stressing the pack out. If Greyson had been a proper leader, he would have fixed this by now. But of course not.

Greyson was still busy with Cali, trying to settle her down, *lying* to her while the rest of the Redwoods were agonizing. Greyson was lying, and he was weak for it.

I was doing him a favor.

I was doing everybody here a favor, and that was the one and only truth.

I took a deep breath and spoke up for the pack to hear.

“I know that everybody is worried right now. That you’re looking for a plan, for a way to move forward,” I said.

In an instant, all eyes were on me. Silence had fallen. Much like when the Alpha spoke.

“You all deserve a leader that’s going to be able to guide you through this without drama and second guessing and lying.”

“Motherfucker,” Greyson said under his breath, marching toward me.

But before he could say anything else, I finished my sentence.

“That leader is me. From here on, I’m the Alpha of the Redwood pack.”

**Episode 1730**

VIOLET

I recoiled, shoving Zachery back. The kid had kissed me. *Oh my god!* I wiped my mouth and tried not to choke, but Zachery seemed to be doing fine, grinning at me even as I took a step back.

Meanwhile, Sophie was staring at us, blinking away in shock. I felt the really strong urge to bolt. That became even worse when I saw Charlie to the left, just standing there, looking like he’d been struck.

*I have no idea why he did that!* I mind linked, though it had to be obvious. Right? Like, there was no way that Charlie would believe that I would enjoy kissing Zachery*. Gross!* The only guy I ever wanted to kiss was Charlie.

“A real vampire!” Zachery said, doing his little happy dance as if nothing had happened. He pointed at the body on the ground, still riding the high from his heroic act. He hadn’t even realized that I didn’t seem to have enjoyed that kiss *at all*. “Oh my god, I can’t wait to tell everyone!” Dancing around like a hyperactive chicken, he told Charlie, “Did you see it? I just grabbed the stake and BAM!”

He was going on and on, obviously very proud of himself, though I couldn’t stand to look at him right now. Especially since Charlie hadn’t replied to my mind link and wasn’t even looking at me.

He walked up to us, looking cool and collected in a way that he rarely did. It was actually freaking me out. I wanted to run up to him and shake him and remind him that there was no way in hell that I would ever be happy to kiss his friend.

“What happened here?” He looked at the vampire on the ground and back up at me, his expression cold.

“Aren’t you listening to me?” Zachery exclaimed. He leapt up and started rambling again about his story of immense bravery. “Charlie, you should have seen me, man! This vampire came out of nowhere! I reacted totally on instinct and took him the hell out!” He pointed at the body on the ground once more, and suddenly a frown decorated his features. “Wait, if he’s a vampire and I staked him, why is his corpse still here? Aren’t vampires supposed to turn into dust after you kill them?” His eyebrows furrowed as he stared at the vampire. “Maybe the books were wrong?”

Zachery seemed doubtful, and I wasn’t going to spill the beans to him about my theory.

*The vampire had orange eyes*, I told Charlie. *It was a revenant.*

Charlie’s gaze flickered over to me. He continued to look a little awkward, a little cold, like he was still processing the kiss. What *was* there to process? Didn’t this boy know that I was crazy about him? He should’ve been more worried about the supernatural problems we were dealing with right now!

Thankfully, when he finally answered me, he focused on that. *Was it really a vampire, though?*

Of course it had been a vampire. And it was definitely possible that it was a *revenant*-vampire, to be exact, with the glowing eyes and all.

*It was a vampire all right. It had fangs*, I replied.

Charlie nodded solemnly.

As Zachery kept rambling at Sophie, I stared at my mate. *Did you hear what I told you earlier? I have no idea why he kissed me. I obviously didn’t want him to, or anything…*

Charlie didn’t respond, which made my stomach twist. But then I realized that he was too busy examining the body. He seemed truly concerned, and then a thought hit me.

If this was a revenant-vampire, we needed to burn him pronto.

“I think we have a problem here.” I cleared my throat loudly to gather everybody’s attention. Charlie, Zachery, and Sophie all stared at me. “I heard somewhere that if a vampire doesn’t turn into dust after you stake them, you need to burn them. That’s the only solution. We have to do it, right now.”

Zachery looked at me curiously. “Where did you hear that? From who?

*God.* Did I really need to explain this further? I was the most awkward liar ever! “Um. I remember my…”

*Parents?* Charlie helped me through our mind link. I shot him a grateful look.

“I remember my parents telling me a story about that. About a vampire who didn’t disappear.” I glanced at Charlie, eager for his support. Thankfully, he delivered.

“You know, I think I actually heard that story as well,” he told Zachery, nodding. “I’m pretty sure Daisy is right.”

To her credit, Sophie hadn’t spoken a word. She was probably still wondering what the hell was going on with that kiss Zachery had planted on my mouth. What a mess.

Zachery seemed to notice how quiet she was being, so he turned to her. “What do you think?”

She stared at both Charlie and me. And when Charlie gave her a faint nod, she seemed to have gotten the message. “I think we should do it. There’s no reason not to, especially if there’s a chance that it will, like, come back to life since it didn’t turn into dust.”

Zachery seemed appeased. He clapped his hands. “Okay then. Let’s burn this fucker.”

“The faster the better,” Sophie said, and Charlie agreed.

“Hey, guys?” Zachery patted himself down, looking around. “Do any of you have a lighter?”

“No,” Charlie and I said at the same time, and Sophie shook her head.

I groaned internally. *Seriously?* Was this thing about to come alive and eat us just because we weren’t carrying a lighter?

*It’s going to be fine, relax*, Charlie told me.

But then, Zachery stared at me and moved a little closer, and Charlie went rigid.

“It’s okay, I can save the day. *Again*.” He winked at me. “I was a Boy Scout—time to put my wilderness skills to the test.” He pointed at the woods. “Do you want to come help me gather some branches, Daisy?”

Feeling actual *fire* emanating from my mate, I said, “I think I should stay back and watch the body with Charlie.”

“I’ll come with you,” Sophie said, bless her.

Zachery shrugged, and the two of them went off to collect the branches.

When I turned to face Charlie, he was serious. He didn’t seem angry, exactly. Just tense.

“Are you okay?” he whispered.

“I’m fine,” I said, swallowing. “But what happened before with Zachery and the kiss… You know I didn’t ask him to do that. Right?”

Charlie shifted his feet, rubbing his forehead. “I know. Which is why I kinda want to fucking punch him.”

I blinked.

“He’s my friend, but sometimes it’s hard to remember that when the blood is boiling inside my head. It seems like he needs a lesson in consent.”

“You trust me, then?” I asked quietly.

Charlie met my gaze softly. “Of course.”

I smiled faintly. Of course Charlie would never blame me for what had happened. Of course.

“I think I’m just feeling territorial because of the werewolf thing,” Charlie said in a low voice. He stared at my mouth. “All I can think about right now is grabbing you and erasing Zachery’s scent from your skin.”

My heart had started pounding. The way that Charlie was looking at me had butterflies flapping their wings inside my stomach. I could see the heat in his gaze, could feel that he meant every word coming out of his mouth. And I wanted him to do just that—I wanted him to wrap his arms around me and kiss me and never let go.

“I can’t believe we’re having this conversation with a dead vampire on the ground,” Charlie said then, breaking the tension.

Just then, Zachery and Sophie returned.

“It’s time to build the fire now,” Zachery was telling Sophie. He always seemed excited to have an audience*. Jesus*. “Hey, Charlie, come on over and help me with that. The girls can pick up the corpse.”

“That’s nice,” Sophie deadpanned. “I love the idea of touching a dead body.”

I snorted. “Same.”

“Maybe I should pick up the corpse—”

“No,” Zachery interrupted Charlie. “I need my right-hand man to help me build the fire!”

With a long-suffering sigh, Charlie moved over to Zachery and the two of them got the fire going. Meanwhile, Sophie and I stared at the dead vampire. *Yuck*. His fangs were still showing, blood dripping from his mouth. There was dirt all over his face, and his clothes were even worse. Oh, and of course he stank of death. I was pretty sure that Sophie was smelling that too, and it wasn’t just a werewolf thing.

“I call dibs on the feet. I’m not going anywhere near that thing’s face,” Sophie told me seriously.

I sighed. “You got me there.”

She bent over and gripped him by the ankles as I held my breath and leaned down to grab him by the arms.

It was then that the vampire’s orange eyes popped open.

In a swift, sharp motion, he sat up. A second later, Charlie screamed, “Violet, look out!”

I flinched back, terrified of the vampire—and by the realization that Charlie had just called me by my real name.

**Episode 1731**

MARTA

I was locked up in my room, trying to breathe right. I could actually feel the chaos going on outside, and I was still shaken by everything that had happened. I couldn’t stop trembling and pacing up and down, very aware of Lilac’s eyes on me.

He had been silent for the past few minutes, but I should have known that that wouldn’t last. He broke the silence with, “Are you okay?”

I whirled around, glaring at him. “Am I *okay*?” His tone had been gentle, but I was flipping out. “I barely escaped a portal to actual hell, and now”—I pointed outside, flailing—“we are all surrounded by ghost demons that are trying to kill us! Does that sound okay to you?!”

“Whoa there.” Lilac cringed, holding up his hands. “Sorry, I guess I shouldn’t have asked that.”

His cheeks were a little red, and he awkwardly retired in the corner like a scolded child.

And now I felt bad. Dammit.

“Stop that,” I said with a sigh. “I didn’t mean to snap at you. I’m just really overwhelmed.” I sniffled, wrapping my arms around my torso. “I’m really scared, Lilac.”

That did it. In an instant, Lilac was next to me, wrapping his ghostly arms around me. Even though he wasn’t fully there, he felt very real to me. His energy vibrated against my skin, filling me with warmth and comfort. I instantly felt safer, more grounded. When I faced him, his eyes were full of emotion, and it made my heart race.

“Thank you again,” I whispered. “You know, for saving my life.”

Lilac stroked my cheek with the back of his hand. “I’m just glad I could help.”

I swallowed, tears still tickling at the corners of my eyes. “Maybe you should’ve just let me die.”

Lilac’s expression became fierce. “*What?* What the hell are you talking about?”

“It kind of feels like everything that’s going on is my fault,” I said, wiping my eyes. “I’m the medium. I’m the one who brought Didi here. I’m the one who opened the portal, and now everybody else is out there, dealing with the consequences.”

Lilac pressed his lips together, shaking his head. I could feel his hands on my arms, his fingertips digging lightly into my skin. Still a ghost, but alive to me. “*No*.” His tone was sharp. “You’re not allowed to talk like that about yourself. None of this is your fault. You just wanted to help. You were repeatedly *asked* to help.”

I sniffled, still feeling horrible. “If I hadn’t been here, though, maybe none of this would have happened.” I glanced out the window, shivering. “And now, the entirety of the pack is in grave danger.”

Lilac swallowed audibly. “That’s not true.”

I scoffed, wiping my tears once more. I freed myself from his grip and moved to the window, pointing outside. “Of course it’s true! There are so many revenants out there—how on earth are the Redwoods and the Blue Bloods going to get out of this?”

Lilac’s expression darkened. “The pack is strong. They’ve gotten out of sticky situations in the past.”

I shook my head incredulously. “Stickier than this?”

“Maybe not, but I’m still sure that they’re all going to be okay,” Lilac said, nodding firmly.

I bit the inside of my cheek, rubbing my forehead. “You don’t know that.” My stomach was in knots. My voice cracked. “Do you think they’re mad at me?”

Lilac came up to me, his expression full of confusion. “Who?”

“The pack,” I said, swallowing roughly. “For opening the portal.”

Lilac scoffed. “They were the ones who wanted you to call Didi in the first place, remember? And sure, maybe you opened the portal, but you were kidnapped! It wasn’t a choice you made, and nobody can blame you for it.”

“But what if they do?” I asked helplessly.

Lilac stared at me, his eyebrows furrowed, his lips a thin line. “That wouldn’t be fair. In fact, it would be ungrateful. They’ve been pushing you for so long in so many ways, even though you told them that you weren’t ready for a lot of things. So yeah, if any one of them dares to say that you’re responsible for any of this, they’ll have to answer to me.”

I took in his expression. Despite myself, I couldn’t help but find his little macho routine quite charming. He was a rascal, and he was stubborn but hilarious too, and I…

I was so grateful for him.

I’d never thought I would think that, but I was very grateful for him.

“Let’s take a moment and accept that all the things you just said are true—” I started, but he cut me off.

“They *are* true,” he declared.

“The point is that even if all that is true, I’m not helping anyone by just sitting up here feeling sorry for myself,” I said quietly. “I need to help the pack however I can.”

Lilac raised an index finger. “Okay, first of all, you’re safer staying here in your room, especially after you were literally attacked and kidnapped. Second, the pack can take care of itself, it’s fine.”

“It’s not fine. This pack has always treated me like one of their own—”

“I mean, that’s kind of an exaggeration, though I guess nobody’s tried to strangle you… recently.”

“Stop being a brat,” I told him firmly. “I haven’t been part of a group like this in forever. Big Mac has taught me so many things, and Violet genuinely cares about me, and even Cali—despite being dramatic, she always keeps an eye out for me. Always!”

Lilac sighed. “Okay, I’ll give you that.”

Saying those words out loud made me feel better. “I should go out there and help them. I’m sure Big Mac and Kira will have something for me to do.”

“Don’t they always…” Lilac trailed off sarcastically, and if I could have, I would’ve elbowed him.

“Stop it,” I retorted, heading for the door.

He blocked my way. “I still don’t think it’s safe for you out there. You should stay here, with me, perhaps cuddle, and everything will be fine.”

I rolled my eyes. “*Lilac*.”

“What?” He threw his hands up in the air. “I’m just worried about you, shoot me!”

“I can’t—you’re already dead,” I said dryly.

He snickered, entertained and distracted. And that was when I took the opportunity to walk out of the room.

“You’re so sneaky!” Lilac said, just as I stepped out into the hall and—

Almost ran straight into Artemis.

I flinched. “Hey! What’s up?” I asked, taking her in. I noticed that her shirt had some blood on it, around the torso. I gasped in shock. “Artemis! Are you okay?”

She didn’t meet my gaze. “I’m fine.” She moved to brush past me, her hand pressed gingerly to her side, but I stopped her.

“Artemis, you’re bleeding through your shirt! Have you talked to Torin?” I asked, alarmed. I looked around. “Is he outside? We should get you to him!”

“I’m telling you, I’m fine,” Artemis insisted, still not looking at me. She tried to leave me behind once more, but I blocked her way, worried and confused.

“You’re not fine, what happened to you? The battle hasn’t even started yet,” I said, feeling anxious. Could someone from the pack have done this? Had she gotten into a fight with someone? Cali wouldn’t be happy about this!

“Just leave me alone,” Artemis said under her breath and brushed past me without another word.

I froze, staring at her retreating back.

Well. She was clearly not interested in being friends. I tried not to take this personally. She had her own issues to deal with. And also, she was very rude in general, so I wasn’t sure if I even *wanted* to be her friend. She had tried to kill me and everything too, so there was that. Frankly, I didn’t know why I had even bothered.

Still a little annoyed, I was starting to make my way down the stairs when Lilac popped up in front of me. “Marta.”

I shook my head. “I said I’m going to be okay—I need to go out there and join the rest of the pack. Stop worrying about me!”

“Even though I do enjoy worrying about you,” Lilac told me seriously, “it’s not about that.”

“What’s going on then?” I asked, confused.

He glanced behind me. “Marta. Artemis’s side…”

I rolled my eyes. “She clearly isn’t interested in my help, and I’m not going to beg for her friendship. And it’s not like our relationship started on the right foot, what with her trying to choke me while she was being possessed or whatever, so that was—”

“Marta,” Lilac said firmly, cutting me off.

“*What?*” I asked, annoyed.

“Artemis’s wound…” Lilac swallowed roughly. For once, he seemed nervous, and that gave me pause. His eyes wide, he said, “Her injury is in the exact same place my wolf bit Letifer.”

**Episode 1732**

I gaped, staring at Xavier in shock.

Had this man seriously just announced that he was going to be the Alpha here? Just, like, casually claiming the throne in front of everybody, deciding that that was it?

*God give me the confidence of a man who would do that!*

Next time I visited the grocery store, I would go to the candy aisle and claim the entire chocolate bar section without paying for anything. That seemed to be Xavier’s vibe, so why not follow his lead straight into the madness?

*Oh my god, Cali, focus here!* I told to myself, shaking with anxiety.

I instantly turned to look at Greyson. I doubted he was about to sit by and passively wait while Xavier took over the pack. Seriously, what did Xavier think he was doing? Didn’t he realize that we all needed to be working together here?

*These boys are going to give me a heart condition!*

Sure enough, Greyson growled. In a flash of movement, he was at Xavier’s side, his teeth bared in anger as he got in Xavier’s face, his voice turning into a vibrating hiss.

“What the hell do you think you’re playing at?” he demanded.

Xavier, to his credit, remained calm. “I’m doing what’s best for the pack.”

I was holding my breath, looking between the two brothers as Greyson snapped, “Bullshit!”

“I’m serious, brother,” Xavier said coldly. “I have some pretty fucking serious concerns about the state you’re in. You’re not in peak physical condition, whereas I am. I know I’m ready for what’s coming. Can you say the same?”

Greyson hesitated for only a second, but it was enough for my heart to start racing.

“Of course I can say that!” He pounded his fist to his chest. “*I* am the pack’s Alpha. I am who they need.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but for once, I was at a loss for words. Because *perhaps* Xavier wasn’t entirely off base when it came to Greyson’s health. I was still reeling from hearing that he’d seen Greyson with revenant eyes in the woods. Meanwhile, behind me, I could feel the weight of the whole pack’s energy. The confusion, the anxiety, the fear. Because Letifer was still outside our bubble, watching us, licking his lips as if we were his next meal. And if what Xavier had said about Greyson and the orange eyes was true…

*Shit.*

I couldn’t help but wonder if there was a chance that he was right. That Xavier was the stronger Alpha right now, and what the pack needed. Not for any reason other than the fact that Greyson could get injured more easily, that this could be dangerous for him.

The thought made me feel like I was betraying Greyson, and it turned my stomach into knots. But now that it had wormed its sickly little way into my head, I couldn’t let it go. What if Greyson truly *was* compromised? There were signs of that—above all, the fact that he was way more injured than he was letting on. I was certain about that, even if he denied it.

And he kept denying it.

“I’ve told you that I’m fine, and *this* is what you do? This is the kind of man you want to be?” Greyson almost spat in Xavier’s face. “You’re upsetting everybody when you make statements like this. You think that this is the way to take over? Where the fuck is your honor?”

Xavier laughed in Greyson’s face. “You’re one to talk about honor. You’re a fucking liar!”

Greyson roared, and alarm bells went off in my head.

*Nope! NOPE NOPE NOPE NOPE—*

They were about to come to blows, I was certain of it. But before I could reach out to them, before I could yell—

Mace stepped forward.

“You two had better stop barking at each other and tell everybody what’s really going on here,” he declared. “The pack deserves the truth, and all your bickering is affecting everybody.”

He looked behind him, gesturing at the werewolves. I could see the concern in their faces, the insecurity—all things that were so bad just before a battle.

*Even if Xavier is right about Greyson’s state*, I thought, *it wasn’t right to bring it up right now. The pack’s morale is in danger!*

“Did you hear that?” Greyson snapped at Xavier. “You’re making everything worse. Stand down, brother.”

*Maybe Greyson should have taken a step back earlier and taken care of himself and his injury*, I thought*. But he didn’t, and now…*

Now, Xavier turned away from his brother and raised his voice. “I know that you’re all worried,” he said, addressing the pack. “And for good reason. But Greyson is injured, and possibly worse.”

His ominous vague tone made a chill run through me. And I wasn’t the only one who felt that way. Rishika stared at Greyson as if she had been slapped.

“I, on the other hand, am not compromised in any way,” Xavier continued. “I’m here, I’m strong, and I’m more than ready to lead this pack and make sure that we all make it out of here.”

“You’re so full of shit.” Greyson laughed at his brother. “You’re just a fucking megalomaniac—”

“I’m not done talking, Greyson,” Xavier said coldly. “After the battle, we can address this formally. But we don’t have any time, and for now, you need to follow me.”

“Oh? You mean we *can* talk about this without upsetting everybody?” Greyson mocked. “And here I thought you cared about the pack—what you’re doing right this moment is creating instability.”

Xavier did not reply. He turned his back on us, and Greyson followed him, obviously ready to continue arguing while the pack erupted into whispers. I was still freaking out, ready to rush after them.

Even though I had NO fucking idea what to say.

*Hey, Greyson, you should definitely look into fixing your leg and those orange eyes, okay? You should have told everybody about this before today!* I would say. Or, maybe I should say, *Hey, Xavier, you may have a point here, but your timing is the worst!*

Feeling like an overflowing boiling pot, I was about to step toward them when I noticed Artemis stepping out into the yard.

*Maybe I shouldn’t go talk to the boys, actually*, I told myself, my chest still tight with anxiety. *Maybe I just need to talk to a familiar face before I go over there and start screaming at both of them for different reasons.*

I ran up to Artemis. “Did you hear all that?”

Artemis blinked at me in confusion. “What? What happened?”

I swallowed roughly. “Xavier just announced that he’s Alpha now.”

Artemis’s eyes widened. “Whoa. Can he even do that?”

I paused for a second, because that was actually a great question. Could I just walk up to everybody and declare myself the Alpha? Of the pack, I mean, not the chocolate bar section at the grocery store.

“I don’t know, but Greyson—”

Artemis cringed. “I’ll bet Greyson’s not happy about that.”

I let out a burst of awkward, exasperated laughter. “I’ll say! These men are so obnoxious that I want to smack them upside the head and set them on fire!” I was about to continue listing all the problematic creative ways that I wanted to attack my mates when my eyes drifted over Artemis’s shoulder.

A few feet away, by the porch, Didi was standing alone. She seemed miserable.

“Stay here, I’ll be right back,” I told Artemis before walking over to Didi.

It seemed like a good idea at the moment, because talking about my mates—or actually talking *to* them—only worked me up. I had a very strong feeling that if I went over there and confronted Xavier and Greyson, things would get a million times worse. Xavier’s tendency to get jealous and think that I never supported him in combination with Greyson’s insistence that I was outrageous for worrying about his injury would be a very bad mix.

So talking to Didi was the perfect solution right now.

I cleared my throat, nudging her shoulder. “Are you okay?”

As soon as the question left my mouth, I felt like an idiot.

*Of course she’s not okay, Cali!* I scolded myself. *My god, how awkward are you?*

Didi didn’t seem to hate me, though. She wiped the corners of her eyes and whispered, “I just… I just still can’t believe what Letifer’s become.”

I took a deep breath. “I can’t imagine how you must be feeling right now. I’m so sorry.”

I *was* sorry for her, for real. Sure, my own love life was a total mess—I glanced over at Xavier and Greyson, who, of course, were still locked in a heated argument—but it wasn’t that bad. At least in theory. Nevertheless, my heart still twisted to see them like that—I absolutely hated it when they fought, especially now that the stakes were higher than ever.

Either way, though, at the end of the day, neither of them were murderous demons. So… Small victories?

Clearing my throat, I squeezed Didi’s shoulder. I was trying to be comforting, but I wasn’t sure if it was working. At least Didi seemed to be on our side after she had helped put up that defensive dome. That gave me the courage to ask her, “I get that this is very hard for you, but is there a chance that you will be fighting with us?”

She paused, turning to look at me.

She remained silent as I quietly added, “I mean, how are you feeling about this whole thing? What are you planning to do now?”

Didi wiped more tears from her cheeks. Her expression shifted. Now, blended with the sorrow was a fiery determination that shocked me.

“I’m going to kill Letifer.”

**Episode 1733**

GREYSON

I couldn’t believe this was happening. My brother was so self-obsessed that he’d decided to pull this bullshit right now—while there was a crisis going on, and we were surrounded by revenants.

But then again, that was Xavier. His ego was his biggest weakness.

“You can’t fool me, you know,” I said, glaring at him. “This is all about you proving to Cali that you’re the stronger man.”

“I *am* the stronger man, Greyson. You are gravely injured,” Xavier said coldly. “You’ve been lying to everybody, because what I saw in the woods—”

“You *betrayed* me,” I snapped, pointing at him, jabbing at his chest. “You told Cali about the orange eyes, you forced my hand and made me look like a coward—”

“Have you ever thought that you just *are* a coward?” Xavier said.

He fucking *dared*, but I knew that he was just lying to himself. Pointing at the pack, I said, “*That* is cowardice, Xavier! You created this chaos!” Everybody was still anxiously watching us or talking among themselves, pacing around. “This is you upsetting everybody just because your tiny little ego isn’t satisfied. You just want Cali’s attention to such a pathological, fucked up degree that—”

“This is not about Cali,” Xavier said, cutting me off. He remained so calm that it was fucking infuriating. “This is about you being in denial about the state you’re in.”

“Are you even listening to yourself?” I asked, exasperated. “This is not about me—it’s about what the pack needs, and that’s stability and cohesion! You’re destroying everything on a whim!”

“It’s not a whim. You mentioned stability—that’s exactly why I’m doing this.” Xavier’s tone was so composed that I wanted to punch him. “I really believe that I am what the pack needs right now. You had orange eyes, and despite trying to hide it, it’s very clear that you’re still injured. *Seriously* injured, if it won’t just go away.”

The moment he said those words, the throbbing pain in my leg became worse, as if begging to be acknowledged.

“Stop trying to paint yourself like some sort of ethical saint,” I snapped. “*I* am the Alpha here, and this is the absolute worst moment that you could have picked. You could have done this at a different time, but you chose right now just to create chaos—”

“You weren’t listening, Greyson,” Xavier breathed, shaking his head. “You’re still in denial, and I just can’t take it anymore.” He pointed behind him, at the dome and Letifer right behind it. “Especially not when danger is literally at our doorstep.”

The fury I felt made my brain fuzzy. It made me feel polluted as my brother’s composure mocked me. Forgetting all consequences, I hissed, “We both know that there’s a way to prove whether you’re the better Alpha. And since you seem to not give a fuck about the way the pack feels, let me take a page from your book and make everything even worse,” I declared, spreading my arms wide. “Come on, tough guy! Come at me! Let’s fight, *right the hell now*.”

Xavier scoffed, his expression full of disdain. “Jesus Christ, get a grip and look at yourself—you’ve flown off the handle just trying to handle the slightest problem.”

I paused.

If I *really* allowed myself to do what I wanted right now, I would bash Xavier’s face into the ground. I was certain that the second I laid a hand on him, it would be to destroy.

My voice lowered, but my fury had become ten times stronger. “You call staging a coup right before battle a *slight* problem?”

Xavier shook his head. His tone shifted to something more urgent, and he took a step closer to me. “You said it yourself—the pack needs cohesion. There’s no time for a fight. We can take care of that after the battle—”

“If you really think that, then why the fuck did you bring this up right now in front of everybody?” I growled.

“Because it’s what best.” He pointed between us. “One of us is looking out for the pack, and the other is looking out for his ego.”

I turned my hands into fists to stop myself from attacking him. “It’s clear that you’re the one with the ego here, Xavier, trying to play the big man for Cali. But guess what? After all is said and done, she’s still going to admire *me* more. She is still going to take my side, not yours.”

I was panting.

For a moment, neither of us spoke.

Xavier’s cold expression had broken the moment I’d finished my sentence.

Now, he looked positively *murderous*.

He was going to lose his cool, put his hands on me, and we would fucking kill each other.

But before Xavier could move an inch, Mace shoved us both apart.

“You two assholes had better stop fighting before I break both your necks!” Mace hissed, looking between us. “Everybody is scared, and you need to get your shit together, set this feud aside, and make a plan!”

I scoffed at Mace. “It’s not my fault that my little brother over here decided to fuck shit up. Help me get rid of him, so I can be the Alpha this pack needs.”

Mace paused. Shaking his head, he looked at me up and down.

“From where I’m standing, Xavier has a point.” He pointed at my leg. “You’re injured, and Xavier is not. And between the two of you, you’re the one who’s been screaming all this time. He has kept a level head.”

It was true that Xavier hadn’t snapped.

For a moment there, he had won.

And I couldn’t believe this was happening.

After everything that I had done for this pack, everybody was ganging up on me. I still got no trust, no respect. I had pushed through the hardest time for everyone, and nobody seemed to appreciate a thing.

“Excuse me,” someone said, clearing his throat.

I turned around to see that professor vampire guy, Emmett, looking between my brother, Mace, and me. “Is this a bad time?”

“Does it *look* like a good time?” I asked him, silent fury raging in my voice. Who did this guy think he was, butting in when there was such a serious issue going on? He wasn’t even a member of this pack!

The vampire chuckled awkwardly. Was that fear in his eyes? Either way, he said, “Okay then. Right.” He stared at Xavier. “I’m gonna go—”

“Yes, you should,” Xavier said gruffly, and something twitched inside me.

Suddenly, I wanted the vampire to stay.

Probably just because I hated to agree with Xavier about anything, *ever*.

“Actually, Emmett,” I said, “if you really need to talk to us, it must be important. What do you want?”

Emmett was still looking at Xavier. “Just wanted to check on your shoulder. How are you feeling?”

I paused, all the blood rushing to my head.

“Wait… What the hell is wrong with Xavier’s shoulder?” I asked.

My rage returned tenfold. Xavier had been calling me out for being injured when he had been injured *himself* the whole time? Was this hypocrite for real? Did he *want* me to rip his head off and then play soccer with it? *Fuck*.

“It’s not what you think,” Xavier said hastily, obviously guessing my train of thought from the murderous glint in my eye. “I’m fine. It’s all healed up.”

There was actual nervousness in Xavier’s tone, suddenly. So now, of course, I was like a shark sniffing for blood.

“What are you talking about? What kind of injury was it?” I asked, turning to Emmett, whose expression was so bright and intrigued that it was disturbing.

“Is that really true? It’s all healed up already?” He gasped. “My serum must have worked!”

I blinked slowly at the vampire. “What serum are you talking about? What’s happening here?”

Mace turned to Xavier, eyebrows arched. “That’s a good question.”

Xavier’s jaw clenched. “Greyson, stop—”

“Stop *what*?” I snapped. “If you needed a special serum to heal your injury because it wouldn’t recover otherwise, you are one hell of a hypocrite, brother. In fact, that’s something the whole pack should know! Don’t you agree? Since you’re all about honesty?”

Xavier had gone rigid. Mace was squinting at him suspiciously. “Answer the question, Xavier.”

He huffed, looking between Mace and me. “God, can you two dial it down? I’m fine, look.” He pulled down his T-shirt and showed us a perfectly normal shoulder.

“This is a scientific marvel!” Emmett exclaimed, leaning in to investigate Xavier’s arm. “And that was such a nasty bite, too! How amazing is it that my serum fixed it up so easily?”

A nasty bite, Emmett said.

A *bite*.

I froze, realization dawning on me.

“*A bite?*” I turned to Xavier, and he clenched his jaw.

“Greyson, it’s not what—”

“Are you saying that Xavier was bitten and this serum of yours healed it?” I asked Emmett. Then, before I got an answer, I asked Xavier, “Is this vampire saying that you knew there was a way to cure my leg and you kept it from me, brother? Did you fucking do all this, just so you could swoop in to save the day?”

I was feeling both disgusted by his betrayal and a little smug, actually. Because when Cali heard this one? Xavier would be fucking *done*.

He sure seemed alarmed as he told me, “It didn’t happen that way! Can you just chill the fuck out and listen to me?”

I ignored my brother and turned to the vampire. “*You!* Give me the medicine.”

Emmett blinked up at me, nervous. “No, you don’t understand. It’s experimental, and your wound is different. It could kill you.”

I grabbed the vampire by the neck of his shirt and barked, “I don’t care. Either you inject me with that serum, or I’ll kill you.”

**Episode 1734**

CHARLIE

“Violet, look out!” I froze as soon as the words were out of my mouth. Had I really just used her real name instead of calling her Daisy? *Shit*. I could feel Sophie’s and Zachery’s eyes on me, but there was no time for that. Not when a real-ass revenant-vampire was getting slowly to its feet, like a zombie that was definitely not fully dead.

Violet screamed, pulling Sophie backward and away from the revenant-vampire, but that didn’t matter. It had seen both the girls, and now it was staring at Violet, bearing its fangs and growling. The stake was still stuck in the thing’s chest, and I looked around wildly for a different one, a branch that was sharp enough to dig into its brain. Would that even help, though?

I didn’t have the time to think about that or anything else.

My wolf roared inside me, and I ran over, thrusting myself between the vampire and Violet, the mate instinct screaming at me to protect her at all costs. The vampire stank of death, its hands stretched out in front of it, ready to grab and destroy, but I wasn’t about to let that happen.

Without taking a second to think, I grabbed the thing by the head and ripped it the hell off.

The sound it made, bones and veins and rotten flesh breaking… It sent a chill down my spine. My stomach convulsed in horror as the vampire’s body fell to the ground, and disgust overwhelmed me. I made a sound and dropped the head, shivering.

How was this real life? I couldn’t believe that I’d just done that.

“Charlie…” Zachery trailed off, breaking the frozen silence.

Apparently, this was what Violet needed to shake out of her stupor and snap into action.

“Hurry, get the fire going!” she yelled at Zachery, grabbing the vampire by the legs to drag it toward the fire. Zachery flinched, doing what he was told as Violet looked up at me and screamed, “Charlie, throw the head into the fire, too! We need to destroy it!”

I almost gagged at the thought of touching that thing again, but I knew that I had no choice. Holding my breath, ignoring the way my stomach throbbed, I grabbed it by the hair and tossed it into the now blazing fire. I was disgusted and horrified to see that the vampire’s orange eyes had opened once more. It stared straight at me, the hatred in its eyes making me take a step back. It opened its mouth like it was going to scream when the fire took over, consuming every inch of the vampire’s flesh as if it were paper.

The scent was so terrible that I felt my whole head throb, my hand moving up to cover my nose the moment I felt faint.

All four of us stood wordlessly, watching the fire until the scent finally settled down. The vampire’s body had turned into ash, and the fire dialed down on its own, as if weakened after devouring something that was so close to death itself.

“Wow,” Sophie whispered. “That was intense.”

Her low, shaking voice broke the spell. The seriousness of the situation was forgotten, shoved to the side, and Zachery turned to me with a huge smile. “Charlie! Bro!” He clapped me on the back, excited. “That was awesome, man! How did you even think to do that? Like, how strong are you to be able to pull that off?”

I stared at him, scrambling for an answer. I settled for, “I think—I think vampire flesh is basically like wrapping paper around their body. It’s not like a human’s. That’s why it was so easy for me to, uh…”

“Kill it,” Violet added, nodding fervently. “That’s it, yeah.”

I shot her a grateful look.

“So creepy,” Sophie whispered, staring at the ashes as Zachery grabbed me by the shoulder.

“It was really cool, man! And you saved Daisy, too!” He turned to Violet, who was standing there, looking awkward. “Right, Daisy?” Before anyone could say anything, though, Zachery’s excited expression turned into one of confusion. “Wait, actually, I have a question—why did you call Daisy *Violet* back there? That was weird.”

Oh, shit. Now I was in trouble.

I had hoped that all the excitement and gore would have made Zachery, and Sophie too, forget. But both of them were now staring at me curiously. They were clearly waiting for an answer, and I wasn’t sure what the hell to say.

“Oh, well,” I mumbled, letting out an awkward laugh. “I’ve never been that good with flowers. Daisy, Violet… You know, all that.”

Violet was staring at me like I had lost my mind. *Seriously? And I’m supposed to be the bad liar here?* she mind linked.

Zachery frowned, clearly not buying it at all. I instantly rushed to add, “It’s kinda like a joke between us—”

At the same time, Violet spoke up and said, “It’s my middle name.”

Silence fell between the four of us. Sophie was pressing her lips together, and Zachery squinted at both Violet and me. “Your name is Daisy Violet? What, did your mom want you to become an Instagram influencer or something?”

Zachery’s joke fell flat. Violet grimaced. “I know, it’s a lot. But my mom was always super into gardening. She had all these books about flowers in her library when I was growing up.”

That sounded like a pretty legit explanation to me. Violet was clearly learning to think on her feet here. I was pretty sure that she’d saved the day, and now Zachery would leave us alone. I obviously overestimated the strength of her lie, though, because when I turned to face him again, Zachery was still looking between Violet and me with a confused and somewhat suspicious look on his face. Could he be thinking that something was fishy between Violet and me? That we were lying?

Sophie, on the other hand, was entirely expressionless.

My mate cleared her throat, very, very loudly. “Anyway. Enough about my hippie childhood. We should probably get out of here. There’s no telling if the vampire was alone—we should alert Sergeant Pepperdine and get to safety.”

Sophie, taking in a breath, nodded in agreement. “Daisy is right. We shouldn’t stay here in the middle of the forest with no backup. Today has been eventful enough as it is, and the sergeant should know there’s more of those things out here.”

I was really grateful for the interruption here, because Zachery was still looking suspicious. Since when was he so perceptive? Usually he couldn’t see beyond his own nose. Then again, he had taken a very intense interest in my mate, so of course he wanted to know what was up with her.

That asshole had better keep his hands to himself.

“Before we leave, we should check to make sure the corpse has been thoroughly burned,” I said.

Everybody agreed, and that seemed to distract Zachery as well.

A long moment later, after the fire was entirely out, all four of us started to walk back to camp. The silence was eerie, but I welcomed it. Sophie seemed thoughtful, and Zachery kept grumbling things about the mosquitoes that kept biting him. Violet glanced at me, then, and offered a faint nod.

*Do you think he bought it?* she mind linked. *Sophie… kind of knows already.*

*Really?* I asked.

*Yeah…*

*Shit. We can trust her, but* *Zachery definitely seemed suspicious. We’ll have to be more careful*, I replied.

Violet pressed her lips together, as if hiding a smile. *Right. You’d better be more careful with using my real name when I am literally undercover. I didn’t know I had to point that out.*

I snorted at her teasing. *Well, you’d better be more careful around possessed vampires. That kind of puts a damper on our adventures here.*

Violet covered her snort with a cough. In the background, Zachery’s rant about mosquitoes had turned into a one-man hype fest once more.

“This was kind of the best day ever, though, right?” he started. “It was literally a vampire hunt! And I staked one!” He kept on going, repeating everything that happened and everything that he’d done, while nobody else spoke.

I rolled my eyes to myself. We were never going to hear the end of this, were we?

But then again, as long as the dude was focused on himself instead of Violet, it was fine by me.

“… and then, I was the one who built the fire, did you see?” he asked Sophie, once we had finally reached the dorms.

The girl raised an eyebrow at him. “Yeah. I was there.”

Zachery laughed to himself. “Best day ever!”

I remembered that he had fucking kissed my girlfriend without her giving him the go-ahead, so this was definitely *not* the best day ever for me. Actually, I kind of wanted to punch him.

“Where’s Sergeant Pepperdine?” I asked instead.

We looked around; clearly we’d have to make an effort to find him amidst the chaos of the patrols all around us. Zachery said something, then, but I missed it, distracted to see Romilly walking up to us.

She was peering at me sternly.

*Fuck.*

“You two!” she barked, pointing between Violet and me. “Come with me right now.”

**Episode 1735**

“How exactly are you planning to kill Letifer?” I asked Didi. I was trying not to seem dubious or completely shocked. I didn’t want to upset her further. “What about the dome? Is it safe?”

Of course, despite my calm questions, I was screaming inside my head.

*OH MY GOD! This is the last thing we need! What if Didi races off and does something without telling us first? She’s just going to get herself killed! Again!*

Plastering my best freaking-out-on-the-inside-but-pretending-not-to-be expression onto my face, I stared at Didi and waited for her answer.

“I’m not quite sure yet,” she replied, her voice cracking. “But I know that this is how it needs to end. It started with me and Letifer, and it’s going to finish that way.”

Well. Didn’t that sound poetic? But also very dangerous. I did *not* like the determination on her face. She was giving off very strong martyrdom vibes, and I wasn’t into that. She’d just come back from the dead, so maybe she wasn’t worried about going back there. But if she did, was there a worse place to go than the spirit realm?

“You don’t have to get hurt,” I told her firmly. “The pack can handle this.”

Didi shook her head bitterly. “This isn’t the pack’s responsibility. It’s mine.”

“Is it, though?” I asked her, squinting. “It really isn’t your fault that Letifer turned out to be evil—men are responsible for their own problematic backstories. This is not on your shoulders, I promise.”

“You’re very sweet, but—”

“No,” I said, a little more intensely now. I squeezed her shoulder, and she blinked at me. “You do not need to take this on alone. Sit tight for now, and please wait until we have a plan.”

*I.e. until the infuriating Alphas are done fighting over the crown, and we can figure out what to do!* I added inside my head.

Didi paused. “But I don’t want anyone else to have to suffer for any of this. I feel so responsible.”

I shook my head vehemently. “I told you, you don’t have to think like that. Your ex made his own very bad decisions, and you are not to blame! Besides, we all know that you want to help us, and that’s enough. That’s amazing, actually.”

“But—”

“*But* you don’t have to do this all alone,” I said. I stared into her eyes. “We’ll do it together, as a pack.”

Didi looked over at the yard. “I won’t lie to you, though,” she said. “What’s happening right now isn’t giving me a lot of confidence. The pack seems like a bit of a mess.”

“First of all, how dare you?” I said, annoyed. But then I let out an exasperated breath. “How dare you be right, actually. We don’t have a clear Alpha right now. Speaking of…”

Both Didi and I looked around to see if Xavier and Greyson had worked their shit out. I frowned in confusion when I saw Greyson marching away with that ginger professor guy from Lola’s school. The one with the kind of preppy-but-evil vibe.

What on earth was Greyson doing with him?

“What is that about?” Didi asked, nodding toward Greyson and the professor.

I cleared my throat and said, “You sit here and wait until we have a plan, okay?”

Didi gave me a curt nod, taking a seat on the first step of the front porch. After giving her a little wave, I rushed away toward the others. I had to see what the hell was going on with Greyson now.

I noticed that Rishika was hanging around, looking a little panicked, so I grabbed her by the arm. “Did you hear what Greyson and Emmett were talking about? You know, with your magical werewolf hearing?”

Rishika nodded, her eyes wide. “Greyson wants a serum from that vampire professor. He threatened to kill him, so the professor made the better choice.”

“A serum for *what*?” I almost screeched.

“I have no idea,” Rishika told me helplessly.

*Oh my god! The DRAMA!*

I ran over to the willow tree, where Greyson and Emmett were just standing around and casually talking. It was as if everything was fine and we *weren’t* under a fishbowl dome with danger literally staring us in the eye.

*Has everybody lost their mind in here?* I wondered, exasperated.

“… I’m not sure if it will work. Xavier’s wound was fresh,” Emmett was saying when I caught up to them. “There’s still so much I don’t understand about the serum.”

“Yes, hi,excuse me? WHAT serum?” I cut in.

Emmett and Greyson turned to look at me with matching shocked-Pikachu-meme expressions.

“Oh. Lola’s friend. I didn’t realize you were here,” Emmett said, looking a little confused.

Greyson, on the other hand, seemed as hectic as ever. He pointed at Emmett. “The professor has a serum that can heal revenant wounds, and Xavier didn’t bother telling me.”

All the air was knocked out of me.

“What?” I gasped. “Xavier would never do something like that!”

Greyson gave me a flat break. “Really? Look how convenient it was—I’m injured, so he steps up to be Alpha without bothering to tell me that he knows how to cure me?”

I didn’t want to believe this. *No*. This had to be some kind of mistake. Xavier and Greyson didn’t always get along, but after everything they had been through, surely Xavier wouldn’t want Greyson to stay hurt.

“He did leave me in that zoo to die, didn’t he?” Greyson said in a low voice, and my heart clenched.

“Ahem.” Emmett made a weird noise in his throat. “There is really no guarantee that this serum is going to be a miracle cure for you, though. Your wound has been festering for so long, and—”

Greyson interrupted him. “Witches stopped it from getting worse. It hasn’t been ‘festering,’ or whatever disgusting thing you have in mind.”

Emmett still looked a little hesitant. Nervous. “I still think it’s too much of a risk…”

“I think I told you that I want it,” Greyson said through clenched teeth. “This is my choice, and I say that it’s worth a shot. We’re doing this, right now.”

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Heading back into the house felt like walking through a fog.

As we made a beeline toward the basement and Emmett’s new makeshift lab, I noticed that Lola and that vampire Jacqueline were heading upstairs. Lola didn’t say a word to me, just gave me an icy look.

*Shit. Still mad, I guess.*

Ignoring her, I rushed to catch up with Greyson.

“You know, I’m really not so sure that I love the idea of you taking some weird, experimental vampire medicine,” I told him nervously as we climbed down the stairs. “Emmett said that it could be dangerous, and I don’t think it’s worth the risk, especially not right now.”

Greyson gave me a sardonic look. “It cured my dear brother, didn’t it?”

The way he said the word “brother” was dripping with venom.

“Greyson, please—”

“Don’t you get it?” he asked, shaking his head. “It’s worth it, because it could mean stopping Xavier from stealing my pack from under my nose. I can’t let him do that to me. It’s just not right.”

There was a hint of genuine betrayal in Greyson’s tone. It made me fall silent.

Emmett made Greyson sit down on a chair and hovered over him, looking awkward.

“Let’s get this over with,” he told Emmett, his attention on the vampire now.

Emmett took a deep breath. “It’s an injection.” He held up the vial of the serum. “Where do you want to do it?”

Greyson pointed at his arm.

I shook my head, panicked. “Greyson, this is all moving too fast—there’s still so much we don’t know, and I sure as hell don’t trust this random-ass vampire professor!” I glanced at Emmett. “No offense, but you and your little lab down here are creepy.”

Emmett gasped, clearly offended.

“I’m not changing my mind, Cali,” Greyson declared.

The fire in his gaze told me that I’d lost this battle.

“I’m ready.” He tugged down his shirt and bared his shoulder. “Have at it, professor.”

I was yelling *No no no no no!* inside my head, wincing. But still, secretly, I did hope that this would be for the best. I wanted Greyson to be at his strongest. For a few terrified moments, I held my breath and watched as Emmett gave Greyson the injection.

I started counting inside my head, staring at Greyson’s profile.

*One.*

*Two.*

*Three.*

Nothing was happening. Greyson frowned.

*Four.*

*Five.*

“How are you feeling?” I asked.

“I’m not dead yet,” Greyson grumbled, glancing at Emmett.

This was actually the greatest news ever! Part of me thought that he was going to collapse or fall into convulsions or something. That would not be good at all. Also, quite traumatic for me.

“Is it working?” Emmett asked Greyson, looking curious now.

“I’m not feeling anything. I’m not sure.” Greyson was still frowning, but I was pretty excited.

“Maybe that’s actually good!” I said, suddenly feeling optimistic. “If you were healing, you’d be feeling less pain, right? Let’s check your wound.”

Without another word, Greyson dropped his pants, as forward as ever.

I gasped. “Greyson, look!”

All three of us stared at Greyson’s leg, at the wound that seemed to be healing itself, the skin weaving back together seamlessly.

My heart was pounding with actual joy after what felt like forever.

“It’s working!” Emmett enthused.

I kind of felt like crying with relief. I gripped Greyson’s hand and was about to grab his face and kiss his smiling mouth when Emmett choked.

“Wait!” he said.

I froze. When I looked back down at Greyson’s leg, my heart clenched.

The wound was glowing orange.

**Episode 1736**

LOLA

Jacqueline was pacing, and it was getting on my nerves.

“Unbelievable!” she screeched. “I came here because I thought I’d be safe, and now we’re totally surrounded! I’m more in danger than ever! I can’t even just get in the car and make a beeline for safety because of that damn dome. We’re just sitting ducks in here!” She turned to me, her eyes wide and wild. She looked out the window and then stared straight back at me, her freak-out escalating. “There are so many demons out there, and we’re all going to die!”

*Oh my god.* And people called *me* dramatic.

“Can you please just calm down?” I told her, fighting the urge to roll my eyes. “This isn’t the first time the pack has faced grave danger. We always push through. The Alphas are good at that.”

Of course, that did not settle Jacqueline down, and she just kept grumbling and pacing. I ignored her, focusing on my own worries, which weren’t exactly worries. I just couldn’t get over that cold look Cali had given me on the stairs. Who did she think she was?

She and I had fought before, of course, but something about all this felt different.

I was probably just fed up.

I’d spent so long dealing with Cali’s problems that I just couldn’t take it anymore.

*Everything’s always Cali, Cali, Cali. But what if it’s time for Lola, Lola, Lola?*

Seriously, when would *I* get the main character treatment? This was altogether unacceptable, and I wasn’t sure why Cali thought that whatever she had going on was more important than what *I* was going through. I’d been having a whole lot of problems lately, thank you very much. Not that Cali ever seemed to care, or really even notice. At least not recently. Like, at all.

*She’s actually the worst best friend ever, isn’t she?*

Or was that too mean?

“Uh, hello?” Jacqueline waved her hand in front of my face. “I’m talking to you! Don’t you care that we’re at death’s doorstep?”

This time, I did roll my eyes. This girl was out of control. “You *are* a vampire. Technically, you’re already dead.”

Jacqueline gasped, as if shocked to hear the truth. What a drama queen.

“Can you just stop? It’s not like I invited you here in the first place, remember?” I pointed at her. “You’re the one who was determined to come along. So determined, in fact, that you snuck into my car! Why aren’t you more grateful that I let you into the house?”

*Grateful* was a good way to put it, and at that moment I realized what bothered me so much about Cali. I had helped her so many times, and she never reciprocated. She was an ungrateful little brat. *Gah!*

Meanwhile, Jacqueline gave me a defensive look. “Okay, why are you being so mean? Pardon me for venting because I’m terrified that we’re all about to die!”

I eyed Jacqueline up and down. She wasn’t that bad. She hadn’t actually done anything wrong. Not lately, at least.

I sighed. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to snap at you.”

Jacqueline sniffed, inspecting her nails. “But you did.”

My voice was gruff. “I’m just upset about someone else. I didn’t mean to take it out on you. It just happened.”

Jacqueline sat down next to me, looking intrigued. “Are you talking about that girl on the stairs? Cali, was it?”

I nodded. “Yep, that’s the one.”

“I didn’t like her outfit at all,” Jacqueline told me earnestly. “*So* last season.”

“She’s supposed to be my best friend, you know,” I said.

Jacqueline’s eyebrows arched. “Really? She had this horrible cold look on her face when she looked at us.”

“Right?” I said, feeling entirely vindicated now. “I thought so too!”

“It was definitely very aggressive. Bad vibes all over, very disdainful, and I just don’t like that at all,” Jacqueline said matter-of-factly. “It’s not part of who I am.”

I coughed. “Weren’t you just screaming and pacing up and down about the revenants out there? Or is that not considered ‘bad vibes’?”

She waved me off. “I’m scared for my life, so that doesn’t count. Anyway, back to that girl. What exactly happened between you two?”

I huffed. “It’s a long story.”

“It’s not like I have anything else to do until the revenants get in and kill us,” Jacqueline told me, shrugging.

That was one way to look at things.

“So what’s going on is…” I paused. “Well, Cali is always mixed up in some sort of drama, and she always expects me to be there for her, but whenever I need her, she’s nowhere to be found.”

Jacqueline scowled. “That doesn’t sound like best friend material to me, and I’ve been around a long time.”

“Right?” I said, feeling even more vindicated. Finally, someone understood me!

Wait, did I just agree with *Jacqueline*?

She shook her head in disapproval. “If I were you, I would just walk away.”

I gasped. Wasn’t that too much? “Just walk away? But Cali’s been my best friend for… Well, forever, basically.”

Jacqueline rolled her eyes. “People change. You don’t need to keep them in your life if they don’t deserve to be there.”

“But—”

“I’m bored with this conversation now. I need to go over there, look at the revenants, and panic again,” Jacqueline said blandly. She stood up from the bed and went to the window, leaving me behind.

At least she was honest.

“Lola!” I heard Jay’s voice behind the door, then a little knock, and he walked in. The moment I laid eyes on him, I felt everything inside me ease. “I just wanted to make sure that you were okay. What happened with Xavier out there…” I saw Jay cringe. “Everyone is kind of freaking out.”

“What did they say?” I asked.

Jay sat down next to me, laughing incredulously. “Basically, nobody can believe what just happened. That Xavier just challenged Greyson.”

I hummed thoughtfully. “But do you think that Xavier is right? Should he be the Alpha through the fight?”

Jay paused. “Honestly, he might be the man for the job right now. I noticed Greyson was limping earlier, and he *has* been a little spacey lately.”

“Spacey how?”

Jay shrugged. “Like he’s daydreaming, maybe? He seems very distracted.”

I frowned.

“Xavier, on the other hand, came in and took decisive action, no uncertainty,” Jay went on. “I think that’s what this pack need right now.”

I smirked a little, nudging him. “You’re just saying that because Xavier’s your bestie.”

The moment I said the words, I felt a brief twinge of sadness, thinking about *my* bestie. This had to be so hard for Cali. Her two mates were literally fighting for the Alpha position while there was a horde of enemies waiting outside the dome. She had to be doing really, really badly, and she—

*No. No. I shouldn’t care about Cali. Who cares about Cali?*

“Okay, you got me,” Jay conceded. “Part of me wants Xavier to be Alpha, just because he’s my friend. He’s wanted it for so long. But is thinking of it like that wrong?”

Jay seemed to never have any issues with Xavier. The two were loyal to each other, and even though Xavier was basically obsessed with his mate 24/7, neither of them demanded more attention from the other. But I… I wanted more attention. I liked attention. From Cali. And in general. Was that so bad?

I thought back to what Jacqueline had said—that since Cali wasn’t giving me what I needed as a friend, I should just walk away. But Jacqueline didn’t understand the history that Cali and I shared… History that Cali repeatedly forgot, when she was being so selfish! I couldn’t even begin to count all the times that Cali had pushed my concerns away, my problems, just because she always had more pressing drama to attend to.

With her, it was *always* boys first!

And okay, maybe all her drama was, like, life-threatening and stuff, and devastating or whatever, but still. Where did I fit into her life? When would she take a moment to spend time with me? To listen to me? There was a tiny chance that I hadn’t been a perfect friend either—a very tiny chance, of course—but we weren’t talking about me right now. We were talking about Cali, and how she thought the whole world revolved around her.

Being friends with her was just too hard. I didn’t have the energy for it—I needed that energy to pay attention to myself. I had a lot of problems! I had been through a lot in that vampire school! Forgotten my mate, even! And what had Cali done? Ignored me!

Maybe I hadn’t been as forthcoming with what was going on either though… I hadn’t told her about the Jay amnesia. I hadn’t exactly been reaching out either.

*Ugh!*

This was just too difficult to deal with. Too complicated. Our friendship used to be something fun and simple, and now it was nothing but fighting lately. And all the frustration I felt… It wasn’t a good feeling to have. Bitterness caused wrinkles and a horrible mood.

I had to wonder if Jacqueline was right.

Maybe I needed to break up with Cali.

**Episode 1737**

GREYSON

I stared at my leg in horror. The wound was glowing orange. *Orange*.

“What the hell is happening?” I grabbed Emmett by the lapels of his jacket, gritting my teeth. What was in this serum, anyway? Was there something that was triggering this reaction?

“I have no idea!” he spluttered, pushing me away. “I warned you—this is all experimental! I had no way of knowing what would happen if you took the serum!”

It was Cali’s turn to grab Emmett by the jacket. “Well, I don’t care! You’d better fix this! Now!”

Emmett, clearly kind of shocked that such a tiny woman could pack so much menace, blinked at her. “I would if I could!”

Cali turned to me, her eyes wild. Her worry and her instinct to protect me were goddamn gorgeous as ever, despite the chaos. My mate was so fierce that it made my heart swell. “Greyson, you’re going to be fine. I’m going to fix this any way I—”

A jolt of fiery pain shoot through my leg, and I faltered, almost fell, crying out. I despised the fact that Cali was seeing me like this. I despised the fact that I was worrying her, but it was too late. She was freaking out, pulling at Emmett’s arm, her eyes filling up with tears.

“Oh my god, do something!” she cried. “Fix him!”

“I don’t know what to do!” Emmett was floundering about, all his coolness gone. “I can’t!”

“Oh my GOD, WHAT KIND OF DOCTOR ARE YOU?” Cali literally grabbed and shook him up so hard that he seemed scared.

“I’m not a doctor, actually!” he blurted, and Cali gasped. “I’m just a scientist!”

“Cali…” I choked out, leaning back against the desk to steady myself. “I—”

“YOU’RE NOT A DOCTOR?” she screeched, looking like she was approximately five seconds from blasting the vampire away.

“I have a doctorate, but that’s different than medical school!” he countered.

“I’m so dizzy,” I whispered. “I—”

My vision had gone blurry.

Cali let go of Emmett, all her attention suddenly on me. “Greyson!” Sniffling, she took my arm, slid it over her shoulders, and helped me lie down on the sofa. She crouched down in front of me, pushing my hair back, her touch firm and her gaze heavy on me. “Talk to me, what’s happening? What are you feeling?”

The urgency in her voice felt sharp in my ears. I opened my mouth to speak. I was about to tell her that everything hurt. That everything burned, and my head was vibrating. My eyes had gotten so blurry that I could barely make her out, but I could still hear her.

“Greyson, no, please, stay with me!” She was holding my face, her hands shaking. I wanted nothing more in this world than to reassure her that everything was going to be okay. I wanted to tell her that I was fine, that I was so thankful for her, that I was so lucky to have someone who loved me the way she did. But the words felt heavy in my mouth, unmoving and unwilling to roll off my tongue.

I blinked slowly, the blurriness getting worse as I whispered, “Cali…”

And then everything went black.

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In the blink of an eye, my vision cleared.

I was next to the lake, beside the old pack house. What the fuck was I doing here? How the hell had I gotten here? Was this… Was this another vision?

I dragged my gaze away from the lake and looked at the house.

The pack house looked like a ghost town.

It looked like it had been abandoned for years—windows boarded up, paint chipped off, holes in the walls. The image felt so jarring that my gut twisted. A horrible sense of foreboding overwhelmed me. My head was still throbbing, an icy wind was blowing, and I shivered.

Something was very, very wrong.

What the hell was going on here?

Bracing myself, I took a few steps forward. I examined the grounds and lawn, fighting to get my bearings. I looked around once more, at the lake, and I stopped dead in my tracks.

Tombstones were set a little ways down the shore.

Those hadn’t been there when we lived here.

My chest feeling like it was about to break, I raced over. I stopped breathing when I saw the names on the stones, my pulse suddenly so loud that I could hear it.

*Xavier Evers.*

*Caliana Hart.*

My knees gave out. I was weak—of course I was. Without Cali, I was just a weak man and nothing more . My breaths were coming out sharp and ragged as one word echoed in my head.

*No!*

“*No no no no no*,” I said under my breath like a chant, a spell to reverse the unthinkable. The pain was so unbearable that I couldn’t even take a second to figure out if this was real or not.

I reached out a trembling hand to trace her name on the stone, my eyes burning, tears falling, my every exhale so harsh it felt like I was drowning.

This couldn’t be true.

This made no sense.

What could have *happened*?

Who had done this to them?

To my Cali?

“You did it.”

I froze.

I hadn’t realized that I’d spoken the question out loud, but the answer had arrived anyway. I whirled around in shock, only to see a man that looked strangely familiar. He had to be in his mid-twenties, strong, tall.

Dangerous.

“What did you just say?” I asked. My voice sounded like pain and anger. “Who are you?”

The man was expressionless. “You don’t recognize your own son?”

The realization fell like a boulder on my head. It was *Shaine*. But he was an adult? What the hell kind of magic was this? What kind of nightmare was I stuck inside?

“This can’t be happening,” I whispered. “No.”

Shaine tilted his head, like a predator would. “Oh, but it will.”

My voice got louder. Outraged. “What do you mean? What the hell is going on?”

I climbed to my feet as he watched me. His calmness, his coldness was disturbing, leaving a bitter taste in my mouth.

“This is the future you wanted, Dad,” he said, gesturing at the tombstones. “You wanted to stay Alpha, to defeat your brother, and so you did.”

“No!” I said. “I never wanted this! Cali…” My voice broke on her name, my eyes burning.

But Shaine, the man who called himself my son, seemed immune to my sorrow and grief.

“You’re lying!” I snapped. “I’d never do anything to hurt Cali! *Never!* I’d rather fucking die!”

Still calm, Shaine said, “You didn’t do it on purpose. But things get away from us, don’t they? One bad decision begets another, and then the consequences get out of control.”

I marched up to him, pain and exasperation overcoming the urge to stay away. “What the hell are you saying!?”

Shaine seemed curious. Intrigued. “That’s odd. Don’t you remember?” He pointed between us. “We wanted this, Dad. You and me.”

“I’m not your goddamn father!” I snapped. “I don’t even know who you are!”

His eyes remained cold. Dead. “This is the future we wanted, Dad.”

“Don’t call me that, and stop speaking in fucking riddles!” The urge to grab and shake him was strong, but I stopped myself. There were six feet between us, and I needed to keep it that way.

Somehow, I was certain that if I touched him, something horrendous would happen.

“Everything will be fine now,” he said.

And yet, I was certain that everything would only get worse.

*Cali…*

How could she be gone?

*No!*

*NO.*

“This can’t be real,” I whispered.

“It is,” Shaine said simply.

I laughed. There was no humor to it. “Then there’s no reason for me to live.”

Without Cali, there was no reason for me to live.

Shaine shook his head. “I’m telling you, everything will be okay—”

“It won’t be! Nothing will be okay, and you’re lying again. You always fucking lie!” I declared.

He took in my expression with mild interest. How could he call himself my son? He was despicable. I was glad I could see nothing of Cali on his face. None of her sweetness, none of her warmth. This man looked more like the worst parts of me more than anything else.

This man looked like Silas’s grandson.

Not *my* kid.

He took a step closer.

“Get the hell away from me!” I hissed.

“You’re upset,” he said in an empty tone.

“Of course I’m fucking upset!” I shouted, hands in fists at my sides. “Cali’s gone, and I don’t—I don’t understand what you want! Why are you here?” I demanded. “Why do you keep showing up in my head? Why am I here?”

Shaine stepped closer to me. He was suddenly way too close, his hands landing on my shoulders, heavy like lead. Crushing. There was a darkness to his expression that made me shudder.

His voice was a chilling breath. “You’re here because Letifer has plans for you.”

**Episode 1738**

MARTA

I stared at Lilac for a long, silent moment. What was he talking about? Artemis had the same wound as Letifer? It was too much for where my head was at right now, which was borderline pounding.

“Wait,” I finally managed. “What are you saying?”

Lilac looked at me nervously. “I’m… not sure I’m saying anything. It’s just that the wound Artemis has, it looks a lot like the one…” He trailed off into silence.

My ears had started to ring, and I blinked, slowly. “Are you saying—are you seriously saying that you think *Artemis* is the person who kidnapped me from this house, blindfolded me, stuffed me into a bag, dragged me down to the pond, forced me to open that portal, and tried to *kill* me?”

Lilac didn’t answer right away, and we looked at each other for a strange, quiet beat.

Then, finally, he shook his head. “No. That’s not what I’m staying. No. Of course not. Things are just weird. With everything going on and all the attacks, it’s totally possible that Artemis got hurt some other way. And it’s insane to think that someone in the pack house would have done anything like that to you. It’s nuts.”

“Yeah,” I said slowly. My head had started pounding with the effort of trying to wrap my mind around the possibility that Artemis could have been there at the pond. That she could have somehow been involved in dragging me down there and nearly drowning me. I pressed my fingers to my temples and furrowed my brow. “If Artemis *had* been there—at the pond—we would have known, wouldn’t we? We would have. We wouldn’t be just guessing. I mean, I was blindfolded, but you weren’t, and you didn’t see her. And even when the blindfold was gone, I didn’t see her anywhere. And I would have recognized her voice, at least, even if I hadn’t seen her… Right?” I looked up.

Lilac shifted uncomfortably beneath my gaze. “Look, I’m sorry I even brought it up. Seeing her wound, right where it was on Letifer, it just struck me as kind of weird, but I think I’m just getting a little edgy with everything that’s been going on. Seeing conspiracies where there aren’t any, stuff like that.”

“Yeah, I get that,” I said, nodding. “I think that’s going around. The pressure seems to be getting to everyone around here. Especially with all the stuff going on between Xavier and Greyson. Everything feels like it’s so up in the air.” I set my jaw. “I get that everyone’s nervous, but it’s more important than ever that the pack sticks together.”

Lilac nodded in agreement. “I just hope everyone else can remember that. Maybe you can remind them for me, seeing as you’re the only one who can hear me.”

“And maybe I can remind them that the real enemy is outside this dome,” I said, glancing out the window.

Lilac followed my gaze, his expression grim. All we could see was the lawn growing dark in the falling dusk, but we knew what lay out there, beyond the shadows.

“Let’s go. I want to see if there’s anything I can do,” I said, climbing down the remaining stairs.

We made our way to the living room, where Big Mac and Kira were sitting on the couch, deep in conversation. But they looked up as soon as I walked in, and Big Mac stood and strode toward me.

“Marta,” she said, her expression dark. “We were just about to come looking for you. We need to speak with you.”

I flinched. This was exactly what I had been afraid of: that everyone would blame me for opening the portal, and for everything that had been happening. And that was exactly what was going to happen.

But then Big Mac’s expression softened. “We need to talk about what happened at the pond. Are you all right?”

A sigh—half-surprised, half-relieved—escaped me. “I’m okay, thanks,” I said shakily.

Big Mac didn’t look as though she believed me. “Marta, that must have been really traumatic. You nearly died. Everyone’s really worried about you.”

I glanced over at Lilac, who looked pleased with himself. He had been right, of course—no one was blaming me for what had happened—which was great, though I still felt awful about the portal opening. I couldn’t help but feel responsible.

“I’m fine,” I repeated. “Just wondering what we’re going to do next.”

“Well,” Big Mac said bracingly, “that’s why we wanted to talk to you. I want to hear more about what exactly happened out there.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I think you’re more powerful than even I thought,” she said. “I just want to know what happened.”

A flash of anger surged through me as I thought back.

“I don’t *know* what happened,” I said honestly. “I don’t even know who kidnapped me. But whoever it was, they used me to open the portal… and I think they wanted to kill me.”

As the anger ebbed away, the fear returned, chilling me to the bone. I shivered and wrapped my arms protectively around myself. Lilac stepped closer to me, and I looked up with a smile. His proximity made me feel better.

Big Mac eyed me, her expression uncharacteristically concerned. “Marta, I have to ask you this—do you think an agent of Letifer kidnapped you from this house, knowing that you could open the portal? And then wanted to kill you afterward to make sure that you couldn’t use your gifts against him?”

I swallowed with difficultly—my mouth felt suddenly very dry. “I think so,” I whispered.

The witch’s eyes narrowed as she thought. “Then how,” she said slowly, her gaze somewhere over my shoulder, “do you think Letifer knew to kidnap you in the first place?”

“What do you mean?” I asked, confused. I wasn’t sure what she was getting at.

Big Mac swung her sharp gaze to me. “Marta, you are a powerful medium—maybe the most powerful I’ve ever met. But—and don’t take this the wrong way—you wouldn’t know it to look at you.”

“Thanks,” I grumbled.

She didn’t appear to have heard me. “How would Letifer or any of his agents know that you were the spirit bridge in the first place?” she said quietly, almost as though she was speaking to herself. Then she looked straight into my eyes. “How did they know to target you?”

My thoughts went straight to Artemis and the wound Lilac had pointed out. What was Big Mac asking? Did she think there was a mole in the pack house? Should I tell her—

But before I could say anything, Kira spoke.

“Letifer is a warlock, Big Mac,” she said, shaking her head, “and a really powerful one at that. He can just sense things. He must have sensed Marta’s magical potential and guessed what she was capable of.”

Big Mac swiveled to glare at Kira. “How?” she snapped.

Kira rolled her eyes. “I mean, *you* can sense it, can’t you? The energy around Marta?” Big Mac reluctantly nodded. “We all know how powerful she is. It’s reasonable to assume that he was just able to target her. It makes sense to me.”

The thought of Letifer sensing my presence sent a chill shivering down my spine, and I wrapped my arms more tightly around myself. Being trapped inside the dome holding us in was stressful enough, but knowing that there was someone beyond it who’d put some kind of target on my back made it all the more horrifying.

Big Mac looked like she was doing some hard thinking about this. She didn’t look wholly convinced, but she nodded. “I suppose,” she finally conceded.

“I really am sorry about all this,” I said, gesturing vaguely.

“Why are you apologizing?” Kira asked incredulously.

“It was all because of me.” I started. “*I* opened the portal!”

Kira waved her hand. “Marta, don’t be ridiculous. No one blames you for that.”

That was nice to hear, but it didn’t change the reality of our circumstances. I glanced nervously out the windows. “How long do you think this protective dome is going to last?”

Big Mac followed my gaze out the window and blew out a long breath. “We have no way of knowing.”

“What?” I asked, alarmed. “Really?”

“Afraid so.” She shot me a keen look. “But maybe you don’t have to worry about that.”

I frowned. “What does that mean? What are you saying?”

“What I’m saying,” the witch explained, “is that I have an idea, and maybe you can save us all without even having to fight.” She raised an eyebrow. “Interested?”

“Are you kidding?” I exclaimed. “Of course I am! What do you need me to do? I’m ready to help however I can. But what’s the plan?”

Big Mac fixed me with a beady stare. “I want you to try to banish Letifer to the spirit realm.”

**Episode 1739**

“Oh my god!” I gasped, dropping to the floor at Greyson’s side. He was completely unconscious—his eyelids were only partially closed, and his eyes had rolled back in his head. He didn’t even flinch when I shook his shoulder. “Greyson! Oh my god, Greyson, open your eyes!” I looked desperately up at Emmett. “Don’t just stand there! Do something!”

But, to my horror, Emmett looked just as panicked as I felt. He shook his head. “I’m not sure what to do,” he said again, though his voice was low, barely more than a whisper. “I didn’t even want to inject him. I told him his wound was too old, that I didn’t know how the serum would react with it.”

“Come on! You have to do something!” I screamed, panic rising in my chest. “You did this!”

“This isn’t my fault!” Emmett shot back. “I told him not to do it! He forced me!”

*Dammit*. I turned away from the useless vampire scientist and looked back down at Greyson, who seemed to be growing paler.

“Greyson, please, wake up,” I begged, shaking him again. It was useless, I knew. It wasn’t like he had just fallen asleep, but I wasn’t thinking clearly. “I need you to wake up. The pack needs you.” My breath caught in my throat. “*I* need you. Please open your eyes. Please.”

Still he didn’t move. His eyelids didn’t even flutter.

I put my hand over his chest and was relieved to feel his heart beating beneath my palm. His chest was rising and falling, so I knew he was breathing, too. He looked as he had when he’d fallen into the visions before, and as I felt his heart rate start to accelerate, my own heart clenched with fear. I knew how terrifying the visions could be. What was he seeing right now?

I hated that I couldn’t be there for him. I felt so useless. I wished I could somehow enter the vision, just to comfort him, to be there if he needed me. I looked back up at Emmett, who was eyeing Greyson warily.

“What the hell are you doing with these serums in the first place?” I snapped. “What’s the plan?”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“What are you working on? Why were you working on them to begin with?” I asked.

Emmett ran an agitated hand through his hair. “I am a scientist. I’m drawn to experimentation. I don’t have some grand master plan—I’ve just always been fascinated by all things supernatural. I was interested in the ways that science and magic intersect, and wanted to see how they’d interact, so I decided to start running some tests.”

“Well,” I snarled, feeling frustrated, “you can’t be very good at your work if you go around passing out supernatural serums all willy nilly. It’s irresponsible!”

Emmett looked offended, and I suspected I’d gone too far, but I was terrified and angry and just needed to vent some of my agitation. Everything was just so overwhelming.

“That werewolf of yours,” Emmett said, pointing a finger at Greyson, “*threatened* me. He said he’d kill me if I didn’t give him the serum. It wasn’t my idea. This isn’t on me. And it’s not like I’m some kind of werewolf specialist, okay?”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s an understatement.”

I turned back to Greyson. There had to be something I could do. Some way I could help him. But how?

My head gave a painful throb. There was so much going on—it was almost too much to think about. I tried to push the thoughts away, but they were too intrusive and couldn’t be ignored: Letifer was breathing down our necks; the revenants were pacing outside the dome, which could only hold them off for so long; Xavier and Greyson were squaring up for leadership of the pack and I was caught between them; and now this serum…

My chest felt tight, and my throat and eyes burned. It was as though everything was catching up to me all at once, and all I could feel was completely overwhelmed. I wanted to talk to someone, to vent—I wanted to talk to Lola. I needed my best friend. But I didn’t even have her anymore. Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes as I remembered the icy moment between us on the stairs. The look in her eyes had been so hard, so hostile. It made me feel so sad to remember it, and worried, too.

Was Lola right to be angry at me? *Had* I been a terrible friend to her? It wasn’t like I’d meant to stab her! She knew that. Of course she knew it. And it wasn’t like Lola was never unfair to me. She was totally underestimating the pressure I was under. I knew Lola thought I was selfish, and I couldn’t exactly say she was *totally* wrong on that count. It was hard not to be a little selfish with so many things going on.

But—if I was being fair—I’d always made a real effort to be there for Lola when she needed me, even when it meant putting aside my own worries when I’d had shit going on.

I was so deep in thought about this that Greyson stirred for a few seconds before I realized it.

“Greyson,” I gasped, looking down at him. “Are you okay? Can you hear me?”

He opened his eyes slowly, his gaze moving from me to Emmett, and then back to me again. He looked confused as hell.

“Greyson?” I asked. “Are you okay?”

My heart was beating hard. His confusion was hardening into something like panic. What had happened while he was unconscious?

Then, his eyes seemed to focus on me, and I felt his body relax. He reached for me and pulled me into a hug so fierce it nearly took my breath away.

“Greyson,” I said, half-laughing, half-crying. I wasn’t sure where this was coming from, but I didn’t really care. I was just so happy that he was awake and moving and recognizing me, and I hugged him back just as tightly.

We stayed like that for a long moment until Emmett cleared his throat with a quiet, “*Ahem*.”

I pulled back to look at Greyson’s face, which was still pale. “How are you feeling? Are you okay?”

Without waiting for him to answer, I looked down at his leg. The vision of it glowing orange was burned into my brain—and probably always would be—but when I saw what it actually looked like, I gasped again.

Emmett stepped forward and crouched to look closer. “Well, look at that,” he said in wonder.

The wound was closed—completely healed—but the mark of Letifer was still there. Emblazoned on Greyson’s muscular leg like a healed scar.

The three of us stared at the mark for a long, quiet moment.

Finally, I broke the silence. “What does it mean?” I asked, my voice hoarse with fear.

No one answered. No one seemed to know the answer.

Then, as we looked at it, the mark began to fade from Greyson’s leg.

It was strange as hell to watch it disappear like that, but I still breathed a sigh of relief to watch it go. I didn’t want anything of Letifer on Greyson. I didn’t want anything of his anywhere near Greyson.

“Most extraordinary,” Emmett murmured, his eyes glued to the fading mark.

“It’s good, right?” I asked. Neither Emmett nor Greyson looked as excited as I would have expected. “This is great. It’s fading. The mark is going away. That must mean that the serum is working, right?” I looked over at Greyson, who was paler than ever. He looked shaken as he stared down at his leg. “Are you okay?”

Greyson didn’t answer. He didn’t even look up at me. He just swallowed hard and squeezed my hand.

It was the visions. I was sure of it. He was always unnerved after the visions. I *thought* that was what had happened, and looking at him, I was sure of it. He looked almost haunted. Why was he getting these? I wished I could snap my fingers and take them away from him. Give him some peace of mind.

I understood how he felt. I’d seen the visions, and I knew they could be deeply unsettling. They always felt so real, made returning to reality feel almost untrustworthy. And I knew Greyson had experienced far worse than I had ever seen in the visions. From the look on his face, I could tell that whatever he’d seen in this one must have been horrible.

“Greyson,” I started, taking his hand with both of my own, but Emmett’s gasp cut me off.

“Look!” he shouted.

I looked to where Emmett was pointing and sucked in a horrified breath.

It was Greyson’s leg. The fading mark was back, and it was growing dark again. Stronger than ever before.

**Episode 1740**

XAVIER

Pacing back and forth on the lawn, I looked down the length of the dome as far as I could see. It was weird to be outside without feeling the wind blow, or hearing the sound of the birds in the trees. It felt strange and unnatural, and part of me wanted to go inside—just to get away from the bizarre feeling of it—but I couldn’t. Big Mac, Kira, and Didi had no idea how long this dome would last, and I wanted to keep an eye on it, and the last thing I wanted to do was turn my back on Letifer or any of those fucking revenants. We all knew an attack was coming—we didn’t need to turn it into a surprise.

And aside from all that, I didn’t want to chance running into Greyson by accident. Though I did sort of wonder what was going on with him. I wondered if he’d managed to bully Emmett into injecting him with that serum. If I was being totally honest with myself, I guess I felt a tiny bit guilty about not mentioning the serum to Greyson, knowing he had that weird festering wound on his leg. But—and I clenched my fists at the thought—I also knew that Greyson was going to use this opportunity to spin this to make me look as bad as possible. He was going to talk to Cali if he hadn’t already and make it sound like I’d been keeping this magical cure from him just so I could swoop in and take power.

I’d literally gone to Greyson to tell him about the serum the second I knew about it. Me not telling him I had Emmett inject me was a completely separate point. It all hadn’t been some kind of plot against Greyson. I hadn’t caused Greyson to get hurt in the first place, and I sure as hell hadn’t caused his eyes to start glowing orange. I was genuinely worried about him, and I was stepping in as Alpha because I believed it was what was best for the pack.

And I hadn’t been planning on keeping the serum a secret forever. I’d been planning on telling Greyson about how I knew the serum worked… *after* the battle with the revenants.

I blew a frustrated breath out through my nose and looked up at the curved top of the dome. *Whatever.* Greyson could think that I was trying to sabotage him—he’d probably go to his fucking grave believing it—but it just wasn’t the truth. He was always going to think I was this selfish prick who only thought about himself, but the truth was that I was just looking out for the pack. Period.

Giving my head a hard shake, I turned my attention back to the dome. I didn’t want to think about my brother anymore. There were other, more pressing things to think about. This dome was only a temporary solution, and now that I’d stepped up as Alpha, I knew this was the moment to prove myself.

I needed a plan.

Turning, I glanced back at the house and saw Rishika and Ravi on the porch, pacing. They were circling each other like caged tigers, both of them keeping their eyes on the dome, alert for any movement.

I walked over. “How are you two holding up?”

Rishika whipped around to look at me, her dark eyes sharp. “How do we look?”

I chuckled darkly. “Like you’re about to crawl out of your skin.”

Rishika shook her head. “I hate this. This inaction. It’s making me insane.”

“Same here,” Ravi nodded. “Anything is better than this waiting.”

“Maybe we should just get the witches to drop the dome so we can fight,” Rishika said, eyeing the shield.

They were fighters, both of them. I could see how the waiting was eating at them—it was doing the same thing to me. Knowing the threat was out there, waiting for us, and we were just in here, waiting for it… It felt like purgatory. But I shook my head. “I get it. It’s making everyone crazy. But there’s still a shit-ton we don’t know about Letifer.”

“As long as he can be killed, I don’t need to know what his favorite color is or where he grew up,” Rishika growled.

“I’m not going to send the pack into battle until we have more information,” I said firmly.

Rishika huffed a frustrated sigh. “He’s a *demon*, Xavier. What kind of answers are you expecting to get? It’s not like we can look up his Grindr profile.”

Ravi snorted a laugh, but Rishika’s comment made me think. Beneath the sarcasm was a kernel of truth. We weren’t likely to get answers from any sources we could access, but there was someone here who already knew those answers.

“Just sit tight for a little longer,” I muttered to Rishika and Ravi. “I need to go talk to someone.”

Inside, I glanced through room after room until I found Didi. She was sitting in the living room—alone—in a wing chair near a window, staring outside. She had her fingers pressed to her lips, and her expression was tormented.

I pulled a chair close to hers. “We need to talk.”

She looked over, surprised, as though she hadn’t seen me walk into the room. “Oh, hello, Xavier. Yes, we can speak. Of course.”

My instinct was to plunge right in, but I paused for a moment, thinking. Didi had opened up to Cali, so I thought about how Cali had spoken to her.

“I understand that this must be really hard for you, Didi, but I’m working hard to keep this pack safe, and I need to know anything you can tell me about Letifer’s weaknesses,” I said. She frowned at me, like she didn’t understand the question. “Any information could be critical in keeping people alive.”

Her expression cleared. “Oh, yes. I see. You do not need to worry, Xavier.”

Now I was confused. “And why is that?”

When she spoke, her voice was as strong and clear as a bell. “Because I am going to kill him.”

I stared at her for a moment, shocked. “What? How?”

She shook her head. “I am not sure yet,” she said slowly. “I only know that it needs to be me.”

“Didi, I’m going to need to know a little more than that,” I said. “How are you going to do it? When? What weapon are you going to use? We can help you, but you need to help us. I don’t like surprises.”

She shook her head again and looked back out the window. “I will kill him,” she said again.

It was clear to me that she was lost in her own thoughts. It wasn’t that I thought she was trying to keep anything from me, she just didn’t seem to know how to say what she was thinking. But still, the whole thing made me deeply uncomfortable.

“Well,” I said uneasily, “just don’t do anything rash, okay?”

She didn’t answer.

She had joined with Big Mac and Kira to fix the dome when it had looked as though it was going to give way. She had jumped in to help us, instinctively. I didn’t know if I could trust her fully, but that was a good sign.

“Just remember that we’re stronger together, right?” I said. “Running off on your own would be stupid. When you get stuff worked out, you have to let us help you, okay?”

Didi’s eyes were out the window, and her thoughts seemed to be a million miles away.

“Hello? Are you listening?” I asked, irritated by her inattention.

She looked over. “I’m listening.” But she immediately turned her attention back to the tree line.

I sighed. I wasn’t going to be getting much more out of her—that much was clear. “Just stay put for now,” I said, getting to my feet. I waited for Didi to nod, then headed back outside.

Rishika and Ravi were still on the porch, looking more impatient than ever. They looked up eagerly when I stepped out.

“Listen, both of you,” I said, taking a deep breath. “I know Greyson is the Alpha you chose for the pack, but right, now he’s not capable of leading. I need to know that you’re both with me on this.” I looked from one to the other.

Ravi glanced at Rishika, then looked over at me. “I thought Greyson was a good Alpha,” he said, his tone a touch pointed.

I gritted my teeth but did my best to shove past my irritation at Ravi’s words. “I’m not saying that Greyson didn’t do some good for the pack, but the point is that he can’t be the leader this pack needs right now.” I looked between them both. “What I’m asking is if you can put aside the reason why you joined this pack, and fight with me as Alpha to make sure this pack survives. Can you back me as Alpha?”

**Episode 1741**

VIOLET

My heart was pounding as I followed Charlie through the dark campus toward Romilly’s office. The caretaker hadn’t said anything more about why she wanted us to come with her, or what she wanted to talk to us about, and that was only making me more nervous.

And, given the tension emanating from Charlie, I imagined he was feeling the same way.

*What do you think this is about?* I asked him.

*Not sure*. Charlie’s mental voice was grim. *Romilly never looks happy, exactly, but even so—judging by her expression, I don’t think this is going to be good.*

My heart started beating even faster.

I looked down at the bracelet on my wrist. The charm caught the dim light of the moon and reflected it. Was that it? My mind was spinning, looking for any possible explanation for why we were being hauled in. Could we be getting in trouble for the charms? I knew Charlie had given me his and lied to get another one for himself. Was that the problem? There were two werewolves at a hunter camp now. That had to be a liability, or an insurance issue, or a breach of some kind of ancient hunter code. Hell if I knew. I had learned a bit being here at camp, but there was still so much about the hunter world that I just didn’t understand. I got the feeling Charlie was still learning, too.

It was just so risky for us to be here. It was like standing on sand that was constantly shifting. You never knew where you were going to end up, or if it was going to be safe. I just wished we could go back to the pack and the pack house, where things were safe and predictable, and we knew what to expect. I wished we could leave all these conflicts behind.

*Do you think she’s going to kick me out?* I asked, finally giving voice to the worry that was making my palms sweat.

*No*. Charlie’s answer came quickly. *I don’t think so. Romilly’s been good to me. She’s been looking out for me.*

*Does she know about me?*

Charlie hesitated. *I’m sure my mom has updated her on the situation by know. She would have enlisted Romilly’s help in keeping you a secret—well, who you really are, anyway.*

*You sure about that?* I wondered.

Charlie nodded without looking back at me. *Think about it, Violet. My mom was the first one who covered for you here. If you’re exposed, then her lie is exposed, too. She wouldn’t want that to happen.*

*What would happen to her?* I asked. *Do hunters get kicked out by other hunters?*

Charlie shrugged. *I don’t know.*

I pondered this as we walked through the shadows. It seemed like a possibility. Werewolves banished other werewolves. It was rare, but it happened.

But that was the last thing I wanted to have happen to Iris. Given our past together, I did *not* need her taking a fall for me. I glanced up at the back of Charlie’s head. I still hadn’t told him what had happened between his mother and me. He knew we weren’t best friends, but I’d never told him any of the details—Iris threatening me and being cold as ice and basically never accepting me as Charlie’s girlfriend. Whenever it came up, I always thought about filling him in, but I just couldn’t. And at this stage, I’d kept it a secret for so long, telling him would just feel strange and awkward, like I was blowing things out of proportion.

And fundamentally, I just never wanted to make Charlie feel like he had to choose between me and his family. I knew what it was like to lose family, and I could never put Charlie through that.

I quickened my pace to catch up with him and took his hand in the darkness. He looked down, then up at me, surprised. But he smiled.

*I love you.*

He squeezed my hand. *I love you, too.*

My heart beat hard again, but this time it wasn’t out of fear.

The air was cold and clear, and Charlie’s hand was warm, somehow warming not just my hand, but my whole body, and I sidled closer to him, feeling warmth radiating through me in the chilly November air.

But when Romilly stopped just outside the building that housed her office, I pulled my hand from Charlie’s. Almost immediately, I felt cold again. Exposed.

Romilly looked between us beadily as she stood at the door. “Well, go on inside.”

I glanced at Charlie, and he gave me a nod and a brief, reassuring smile. With a deep breath, I walked inside. Whatever Romilly had to say to us, I could only hope it was going to be quick so we could get the hell out of here. Apart from the fact I wasn’t keen on being discovered as a werewolf in the middle of a hunter camp, there was a vampire lurking in these woods. I was feeling less than safe and was actively repressing the urge to shift.

“Inside, inside,” Romilly grumbled, herding us in. She looked outside the door before she shut it, then flipped the lock. When she rounded on us, her sharp eyes were on me. “We haven’t been properly introduced, *Daisy*.”

I flushed. I didn’t mean to, of course, but I was thinking back to a little while ago, when Charlie had accidentally called me Violet in front of Sophie and Zachery. But Romilly looked like a woman who didn’t suffer fools, so when I spoke, I kept my voice steady.

“So, I’m guessing you know that’s not my real name,” I said.

She raised one eyebrow and nodded. “Iris told me everything.” She reached out a hand to shake mine. “It’s nice to meet you, Violet.”

I took her hand, too surprised to do anything else. Her hand was rough and calloused, but her grip was firm and almost friendly. I was pretty shocked at how warm she was being—shocked enough that I asked my next question without thinking about it. “So, we’re not in trouble?”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Romilly said, letting go of my hand and walking behind her desk to take a seat. “The camp certainly is. Vampires? I’d call that trouble, wouldn’t you?”

“Yeah,” I said in a rush. It felt like such a relief to be speaking openly. “We just ran into a vampire tonight. Actually, it wasn’t just a vampire—”

“What do you mean?” Romilly demanded.

“It was a revenant,” I said.

Romilly went pale. “A what?”

“We killed it, though,” Charlie explained hurriedly. “It’s dead. For sure. I tore off its head and we burned the body. Dead for sure.”

Romilly leaned forward and looked at us closely, her face troubled. “I don’t understand. I’ve never even heard the term revenant spoken out loud. I’ve only ever read it in old texts. Not just old—*ancient*. What is it? What are we talking about here?”

I glanced at Charlie. “It’s a kind of ghost—a spirit that inhabits the body of a host. The dead body of a host. But don’t worry,” I said quickly, seeing the horrified look on Romilly’s face. “When the vampire got back up after we staked it, we burned the body, like Charlie said. It’s gone for good.”

This did not seem to put Romilly’s fears to rest. She stared at me in mute horror for a moment. “But how did you know? In that text, there was only a mention of the beings. There wasn’t information on how to deal with them. How did you know to burn the body?”

My palms started to sweat. They always did that when I was put on the spot. I managed to not wipe them off, but I didn’t answer either. I didn’t know how. I shot a glance at Charlie, who was looking stonily at Romilly.

“Are you trying to blame Violet for the revenant?” he asked, and I was certain I wasn’t imagining the hard edge to his voice.

He leaned toward me, angling his body so he was covering me slightly, protecting me. He probably wasn’t even aware that he was doing it. It was instinct for Charlie, to look out for me. To protect me. The warmth I’d felt earlier flooded back, and I had to stop myself from throwing my arms around him. This wasn’t the time or the place.

Romilly seemed to have gotten over her fear and looked back at him, her expression calm once more. “I’m asking because it’s clear that Violet has come across these revenants before. Is that right?” I didn’t answer, but she pressed on. “It’s important—*vital*, at this time—to utilize all resources available to us, even if one of those resources is a werewolf.”

Charlie’s eyes narrowed. “And what does that mean, exactly?”

Romilly hesitated, looking between us for a long moment. “I need your help.”

**Episode 1742**

GREYSON

I stared down at my leg, horror echoing through my body like a painful blow. The ugly mark—which had faded for a moment—was back, and bolder than ever before. Just looking at it made me feel dizzy, like I was going to pass out, though I was still lying down. And the last thing I wanted to do was pass out again. I couldn’t stand to see anything like that horrifying vision I’d just had. I didn’t think I’d ever be able to erase the image of Cali’s tombstone from my mind.

I closed my eyes tight, trying to keep my head from spinning. I had so many questions, and absolutely zero answers to any of them. What the *hell* did this mark mean? And why was it getting darker? Did it mean that I was going to keep having those terrifying visions? And what the fuck did that dream mean? Did it mean that I was dying? What about the serum Emmett had given me? Had that saved me? Or was it only going to delay the inevitable, just like the witches’ spell?

I was spiraling—falling down a rabbit hole of unanswerable questions. I would have gone on, too, but Cali grabbed my hand, pulling me back from the edge of that cliff. I looked at her, but she wasn’t looking at me. Both she and Emmett were staring at my leg, their expressions frightened and confused.

I hated seeing her like this, her face lined with worry. And I hated that I had caused it. I couldn’t stand to look at it, so—ignoring the pain radiating through my body—I pulled myself to my feet and yanked my pants back on, covering the mark.

“The serum healed the wound,” I announced, trying to sound optimistic. “That’s good.”

My positivity didn’t seem to have fooled Cali, who still looked worried.

She got to her feet. “Greyson, the mark. Did you see—”

I waved my hand. “It’s not important. The wound is healed. It doesn’t hurt or anything.”

Cali didn’t look reassured. Neither did Emmett. They exchanged worried glances.

Suddenly it felt like there was no air in the room. Emmett’s makeshift lab was small, but suddenly it felt microscopic, and I couldn’t catch my breath.

“Thanks for the serum,” I said brusquely to Emmett. “It healed the thing right up. But now I need to get back to the pack. We’ve got a situation, and I need to take care of it.”

“Greyson.” Cali caught my hand. “Maybe you should stay. Let Emmett observe you for a little longer. Just to make sure everything’s going the way it should.”

“That’s a good idea,” Emmett started. “You—”

“I’m fine,” I said shortly, cutting him off.

“I’m worried, Greyson,” Cali interjected.

I knew she was, but I couldn’t stand the plea I heard in her voice, or the pity I saw in her eyes.

“I’m fine,” I snapped and, turning my back, headed out.

Upstairs, I moved into the living room.

Cali—who had anxiously followed me—stepped up to stand beside me. “I’m going to go get you some water. And I think you should go upstairs and lie down. You know how those visions take it out of you.”

I gritted my teeth as she moved off. She wasn’t wrong about the visions draining me, but lying down was the absolute last thing I wanted to do. What I *wanted* to do was find my asshole brother.

Glancing out the window, I saw Xavier on the lawn, looking warily at the dome, and headed outside.

Xavier looked up as I slammed the door and—seeing me coming—straightened his shoulders, clearly bracing for the confrontation he knew was coming. The one he had fucking earned, as far as I was concerned.

“Looks like your leg is better,” he commented, looking down. He raised his eyebrow. “The serum must have worked for you, too.”

“No thanks to you,” I snarled, getting right up in his face. “That must be disappointing for you, little brother. Sorry, but it looks like your plan to snatch the pack from me on my sickbed has failed.”

Xavier narrowed his eyes, clearly irritated. “That was never my plan. I didn’t even have a plan.”

“Give me a break—”

“Why don’t you give me one?” he snapped. “All I did was step up when I saw a situation that required a strong leader.”

Anger flared up like a bonfire inside my chest, but I tried to tamp it down. I’d flown off the handle last time, and I was determined to keep it together now. I had everything under control, and I’d be damned if I wasn’t going to prove it. “Well, I’m strong now.”

I didn’t mention the mark that remained on my leg. It didn’t matter. Or, if it did, I’d deal with whatever it meant after this battle was over.

“Big congratulations, Greyson,” Xavier said. “You’re all pale and sweaty and you look like a million bucks. But the pack has already accepted my leadership, so why don’t you just—”

I held up my hand. “Listen. We can keep going with this pissing contest until the revenants attack, but we both know this isn’t the time for us to be fighting.” This next part hurt, so I took a deep breath. “We can work together to defeat Letifer.”

Xavier narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean, ‘work together’?”

I ground my teeth. “Work as a team. And then after all this is over, you and I can settle this, once and for all.”

Xavier didn’t answer for a long moment. He was hesitating, and it was clear that he didn’t love the idea.

I clenched my jaw, stopping myself from starting in on a furious diatribe. Did Xavier think this was what *I* wanted?

As the silence continued, I had to exert all my will to stop myself from hauling off and punching Xavier in his smug face.

Then, finally, Xavier spoke. “Maybe.”

I blew out a breath. “Seriously? *Maybe?*”

Xavier shrugged, the gesture casual, like we were trying to decide where to grab dinner instead of determining the future of the pack. “Yeah, maybe.”

“Seriously, Xavier?” I yelled, throwing up my hands. I’d hit my limit. “Why are you like this? Why do you have to be so difficult sometimes? Listen, I fucking tried.”

I glared at Xavier, and he glared right back. The tension between us rose again, growing thicker and thicker until—

“Greyson?”

We both whipped around to see Cali standing behind us. She had a glass of water in her hand and was holding it out to me, but she was also looking between the two of us, her expression anxious.

“What’s going on?” she asked hesitantly.

Neither Xavier nor I answered for a beat.

After a moment, Xavier rolled his eyes, looking angry. “We’ll talk more about this later. I need to check on the rest of the pack,” he snapped at me. Then, without a word to Cali, he stormed away.

Cali looked after him, and I could see the pain in her eyes.

But seeing her out on the lawn reminded me of the vision I’d just had. For a moment I was gripped by fear, but then a wave of gratitude swept over me just to see her standing there, alive and well. I stepped toward her and reached for her, suddenly desperate to hold her in my arms. I wanted to feel her heart beating against me. I wanted to feel the softness of her skin and smell the lavender shampoo in her hair.

She was clearly surprised by the suddenness of my embrace, but after a moment she relaxed into me, nestling into my chest. I’d always loved how we fit together, and I needed it so much after that vision.

The abandoned pack house, the dead grass, the gravestones… Shaine had told me that was the future I wanted.

I shut my eyes tightly as a wave of fear passed through me. *What the hell did that mean?* Why did this keep happening to me? What did these visions mean?

I’d seen so many visions—so many good ones. Ones where Cali and I were happily married. A house, children, a life free from this kind of worry and pain. But those visions had just been a snapshot. Did one of those visions lead to the vision Shaine had shown me?

It felt like I was at a crossroads—the proverbial fork in the road—but I didn’t know which path to take. Which direction would lead me toward the future I actually wanted? The one with Cali and me happily married, living with our children and at peace with my brothers. And which direction would lead to Cali’s death?

My heart chilled at the thought, but I forced myself to examine it. I loved her so much it scared me. But, having seen what I’d just seen, I had to ask myself: was loving her going to kill her?

**Episode 1743**

The intensity of Greyson’s hug took me by surprise. He was strong—he always had been—but this was something else. He was crushing me to him, clinging to me like I was a life raft and he was a drowning man in a storm-tossed sea. It was unexpected, but once I was in his arms, I realized that I needed him as much as he needed me, and hugged him right back.

I closed my eyes, trying to banish the image of the stark mark on his thigh from my mind. But it didn’t work. It was still there, behind my eyes, clear as day. It glowed on his skin, just as it had in Emmett’s office. Greyson had gotten to his feet and waved away my concerns, but I wasn’t fooled for a moment. That was what he always did. He always downplayed everything that could be concerning, because he never wanted me to worry, but I knew all the way to my bones that the mark on his leg couldn’t mean anything good. Even Emmett—who was new to the pack house and all our problems—could tell that it was something sinister. I’d seen it in his eyes.

I pulled away from Greyson so I could look up at him. I wanted to talk to him—I wanted to tell him that he needed to start taking it easy, that he even needed to consider stepping back from the Alpha role and just letting Xavier handle this. I knew he’d push back, but with the mark on his leg and the revenants outside the dome, everything just felt so ominous. But as I met his gaze, the words died on my lips. His grey eyes were boring into mine with a strange, burning intensity, and I felt a sudden nervousness in the pit of my stomach. What was making him look at me like that? Was he worried about the mark, too?

“Are you okay?” I asked nervously.

“I’m fine,” he said, not taking his eyes from mine. “I just need you to know how much I love you. You know, don’t you?’

I looked at him, confused. I couldn’t make sense of the energy he was giving off. There was something about it that almost made it feel like he was saying goodbye. “Yes, I know, Greyson. I love you, too. And I—”

But the rest of my sentence was cut off when he leaned forward and pressed his lips hungrily to mine.

If his hug had caught me off-guard, Greyson’s kiss nearly knocked me on my ass. His kiss was a car going fifty miles per hour over the speed limit. His kiss felt like being plunged into an icy lake, and then being plucked out and lit on fire. I couldn’t feel my arms, I couldn’t feel my legs. I wasn’t even sure if I was still standing the right way up. All I knew was that I was in Greyson’s arms and that his hands were sliding up my back, that his lips were pressed to my lips, that his tongue was sliding against mine, that his kiss was asking questions and that I was breathlessly offering answers.

When he finally pulled back, I stared up at him, waiting for my breath to return and for my heart to restart.

“What was that about?” I finally managed to ask. My eyes focused again, and I glanced around. It suddenly occurred to me that we were standing in the middle of the lawn, totally exposed. Anyone could have seen us. Xavier could have seen us. The last thing I wanted was to get caught in the middle of the brothers’ power struggle.

Greyson looked down at me, his eyes scanning my face. He shrugged. “I just couldn’t help myself.”

He was being… odd. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but there was something strange about the way he was acting.

“What’s going on with you?” I asked, trying to get to the bottom of it. “What are you thinking about?”

But he didn’t answer my question. He just looked up at the house, as though someone I couldn’t hear had shouted his name. He frowned. “I need to get inside.”

“Why?” I wondered.

“I’m not going to let Xavier go around whispering in everyone’s ears about how I’m not fit to be Alpha,” he said bitterly. He shook his head. “I need to go check in with everyone.”

And without another word, he let go of me and strode back toward the house, taking the porch steps two at a time.

I stared after him, baffled. I had no idea what any of that had been about. Then I turned my attention outward, taking in the dome that covered the house. It looked stable enough, but I knew it wasn’t going to last. Beyond the safety of it, I could see Letifer, staring at us. The revenants were there, too, standing still as statues. A shiver vibrated up my spine. It was just so freaking creepy.

Then my eyes landed on York. He was staring right at me. That dude just wouldn’t stay dead.

I put a hand to my forehead, feeling a wave of hopelessness wash over me. For a desperate moment, it felt like a truly impossible task. How were we ever going to defeat enemies who could just regenerate? I turned my gaze upward, remembering the crack in the dome, and how close we’d come to being invaded.

One thing was for sure: we were living on borrowed time.

Looking at the revenants was starting to give me the creeps, so I turned on my heel and hurried back into the house. The living room was filled with people. Ravi, Rishika, Sage, and Zainab were all gathered on the couch, speaking in low voices. They all looked tense and worried. The overwhelmed feeling I’d been having seemed to expand a little bit more in my chest. It was getting hard to breathe.

It just felt like I had so many problems, and I couldn’t think of a single solution. My eyes darted around, taking in Mace and a knot of his pack members near the fireplace, all looking edgy. I hated feeling so helpless.

My head spun, and I leaned against the doorway to the living room. Letifer, the revenants outside the dome, my mates constantly fighting, the mysterious mark on Greyson’s leg, Lola…

Hang on. Maybe there *was* something I could do. About Lola, anyway.

This cold war between us was more emotionally draining than I would have thought possible, and I had to try to make things right. Even if it didn’t work, I knew I had to try.

So it was with fresh determination that I turned toward the stairs and headed up to Lola’s room. But when I knocked on the door, that vampire girl Jacqueline opened it.

She looked me up and down, then shot a meaningful look over her shoulder at Lola, who was sitting on her bed. When Jacqueline turned back to look at me, she looked smug. “Um, now isn’t a good time.”

Lola stood with a sigh. “It’s okay, Jacs.”

Jacqueline—or *Jacs* now, I guess—didn’t look pleased about this, but she stepped back, opening the door wider to let me in. As I stepped in, she stepped out. “I guess I’ll give you some privacy. Give me a shout if you need anything,” she called to Lola over her shoulder.

I frowned at her as she disappeared down the hallway, then turned my frown onto Lola. “So, you’ve got a new best friend already, I see.” Even I could hear the bitterness in my voice, so when Lola narrowed her eyes, I wasn’t exactly surprised. “Sorry,” I muttered. “I came here to try to make things better, not worse.”

“Is that right?” Lola crossed her arms over her chest and gave me a cool, assessing look. “I’m not so sure we *can* make it right.”

I frowned at her, certain I’d misheard. “Wait, what are you saying, Lola?”

Lola raised an eyebrow. “You heard me.”

The force of the realization hit like a punch, and I nearly gasped. “You don’t want to be friends anymore?” I asked, tears pricking at the corners of my eyes.

It felt like the floor had opened up underneath me. She couldn’t be serious… could she?

But before Lola could even open her mouth to answer, there was an ear-shattering crash from behind us that made us both jump in surprise. We both turned to see that Lola’s bedroom door had slammed shut.

“Fine,” I said tightly. “That’s fine, Lola.”

I reached for the doorknob, desperate to leave before I burst into tears, but when I pulled, the door didn’t budge. Huh? How had that happened? I just wanted to get out of here, dang it!

“What are you doing, Cali?” Lola asked, stepping next to me. “Quit joking around. Open the door.”

“I can’t!” I said, yanking on the doorknob with all my might. “It’s locked!”

**Episode 1744**

LOLA

“Stop being so dramatic,” I snapped as Cali jiggled the doorknob, trying to wrest the door open. “Just open the damn thing.”

“I’m not being dramatic, Lola. And I *am* trying—it’s just not opening,” she growled, staring to sound a little irritated herself.

I rolled my eyes. “Get out of the way.” I hip-checked her, pushing her to the side, then grasped the doorknob and pulled. But dammit if she wasn’t right. The door was locked. “What the hell is up with this door? How did this happen?” I rounded on Cali. “Did *you* do this?”

“Did I do *what*?”

“*This!* Did you lock this door? With your Fae powers or something?” I demanded.

Cali’s face was flushed, and her eyes flashed as she looked at me. “What? No! Of course I didn’t! Why would I do that?”

“Why don’t *you* tell *me*?” I said icily.

Cali swallowed visibly. “Do you really think I’d actively choose to be locked in a room with someone who hates me?” Her voice broke on the last words, and her dark eyes filled with tears, though she tried to blink them back.

I looked away quickly, back at the locked door, trying to ignore the stirrings of guilt in my belly. I tried the door again, even though I knew it wouldn’t budge.

“I’m not letting you two out until you make up!”

My eyes widened in shock. “Jay!” I screamed, pounding my fists on the door. “Did you do this? Open this door!”

“Forget it!” Jay’s voice was muffled by the thick door. “I locked this door, and I’m not opening it. You two have been best friends your whole lives. I’m not just going to sit by and watch you throw away something that special just because you’re annoyed with each other.”

“Jay! Come on! Unlock the door!” Cali said.

“*No*.” Jay sounded stubborn. “There’s already too much at stake in this house. Your friendship can’t be one of those things.”

“Jay!” I called again, but the fire had gone out of my voice. I was irritated—this was hardly Jay’s business—but I knew he was just trying to help. He loved me, and he knew I’d been upset about this fight with Cali. He just wanted what was best for me. And… I hated to admit it, but maybe he was right. I glanced over at Cali, who was shaking her head at the door. I was irritated with her, but it was strange—it was like I couldn’t even imagine what my life would look like without Cali in it.

Maybe I was being too rash about all of this…

I turned and leaned against the door with a gusty sigh. “He’s *so* meddlesome.”

She shook her head and leaned next to me. “He’s got a lot of nerve.”

We were quiet for a moment. “You’re wrong, you know.”

“What?” Cali snapped defensively. “Wrong about what?”

“I don’t hate you.”

“Right.” She rolled her eyes, which were still filled with tears. “You just don’t want to be friends with me or have anything to do with me anymore. But other than that, things are fine.”

I pushed off the door and flopped back down onto my bed. “I’m not totally sure I meant that either.”

Cali looked at me uncertainly. “What didn’t you mean?”

I thought for a moment before I answered. “It’s just, for so long now, I feel like you’ve been too wrapped up in your own drama to pay any attention to me.”

“Lola,” she exclaimed, looking shocked. “I—”

“Because if you’d been paying attention, you would have realized that I’ve been going through a hell of a lot lately!” I burst out. “I needed you. But every time I tried to talk to you, it was all about you. You, you, you! You stabbed me in the back, Cali! Practically literally.”

She winced. “I *am* sorry about that. It was an accident. You know how clumsy I am.”

I huffed out a laugh. I didn’t mean to, but it kind of slipped out all on its own. “Oh, I know. Do you remember that time you fell down the library stairs sophomore year, right into Dan McCullough’s arms?”

Cali flushed darker. “Don’t remind me.”

“He thought he’d died and gone to heaven. He was riding that high for weeks.”

When I laughed again, Cali joined in, and it was so easy and natural it made me feel lighter and happier than I’d felt in weeks. My heart twisted in a weird, painful way, remembering what a long history Cali and I had together. Maybe Jay was right—my friendship with Cali was too important to just throw away.

Cali caught sight of my face, and her laughter died. She looked at me for a moment, then took a deep breath. “You’re right, Lola.”

“About what?”

“I haven’t been there for you like I should have been. My life is just really complicated right now—”

Anger flared up inside me again, and I held up a hand to stop her. “Stop right there. *Your* life is really complicated? Cali, I turned into a fucking vampire, and you didn’t even seem to care!”

This stopped Cali for a moment, but then she frowned. “I brought you to Tottenville. I was trying to help! And, for that matter,” she said, taking a step toward me, “*you’ve* never taken the whole *due destini* thing very seriously.”

“That’s not true,” I said, rolling my eyes.

Cali leveled a look at me. “Are you kidding me right now, Lola? You literally told me I was crazy!”

I opened my mouth to respond, then closed it again. “Okay fine,” I finally said, conceding with bad grace. “*Maybe* I could have done a better job taking your whole curse… thing seriously.”

Cali chewed her lip. “And I should have done a better job checking in with you while you were at Tottenville and getting used to being undead and all that.” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “And I hear what you’re saying, and I think you have a point. I *have* been really wrapped up in myself and what’s going on with Xavier and Greyson. But if you do want to be friends again, I promise that I’ll do a better job of checking in with you. I’ll work on being a better friend, and on not being so selfish.”

I looked at her for a long moment. I was still frustrated, but it was clear that Cali was really listening to me—and really trying—so I nodded. “Okay. Thanks. And I’m going to try to be a better friend to you, too.”

There was a beat of awkward silence where Cali clearly didn’t know where to look or what to do with her hands, so I stepped forward and pulled her into a fierce, tight hug.

It wasn’t until that moment that I realized how much I needed my friend, and I clung to her, tears welling in my eyes. The tension in my chest began to ease, and I knew—in my heart—that Jay had been right. I needed Cali—more than I knew.

Cali pulled back to look at me, tears streaming freely down her face. “I love you, Lola. You’re my best friend.”

My throat burned as I fought down a sob. “I love you too, Cali.”

As Cali threw her arms around me again, I knew Jacqueline had been wrong. Her way was easier, for sure, but lonelier. It was better to put in the work to keep your friends—especially friends like Cali.

“Is that a make-up I hear in there?”

I rolled my eyes but smiled at Cali. “It is, Jay. Now open the damn door before you live to regret it.”

There was a little click, and the door swung open. Jay stepped through and looked between us for a moment, relief evident on his face. “Oh, thank god. I was so worried this wouldn’t work and you were going to kill me.” He reached for us and pulled us both into a hug.

Laughing, I slung an arm around Cali and relaxed into the arms of two of the people I loved most in the whole world. Just get my dads here, and my life would’ve been complete.

“Hey, I hate to interrupt whatever is happening here, but you’re all needed down the hall.”

We looked up to see Rishika in the doorway, her expression tense.

“What’s up?” Cali asked, wiping the tears from her face with her sleeve.

“There’s a pack meeting. Everyone needs to be in the last bedroom at the end of the hall. Five minutes,” Rishika said shortly.

I frowned. “Did Xavier call it, or Greyson?”

Rishika’s expression darkened. “Neither of them. I called it.”

“What do you mean?” Cali asked, looking worried.

“They aren’t invited to this meeting,” Rishika told us. “That’s the point. We need to decide what we’re going to do about Alpha.”

**Episode 1745**

CHARLIE

I stared at Romilly in disbelief. It felt like my brain was having a hard time catching up with my ears.

“Wait,” I said slowly, “*you* need *our* help?”

Romilly nodded.

“How?” I spluttered.

She rolled her eyes. “You’re werewolves,” she reminded me. “You have talents that the other hunters in the camp just don’t have. Wouldn’t you say so?”

“Hell yes,” Violet muttered.

“It’s clear to me that something’s been creeping around my forest, which makes me worried for about a dozen reasons. And reason number one is the safety of the rest of the campers.”

“What do you want us to do?” I asked, still feeling one step behind in the conversation.

“I want you two to start doing evening patrols,” she said simply.

“Around camp?” I asked, shocked.

She nodded. “In your wolf forms, you’ll be able to move faster than anyone else, so you’ll be able to cover more ground. And no vampire or revenant or anything else creeping around is going to expect to run into werewolves so close to a hunter camp, so that means you have the element of surprise on your side, too.” She pulled a map of the camp toward her and spread it out on the desk. “There’s a vampire coven that resides here,” she said, pointing to a spot outside the camp’s wide boundaries, “but we’ve known about that for a while—”

“*What?*” I asked, thunderstruck. “A known vampire coven just outside the camp’s boarders? What the hell’s up with that?”

“We keep tabs on them, obviously,” Romilly said sniffily, “but it’s possible that someone’s gone rogue.”

“Or that there’s dark magic involved,” Violet said grimly.

Romilly looked up her, her small, dark eyes sharp. “Yes. That’s also a possibility I’ve been considering.” Her gaze on Violet was assessing. “Which is why I’m troubled to hear about the revenant you say you killed tonight. It’s clear we’re dealing with something totally new here, and we’ll need all the help we can get to keep everyone safe.”

I glanced over at Violet, then back at Romilly. “Patrols, huh? How often?”

“I’ll need them every night.”

With a jolt, I realized that this would mean Violet and I could spend time together every night. Alone.

“So,” Romilly started. “This is important, so I want you both to think about it—”

“We’ll do it,” I said quickly.

She looked surprised but nodded. “Good. If you’ve got it in you, I’d like you to start tonight. I want to make sure there aren’t any more revenants in the area. Are you up for it?”

“Yeah,” Violet said without hesitation. “We can leave now.”

I didn’t even have to mind link with her to know what she was thinking. We were both so tired of being near each other, but not able to really be together, so we were dying to spend some time alone, away from the rest of the campers, and Sergeant Pepperdine, and my mom.

“Okay, so you’ll head out now, then check back in with me in a couple of hours.” Romilly pointed out a large, wooded area on her map. “This is where the vampire coven is usually found. You’ll want to take a look at what they’re up to, see if anything looks suspicious. But keep your eyes open.”

I nodded, and Violet and I got to our feet. “We’ll go now.”

“Be careful,” Romilly called after us as we reached the door. “Don’t shift until you’ve left camp territory—for your safety and the other campers. And make sure you have each other’s backs.” She folded up her map, her expression grim. “This is important—that’s why I’m asking you to do this—but there’ll be hell to pay from your mom if anything happens to you, Charlie.”

I nodded. “We’ll be careful.”

Alone in the woods, we hurried into the darkness. Violet grabbed my hand with an excited squeal. “I’m so pumped!” she said, jumping a little. “We get to have time alone together every night, Charlie!”

“Yeah.” I laughed. “Even if it is to scout around for deadly monsters.”

Violet laughed too and squeezed my hand.

When we were deep enough into the woods that we could no longer see any light from the camp, we stopped and shifted. It felt amazing. It had been so long since I’d been able to shift spontaneously, I’d almost forgotten how free I felt in my wolf form. When Violet took off into the trees, I raced after her. Running as a wolf felt fantastic. I loved being able to stretch out and sprint fast and quiet along the wooded path. I’d forgotten how much I loved the feel of the cold wind rushing through my fur.

After a couple of wrong turns, I picked up my speed and drew even with Violet. *I know these woods better than you. Why don’t you let me take the lead?*

I could hear her huff in my head, but she dropped back, and I set out toward the coven that Romilly had pointed out.

We were moving fast, so it wasn’t long before we were well beyond any of the land I’d seen before, and when I burst out of the forest into an expanse of meadow, I stopped short in surprise. Next to me, Violet did the same.

The meadow was wide and flat, a strange clearing, surrounded on all sides by the woods, quiet and peaceful, and stunning in the moonlight. I shifted back to my human form and looked around, taking it all in.

Violet shifted as well, and when she looked at me, her expression was wary. “What’s going on? Did you see something? What’s up?”

I looked over at her. “I just wanted to see your face.”

Her face softened into a smile, and when she turned to look at me, her eyes caught the shine of the moonlight. “This place is beautiful.”

“Yes, it is,” I breathed, stepping closer to her. I put my arms around her waist and pulled her into a kiss, suddenly very aware that we were both very naked.

Violet pressed herself against me, and I could feel the warmth of her skin all the way down my body. I kissed her, softly at first, but soft and sweet soon turned to firm and frenzied. Her fingers laced into my hair, pulling tight, and my hands roamed all over her, feeling the curves and valleys of her perfect body. I’d just missed her so damn much.

Somehow—I wasn’t exactly sure how—we found ourselves on the ground, and the moss was soft as clouds beneath us as we brutalized each other’s lips. We were breathless, desperate for each other, like we could never, ever get enough. My whole body was on fire, and when Violet reached her hand down, running it up my thigh, her fingers feather-light as they played across my hip bone, I started to think the moment had come for us to finally take things to the next level.

A sudden screech above us pulled us apart in an instant. We sat up, panting, looking around for the source of the sound.

After a moment, Violet gave a relieved laugh. “It was an owl.”

“What?”

She pointed at the tree closest to us. “Do you see it?”

I squinted. There, in the dark, I could see the faint glimmer of the owl’s eyes looking at us. I shook my head. Interrupted by an owl wasn’t how I’d wanted this to end, but it was probably for the best. We were out here to scout for danger, but we could hardly have made ourselves more vulnerable: naked, distracted, in the woods, near a vampire coven. Not my smartest move.

Violet must have been thinking along the same lines, because she got to her feet. “We should probably get going. Romilly’s going to be waiting for us to report back.”

She was right, of course, but I got to my feet reluctantly. I pulled her in for one last kiss, then we both shifted and started out into the woods once again.

After a few more miles, I slowed my pace. *We’re close. We need to be careful.*

Violet slowed to match my pace, and we moved soundlessly through the trees.

My muscles were coiled tight, and all my senses were on high alert. I kept shooting glances behind me to make sure Violet was safe, but she was fine. The woods were quiet, almost eerily so, without even the soft rustle of animals moving along the ground or the gentle sound of wind through the trees.

After another quarter of a mile, we reached the outskirts of what looked like an upscale trailer park. It was right where Romilly had said it would be, but something was wrong. As we drew closer, I could see that the place looked completely empty. And not just empty as though no one was home—it looked abandoned. Doors to the trailers were flung wide open, mailboxes tipped over, windows ajar. There was no movement anywhere, but something about the place sent a chill down my spine.

*Violet?*

*Yeah?*

*Where the hell did they all go?*

**Episode 1746**

XAVIER

My mood was stormy as hell as I stared out the living room window. I’d come in here to gather my thoughts after I’d gone around the pack house, checking in with everyone, and it had become clear that the road to being Alpha wasn’t going to be as simple as I’d thought. Despite Greyson’s *clear* inability to perform his duties, the pack didn’t appear to be automatically accepting me as Alpha. Frustration and fury mingled in my chest as I glared—sightlessly—out onto the lawn.

I thought back to what Ravi and Rishika had said when I’d spoken to them. They had both been cagey when we’d talked on the porch, trying not to give too much away, but it had been clear they weren’t comfortable with what I was doing—or how I was going about it. They were both fighters—and strategic ones at that—so I knew they were worried about the idea of going into a battle like this with an injured Alpha, but still.

“Being Alpha is a big deal, Xavier,” Rishika had told me, as if I didn’t know. She’d shaken her head, her expression grim. “It’s not something you just casually step into.”

*Fuck that*, I thought, glowering out the window. Is that really what people thought? I *wasn’t* being fucking casual—there was nothing casual about this. Lives were on the line. It was life or death here, and the stakes couldn’t have been higher. I knew that. That was *why* I was doing this! How were people not seeing that?

Turning away from the window, I glanced around the living room, then leaned back in my chair to look out into the hall. Where the hell was everyone? I hadn’t been paying too much attention, but why the hell was it so quiet all of a sudden? Like the whole floor was empty?

I listened for a moment, but I didn’t even hear anyone moving around upstairs, and my stomach clenched. I had a sneaking suspicious than Greyson was going to try to pull something underhanded, so I got to my feet, intent on figuring out what was going on. But when I reached the doorway, I stopped, suddenly wary. Ava was coming down the stairs, her eyes on me.

*Shit.* Of all the people in this damn pack house, she was… Okay, maybe not exactly the *last* person I wanted to see, but she was pretty far down the list. Every conversation I’d had with her had been a goddamn headache, and with everything else going on, I didn’t have time for her bullshit.

I angled myself, trying to edge around her and into the kitchen, but Ava—sensing what I was doing and clearly determined to talk to me—stepped right into my path.

It wasn’t easy, but I tried to tamp down the frustration boiling up inside me as I looked down at her. “What’s up?” I asked shortly.

“I was just wondering how you were doing,” she said, still watching me carefully.

“Fucking fantastic,” I snapped.

A corner of her mouth lifted in a smile. She looked over my shoulder toward the windows. “This is crazy. The revenants, Letifer, Silas, the dome.” She shook her head. “I’ve never seen anything like this before. You’re sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine. Or, I will be,” I said, my voice tight, “once this pack wises up and realizes that Greyson’s not up to being Alpha.”

Ava took a step closer to me. “You’re right.”

This caught me off-guard. Since when did she admit that? When did anyone admit that around here? “What?”

“I’ve seen how distracted Greyson’s been lately. Anyone with a pair of working eyes would have seen it. He’s in pain and nursing that wound. If a wound is all it is. And, besides that,” she added, her dark eyes flashing, “you were always meant to be the Alpha of this pack. You were born for it.” She reached out and laid her hand on my chest.

The feel of her hand on me shocked me for a moment, and I flashed back to that dream I’d had not too long ago. For a moment I didn’t move, remembering—in *explicit* detail—the feel of her skin beneath my hands, the warm of her breath in my ear as she moaned my name, and the familiar, mind-blowing way our bodies had connected. It’d felt real at the time, but it’d been a cruel mind trick. Some subconscious piece of me that was having a laugh.

Then I stepped back with a sharp shake of my head. What the fuck was wrong with my brain? Why was I thinking about some stupid dream?

“I appreciate your support,” I said, lacing my voice with sarcasm. But it was sarcasm I didn’t actually feel. It didn’t escape me that my old mate supported me so easily—without batting an eye. But Cali… I’d seen the way she’d looked between Greyson and me after I’d announced I was going to be Alpha. And I knew she was upset about me trying to step into the role.

*Why was it that Cali didn’t have the same faith in me that Ava had?*

This thought wormed its way into my brain. I didn’t like it—it made me feel like I was betraying Cali just by thinking it—but once I’d thought it, I couldn’t shake it. It was a question I’d asked myself before, and it just kept popping up.

What did that mean? That I kept asking the same question?

I gritted my teeth and pushed the thought away once again. I couldn’t do this. Not now. I didn’t have the luxury.

But some of this turmoil must have shown on my face, because Ava stepped toward me again, closing the gap between us, and when she spoke her voice was low and intimate. “Xavier, is there *anything* I can do to help you?”

I could feel the warmth of her body, smell the scent of her hair, and I could vividly remember how the silky strands of it had felt in my hands during the dream. My muscles tensed, and I took another step back, frustrated as hell with myself.

“I’m fine,” I snapped. “It’s nothing I can’t deal with.”

Ava raised one eyebrow, which was what she’d always done when she didn’t quite believe me.

I looked away from her and around the empty living room and hallway. Where the hell was everyone? Were they napping? Playing video games? We were on the brink of war here, and everyone was off catching up on *The Bachelor* or some shit.

Ava tipped her head to the side, looking at me closely. “Xavier, have you had anything to eat today?”

“What?” I asked, thrown by her question—and her concern.

“You look exhausted, and you’ve got a big night ahead of you. Do you want me to make you a sandwich or something? I saw some of that honey smoked turkey you like in the fridge.”

The look in Ava’s dark eyes was so genuinely concerned that I was taken aback, even despite my wariness.

“No, I’m fine. But… thanks,” I added, my tone softer.

She sighed. “I hate to see you like this, Xavier.” She reached for me, slipping her hands down my arms and into my hands. The gesture was too familiar and too intimate, but somehow, I couldn’t bring myself to pull my hands away from her grasp. “Just hold strong, okay? I know the pack’s going to come around.”

“You think so?” I asked gruffly.

She nodded, her eyes grave but certain. “I know that being Alpha of the Redwood pack is where you belong. I’ve never been more sure about anything in my life.” Her mouth quirked up in a wry smile. “Either of my lives.”

“Yeah,” I breathed, my heart beating faster than normal.

She looked me straight in the eyes. “This is your destiny, Xavier.”

I was nodding. I hadn’t even realized it until now, but I was nodding along with her. This was exactly what I needed to hear, this kind of support, and I was drinking her words in like wine.

“You have Alpha blood running through your veins. You were never going to be comfortable seeing someone else in that role. You’ve been patient, but you know what’s best for your pack. *You* are what’s best for your pack.” She was moving closer to me as she spoke, her hands still in mine, until we were almost touching. She took a deep breath. “I believe in you, Xavier. I always have, and I always will.”

It was as though our polarity shifted, and—instead of being repulsed by Ava—I was suddenly drawn toward her, almost magnetically. Whatever I was feeling stirring deep within my chest was something beyond feelings, or lust, or that stupid fucking dream. It was deeper, more primal, more fundamental.

Shit. Was the mate bond between Ava and me not completely broken?

**Episode 1747**

My stomach was an anxious, fluttering ball as I gathered with the rest of the pack in one of the unused rooms at the back of the house. The room was crowded with wolves—I must have been the only non-wolf besides Lola who’d been invited to join, because I didn’t see Artemis, Big Mac, Kira, or my parents in the crowd. But Rishika was there. Ravi, Sage, Jay, Lola, Zainab—everyone, it seemed, except Xavier and Greyson.

“Is someone getting Mrs. Smith?” Rishika asked.

“She should be coming,” Ravi replied.

The room itself was pretty empty—just a single bed stripped bare—but that was already taken by about a dozen pack members, so I wiped my sweaty hands on my jeans before I took a seat on the floor. Being here without my mates felt weird, and I knew they’d both be upset to know that the pack was meeting secretly to talk about them. It wasn’t as though I’d planned this, but still… I couldn’t help but feel like I was betraying them, somehow, just by being here. I hoped they weren’t going to be hurt if they found out I’d been here for this—like I was going behind their backs or something.

“Okay, okay!” Rishika shouted as the last pack member squeezed into the room and shut the door behind her. “Thanks everyone for showing up. I wanted us all to meet because—as I’m sure we’re all well aware—we’ve got an Alpha situation going on.”

There was the rumble of disgruntled murmurs around the room. I looked around quickly, my stomach flipping nervously.

This was going from bad to worse. It was bad enough that we were meeting secretly—but what was Rishika planning here? Why had she called this meeting? Was she going to try to stage some kind of a coup? Had she called this meeting to try to recruit support to get rid of both Xavier and Greyson?

Beads of sweat broke out on my forehead, and I swallowed hard.

“Since Greyson and Xavier don’t seem likely to work this out on their own in the near future—” Rishika went on, then stopped and glanced over at me. “Cali, do you think they’re going to? Can they work this out? Do you think it’s possible that Greyson might step down quietly?”

I felt guilty as hell, but I shook my head. “No. I don’t,” I admitted.

It was the truth, and maybe the pack deserved to know it, but my stomach churned with anxiety as I spoke. All of this just felt wrong to me.

Rishika sighed. “That’s not exactly news,” she said briskly, recovering herself and turning back to the group. “So, since they can’t work it out on their own, I think it’s time for us to take matters into our own hands.”

More murmurs met this statement.

“And what are you suggesting?” Sage asked, calling over the heads of a group of pack members. “Some kind of vote?”

“Yeah, basically,” Rishika said, shrugging.

Sage shook her head. “No, I don’t like it. This isn’t how it works. We all know it. That isn’t how a pack is supposed to choose an Alpha—”

“None of what’s happening here is normal,” Ravi shot back. “Look around, people. We’re in uncharted territory here. We’ve got revenants pacing around outside a dome, just waiting to take us down. You all know we’ve got to do something, and we clearly don’t have time for any kind of formal reckoning.”

This was met with a general murmur of agreement and a lot of head nods. It was clear everyone felt the urgency of the moment.

“What *are* you saying?” Zainab asked.

“What we’re saying,” Ravi said, getting to his feet and coming to stand next to Rishika, “is that we—as a pack—need to choose who we’ll be following into this battle. You know, the battle that’s waiting for us outside that dome. And after that’s over, then we’ll deal with a more formal Alpha selection.”

All the people packed into the small space was making the room hot as hell, and I was starting to feel dizzy, like I might be sick. Should I have told my mates about this before I headed up here? I hadn’t known what I was walking into, but now that I was here, it was feeling more and more like a sneaky betrayal.

Maybe I should leave?

“I don’t know. It’s not normal, but it makes sense to me,” Zainab said, shrugging her shoulders. “What matters right now is that the pack is strong, and that we’re fighting together out there.”

Rishika looked around at the grave faces. “So we’re all in agreement about a vote?”

Before anyone could answer, the door burst open. All eyes in the room swung to the figure standing in the doorway.

Greyson stood there, his eyes narrowed. “What’s going on in here?” he demanded.

He stepped into the room, and as he looked around, eyes dropped to the floor. No one wanted to look at him. Everyone looked guilty as hell. Then his eyes flickered over to mine—pain and anger mingled together in their grey depths—and my stomach seemed to drop through the floor beneath me.

“So here you all are.” Xavier stepped into the doorway Greyson had just vacated. He was followed by Ava, who looked around warily at everyone. Xavier was just a beat behind and—reading the obvious tension in the room—narrowed his eyes as well. “What exactly are you all doing in here?”

Rishika stepped toward them both. “What we’re doing is what you two can’t. Or won’t.”

“What does that mean?” Greyson growled.

“We’re deciding who we’ll be following into battle as our Alpha.” The room was silent. You could’ve heard a pin drop. She cleared her throat. “Once the battle is over, we can make a formal decision, but—you said it yourself, Greyson—the most important thing right now is for us to stick together. And for that to happen, we all need to be on the same page about Alpha.”

Greyson and Xavier took this in, and neither of them looked remotely happy about it.

“This isn’t how this is supposed to work,” Xavier snarled, though he didn’t seem to be objecting. He shook his head, clearly thinking.

Rishika tapped her foot and looked between them for a moment. “Do you agree to abide by the decision of the pack? Whoever we choose is our Alpha for the battle. The other steps down and follows that Alpha’s lead. Agreed?”

The brothers glared at each other, fury sparking in both their eyes. It would have been impossible to say who was angrier at whom in that moment.

I was in agony. I hated to see them so unhappy, and so at odds with each other. But I held my breath. I didn’t know what would come next if they didn’t agree.

There was a long, tense silence, and every eye in the room was on Greyson and Xavier.

Finally, after what felt like hours, Greyson gave a single nod. “I’ll respect the pack’s decision. If Xavier will.”

“Of course I will,” Xavier shot back.

“Great,” Rishika said, clapping her hands. “It’s all settled then. Let’s start the vote.”

She started around the room, asking every pack member who they chose as Alpha. What was already going to be an awkward moment became a thousand times worse with Greyson and Xavier scowling from the doorway, and everyone who voted shot a guilty look at the pair of them.

Rishika didn’t turn. She kept things moving, writing down every vote in a little notebook.

“Greyson.”

“Xavier.”

“Xavier.”

“Greyson.”

When she got to Sage, she glanced over at the doorway, blushed, and looked quickly back at Rishika. “I pick Greyson.”

Greyson nodded, but Xavier looked furious.

Rishika took another step. “Zainab?”

Her expression was stormy. “Greyson,” she mumbled.

“Jay?” Rishika asked, her pen poised.

“Xavier.”

“Lola?”

Lola glanced at Xavier and Greyson, then at me. “Xavier.”

Greyson glowered.

Rishika turned to Ravi. “What do you say?’

Ravi didn’t hesitate. “Greyson. What about you?” he asked Rishika.

She looked up, surprised, then, for the first time, shot a glance at the doorway, where Xavier and Greyson stood, angry energy radiating off them. She took a deep breath. “Xavier,” she finally said, though her face went pale as she spoke.

Greyson looked down at the floor.

I felt like I was about to pass out. This was worse than a nightmare. This was torture. I was soaked with sweat, my heart was beating fast, my head was spinning, and my ears were ringing so loudly I barely heard when Rishika called my name. I felt like I wasn’t going to make it much longer.

“What?” I asked, looking over.

She raised her eyebrows. “You haven’t voted yet, Cali. As the mate of both of them, you’re the closest thing we have to a Luna. We need your vote. Who are you going to choose?”

Out of instinct, I looked over to the doorway, and found Greyson and Xavier both looking at me, their gazes boring into me.

“Cali?” Rishika asked again. “Who’s it going to be?”

**Episode 1748**

Both Greyson and Xavier stared at me.

Their expectations weighed on my shoulders, their gazes hard and heavy, the emotion they emanated through everyone in the room. The pack waited for me to make a decision to break the tie. My choice felt so critical that it reminded me of another kind of choice that I had, time and time again, been asked to deliver.

And that was when fear took hold of me.

“I can’t do it,” I said.

Xavier winced, as if my lack of a decision still looked like a rejection to him. “This is important, Cali.”

“It’s okay, love,” Greyson said, his voice gentle in comparison to Xavier’s. “You can just say it. You don’t have to worry about hurting our feelings.”

*Now THAT’S a lie*, I thought.

I shook my head, taking a deep breath. “It’s not that.”

Xavier clenched his jaw. “I know this might be hard for everybody, but I know I am what’s best for the pack right now. Greyson was just sick with that revenant wound, when I—”

Greyson turned to his brother, his tone imposing. “I’m better now. And let’s not forget that *you* were bitten as well—you just hid it from the pack.”

A murmur ran through everybody, but Xavier laughed. “You hid your injury as well!”

“We’re in the same boat, here,” Greyson said simply. “You have no physical advantage. We’re both Alphas, both of us recovered from a revenant injury.”

Xavier pressed his lips together. “You were injured for a longer time, though, so—”

“So nothing. The witches had stopped my wound from getting worse, and I’m fine now.” He turned to me, his eyes boring into my face. “I’ve been a good Alpha to the pack, Cali, you know that—”

I sighed. “I do know that, but this isn’t about your injuries, or—”

“Isn’t it?” Xavier asked. “The pack needs a strong Alpha to lead them into battle.”

“Which I have done time and time again,” Greyson declared. “You need to remember that before I took over, the group was disjointed, Cali. We never would have beat Silas without me.”

“We killed Silas *together*, Greyson,” Xavier said sharply. “The two of us and Colton.”

Greyson glared at his brother. “And who organized everyone’s line of action? Who worked on strategy and asked for your training? Who gave the fatal blow? *Me*. I’m the oldest—”

Xavier rolled his eyes. “You did *not* just call for the firstborn’s right—”

“It’s true, though,” Greyson said. “Firstborn werewolves know leadership and responsibility. I know how to work things, and I’m always here. I’m always reliable, doing what’s best for the pack, while *you* always went off on your random solo trips.”

Xavier opened his mouth to speak but closed it. He crossed his arms over his chest, scowling before remaining silent. That was Greyson’s cue to step forward toward me. I could feel his proximity like a physical force. He took my hands gently, looking down at me with those silver eyes. There was hope and love in there, and I swallowed roughly.

“I know that you’re probably still hurt that I chose Joss for my Luna, Cali,” he whispered.

I instantly winced at the memory.

“But you do know that that only happened because I thought it was what the pack needed,” Greyson went on. “I wasn’t ready for you back then. I just did it to keep you safe.”

My stomach had turned into knots, a bitter taste forming in my mouth.

*Am I still salty about that? The woman is gone!* I thought. *And Joss did such a great job as Luna, even if she was occasionally annoying!*

This was a knee-jerk reaction. The feeling was not quite jealousy anymore, but it still made me uncomfortable to think about that time, about the sense of loss I’d experienced, even though I hadn’t even fully known my own feelings.

I nodded my head in agreement, shakily, and Greyson perked up in an instant. Did he think he’d just won this argument? The change in his mood was so sudden that I got whiplash, and before I could speak, Xavier shouldered in, pushing Greyson aside.

“All of that is in the past, Cali,” he declared. “Greyson might have come in and forced his way into Alpha before, but *I* am the one who has lived with this pack his whole life. Doesn’t that show that I’m the one who knows the pack best?”

I sighed. “Xavier—”

“No, you’re right,” he interrupted, “I know that I wasn’t ready to take over as Alpha before—I needed to figure some shit out. I needed to figure out how to battle my mercenary nature. I know I left the pack to help Kira, but that was to honor my word as a wolf, as an Alpha. But me leaving? That’s in the past.”

“Is it?” Greyson scoffed.

Xavier glared at him. “Of course. I’m always here when it matters. And ever since I realized Letifer is a threat, I have been committed to helping the pack. I even went so far as to say I’d help Greyson get better with that serum—”

“*Wow*,” Greyson deadpanned. “Thanks so much for doing the bare minimum for your own flesh and blood, Xavier.”

That got some awkward chuckles from the crowd, even from Xavier’s BFF, Jay. Xavier huffed, ignoring his brother.

“It was good of you to help Greyson, Xavier,” I said. A part of me had wanted that to symbolize the brothers finally getting along, but wishful thinking wasn’t the most reliable thing.

“He was *forced* to tell me about the serum, Cali,” Greyson said with a bitter laugh.

Xavier spun around to face him. “I *tried* to tell you about it when I first heard. I could have kept that information to myself, but I knew the right thing was to try to help you. Because I somehow do care about you, even when I want to kill you.”

Greyson rolled his eyes, crossing his arms over his chest. He was the one to fall silent this time, and my chest tightened.

I hated this back and forth between the two brothers—all the arguing. They were fighting once more, and I was in the middle of it.

*Again and forever*,I thought*. It’s like we’re stuck in this cycle and there’s no end.*

“I am what’s best for this pack, Cali,” Xavier started again.

Greyson scoffed. “You’re fucking delusional, is what you are.”

Their fight was about to escalate, but I had just about had it.

“Stop this, right now,” I said firmly, and both of them shut up. *Finally*. “I’m not sure what the best thing is for this pack, but fighting isn’t it.”

Xavier and Greyson spoke at the same time.

“But—”

“He said—”

“No!” My voice was loud. “I’ve heard enough—you’re wasting your arguments and everyone’s time. You don’t need to convince me. I know what I have to do.”

Both brothers fell silent. Anxious.

But my answer remained the same.

“I’m not picking anyone.”

“What?” Xavier blurted. “Why?”

I laughed a little, bitter and frustrated. “How can you not see it? I can’t risk it with the *due destini*!”

Greyson’s expression became thunderous. Xavier seemed confused as I added, “If I pick someone as Alpha, then the *due destini* might think I’m making my official choice for the curse.”

Greyson rubbed his forehead. “Cali, it’s not like that—”

Xavier shook his head. “I don’t think—”

“*No*. She’s right.” Another voice cut them off, then, loud and imposing. Lola stepped forward, taking my hand.

She was standing by me, and I felt a lump in my throat.

“Not choosing sounds like the smartest thing to do. We can’t risk it,” Lola continued.

I squeezed her hand, feeling a little emotional. Xavier and Greyson had matching frowns, now. I could fucking tell that they were about to start with their nagging all over again, but then we all heard the sound of loud footsteps barreling down the stairs.

“Are we late?” Mrs. Smith said, pulling Big Mac by the hand to enter the room.

“Kinda,” Rishika mumbled, but Ravi said, “Mrs. Smith! Good, you’re finally here, we need your vote.”

“We need a tie breaker,” Rishika said, and then explained to the two women how everybody else had voted.

“Since you’re part of the pack,” Ravi told Mrs. Smith, “you have to vote. Who do you think should be Alpha while we deal with Letifer—Xavier or Greyson?”

“How is this fair?” Xavier asked. “She’s Greyson’s *mother*.”

“And still part of the pack,” Rishika said.

I braced myself. This was the worst things had felt in a long time. I looked at Big Mac, who remained silent. Mrs. Smith looked at her son. Greyson gave her a nod.

*That’s it, then*, I thought. *No more debating.*

It was clear that Greyson would be the choice, now. Even Xavier seemed to think so—his frown became so intense it could’ve stopped someone dead in their tracks. But not Mrs. Smith.

She took a deep breath and turned to face the group fully.

When she spoke, her voice was unwavering. “I choose Xavier.”

**Episode 1749**

GREYSON

This wasn’t right.

This couldn’t be real.

“What did you just say?” I asked Sabine. Because there was no way my own mother had just said my brother’s name.

“I choose Xavier, Greyson,” she repeated, and her words fell like bricks on my head.

I stepped toward her, shaking. “Is this some kind of joke?”

Sabine looked away, timid but somehow determined in her statement. “I’ve made my choice.”

Everybody around me was murmuring about the seal of the decision.

“That’s it, then,” Ravi said awkwardly.

“Yep,” Rishika agreed, and then the entire pack kept on mumbling.

But I…

I still couldn’t believe it.

I couldn’t process what I’d just heard.

Even fucking Xavier looked shocked.

“Give her some time,” Big Mac told me sternly before she took Sabine’s hand and stepped out of the room.

Sabine still hadn’t looked at me.

I felt numb. Unmoving.

What the *hell* had just happened?

“Remember, this isn’t permanent,” Rishika said. It felt like she said it for me to hear. To console me from my actual mother’s betrayal. What the *fuck*?

“It’s just until we defeat Letifer and the revenants. So we should get started on that,” Rishika went on, before turning to my brother. “Xavier, what are your orders?”

The way *my* top fighter spoke to Xavier, the way she looked at him made my skin crawl. This whole process felt like a sudden hit upside the back of my head. The fact that Xavier seemed equally stunned by his victory made everything a million times worse for me.

“Um, well, I think we should create a training schedule, take advantage of the dome safety while we can,” he said.

Rishika nodded seriously. She turned to the others, starting to break them into groups with her usual efficiency. She hadn’t spared me a look, and I had to wonder:

Did any of the things I’d done for this pack matter at all?

What the hell had I been doing all this time, if all that was needed for them to get rid of me was a vote?

Where had I gone wrong?

I had poured my all into this pack, but apparently, it wasn’t enough. I hadn’t been enough, and the thought of that made my ears ring.

“Are you okay?” Cali whispered, pulling me to the side by the hand.

“Of course I’m not,” I said bitterly. “They’re stripping me of everything. I gotta wonder if everybody’s always fucking hated me, anyway. Where did I go wrong?”

Cali blinked up at me, shaking her head. “Please, don’t think of things that way. This isn’t about whether you were a good Alpha or not.”

“Isn’t it?” I scoffed. “I gave up so much to come back here, to save this pack from Silas, and *this* is the thanks I get. I should have just stayed away and let them burn with their precious Xavier.”

Cali flinched. “You don’t mean that.”

“It doesn’t matter what I mean. The point is, to those people”—I pointed toward the rest of the pack—“everything I’ve done means nothing. Everyone in this damn house is against me.”

Cal pressed her lips together. “Greyson, it’s not personal. If you hadn’t come back, then we would never have met. We would never have defeated Silas. Your involvement was crucial—”

“Right,” I deadpanned. “If you believe all that, why didn’t you do it?”

She frowned. “What?”

“If you had just voted, then this wouldn’t have happened,” I told her, taking a step closer.

“I explained why I couldn’t,” she said, tense now. Fired up.

But that was nothing in comparison to the betrayal I felt. “There’s *no* *way* you could know if your voting in a damn Alpha election is the same thing as choosing your true mate. The *due destini* is smart enough to hold us captive in this goddamn love triangle—wouldn’t it be smart enough to know that you’re not choosing a mate here?”

Cali’s eyes narrowed. “The curse is like a trap, Greyson, you know that. I just couldn’t risk it, and you of all people should understand how hard this is for me. We’re in this together.”

“Are we? Because I feel *alone*.” I pointed at my chest, breathless. “I’ve worked so much to build the Redwood pack from the ground up that now, I… I would rather die than lead our whole pack to ruin.”

Cali’s eyes widened. Her voice lowered, her hand shaky as she reached out and squeezed my shoulder. “You can’t mean that. I know you’re just angry.”

I was angry, all right.

It didn’t matter what I said or what I did, one fact remained—I was no longer the Alpha. It was like my life’s purpose had been ripped out of my hands, no matter how much I’d tried to hold onto it. Other than Cali, being the leader and taking care of everyone was all I had. It was part of my identity—an identity that had been chopped up and thrown away.

If I wasn’t the Alpha, who the fuck was I?

“I can’t do this right now,” I said sharply, shaking my head. I stepped away from Cali and toward the door.

She raised her hand to reach me. “Greyson, wait!”

I ignored her, storming outside. I marched toward the woods, ready to shift and take all my frustrations out on a run, but then I remembered…

There was a fucking dome.

I was stuck in here with all the people who’d just betrayed me.

*Dammit.*

“This is fucking unbelievable,” I said under my breath, feeling the absurd urge to laugh. It was gone the moment I spotted Sabine and Big Mac. They were still hand in hand, walking by the lake like they had no cares in the world. First, I get voted out of my position, and now my mom and her girlfriend were acting like this was their day off, while Letifer was lurking outside.

What kind of surreal universe had I walked into?

They saw me see them and started whispering.

*Give her some time*, Big Mac had said earlier. Time for *what*?

That time was over now.

“What are you two doing out here?” I asked after walking up to them.

Big Mac arched her eyebrows, taking a step back. “I know when I’m not needed in a conversation.”

I glared at her as she strutted back into the house.

“What is it?” I demanded. “Is she too chicken to talk to me too?”

Sabine sighed. “She just thought we might need a moment to talk in private.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, then chuckled bitterly as I crossed my arms over my chest. “Oh, so *now* you want to talk to me? You didn’t seem too keen on me before when you chose Xavier over me.”

Sabine pressed her lips together, staring up at me intensely. “I did that for your own good.”

“Why is everyone deciding what’s good for me today?” I snapped. “I know myself and what I’m capable of. I would have done anything to protect this pack, and they all turned their backs on me.”

The ingratitude was fucking *outstanding*.

“And you, my own *mother*—”

“Greyson, stop,” she cut me off firmly. “I chose Xavier because you need a break from being Alpha. Maybe you don’t see that now, but I hope you will soon.”

I could barely process this. “Seriously?” I pointed into the distance. “There is a war happening right now. It’s not the time to take a *break*.”

My mother nodded, exhaling sharply. She seemed… *sad*. “That’s exactly what I mean. You were literally dying from your wound, and you hid it from us all because of your responsibility to the pack as Alpha.” Her lower lip trembled. Her eyes watered, and the sight of her sorrow was a punch in the gut. She swallowed roughly, resting her hand on my arm. “I could have lost you when I’ve only just found you.”

Something inside me eased. I shook my head. “That’s not true, Mom.”

“You know it is,” she said, her voice cracking. “That’s why I voted for Xavier, because I don’t think you should bear the responsibility of this war. Not after all you’ve already sacrificed for this pack.”

I had no fucking idea what to say. Her emotion had overwhelmed me, and I couldn’t deny her logic. She wiped her eyes and made a sound, and before I could even debate comforting her, Big Mac was back. Had she been watching this entire time? I didn’t have the time to ask.

She took my mother inside, gently, shooting me a warning look that said once more:

*Give her some time.*

I swallowed roughly, feeling lost, watching as they walked away. Xavier was on the front porch, watching. Had he been there the whole time, watching us as well? Had he heard everything? I turned my back on him, but then Xavier used werewolf speed to get to me in the blink of an eye. He grabbed my arm, pulling me to look at him.

“Don’t fucking touch me,” I snapped, shoving him.

“Okay,” Xavier said gruffly, raising his hands up in defense. “But this isn’t over, Greyson.”

I shook my head bitterly. “Isn’t it?”

“Of course not,” he said. “I need to know if you’re with me. Will you officially support me as Alpha now?”

**Episode 1750**

CHARLIE

“What the hell happened here?” I mumbled, pulling Violet closer to me as we walked through the trailer park.

“No idea,” Violet replied. She stopped in front of the porch tables. “Look at all the coffee cups. Half-full.”

I frowned. “That means people were still actively living here as early as this morning.”

Violet picked up the newspaper. “This is from today.”

“All their stuff is here,” I said, going through a clothesline. “Here,” I told Violet, throwing her an oversized sweatshirt. “We don’t want you to get cold.”

She snorted, pulling it on as I did the same with a pair of sweatpants. “This is really weird, though,” she said. “There’s not even a lick of wind.”

I frowned, looking around. The forest was silent. Eerily so. It was as if time had stopped, as if this place was frozen in a picture frame.

“They must’ve abandoned everything… Had to have been in a hurry,” I said, taking Violet’s hand.

“But why?” she asked. “There are no signs of struggle.”

This was creepy. It just wasn’t natural, but I wasn’t about to back off and let my mate see that I was afraid. She needed to know that I would be there to protect her at all times.

“Let’s go check out the trailers,” I mumbled.

We knocked on some of the closed doors, but nobody answered.

“Look!” Violet said under her breath, pointing at a spot a few feet away. The door to one of the trailers was wide open. We peeked inside, with me in the front to cover for Violet in case there was a threat. But everything looked completely normal.

I had expected things to be in disarray, or at least show *some* kind of sign of struggle. But it looked as if these vampires had just stood up and walked away. Or disappeared without any of their freaking stuff. They couldn’t be dead, either—they definitely hadn’t been staked, because there was no dust anywhere.

“Charlie?” Violet muttered.

I flinched, dragging my eyes away from the trailer and to Violet. “Yes?”

“We should hurry up and finish the sweep—the sun is starting to set,” she told me.

I nodded quickly, and we moved to the next trailer. No stalling this time—we examined every inch of the area, only to come to my original conclusion.

The whole coven had just *left*.

“This whole thing creeps me out,” Violet said, moving closer to me as we held hands. “It’s like one of those paranormal documentaries about whole villages getting abducted by aliens.”

I arched an eyebrow. “You think aliens kidnapped a whole vampire coven?”

She nudged me. “You know what I mean.”

“Okay,” I said, looking around one last time. “You’re right, let’s get going. We should report back to Romilly and let her know what’s happened here.”

Violet gave me a funny look. “But that’s the point—we have no idea what happened. And I’m pretty sure the alien abduction thing wouldn’t fly with Romilly.”

“Right…” I trailed off awkwardly. “I wonder if there’s something we’re not seeing.” I looked around, scanning the area as if that was all it would require for me to find a miraculous clue. We were silent for a moment, scrutinizing everything, and then—

*CRACK!*

There was a loud-ass sound behind us, and I let out a yelp, instantly leaping toward Violet. I wrapped my arms around her, pulling her to my side just as some bushes rustled.

“Charlie,” she choked, holding onto me.

“Stay back,” I said as the rustling got more and more violent.

And then a really fat raccoon jumped out of the underbrush, hissing at us before scurrying away.

*What. The. Shit.*

I stared at the thing as it ran, my heart still racing. Violet was still shaking in my embrace. I faced her, ready to tell her that everything was okay, that it was just a chunky raccoon instead of a violent beast.

Then again, I had seen how violent raccoons could get. Just saying.

“Oh my god,” Violet mumbled, and I realized that her shaking was because she was *laughing*.

My brow furrowed. “What?”

“The look of fear on your face as you jumped into my arms! Amazing!” Violet was cackling now, and I was extremely offended.

“Uh, what? I didn’t jump into your arms, I was *protecting* you,” I said.

Violet smirked, elbowing me. “*Sure*. Don’t worry, I’ll protect you from the big bad raccoons and squirrels, baby boy.”

I huffed. “I am not a baby boy! I am a man! That was about to die for you!”

“I know, sweetheart, I know,” she said jokingly, wrapping me up in a tight hug. I was about to continue with this little fight, but then I felt her body so close to mine that I just about forgot anything else other than her proximity. Her scent, her warmth, how beautiful she was… I forgot all about raccoons and vampires and aliens and all the dangers, and I just stared into her eyes.

Only a week ago, I’d been missing her so badly. And now I could finally hold her, touch her, look at her from so close that I could see the little freckles she had over her nose.

“What is it?” Violet asked, her voice breathy as she glanced at my mouth.

Without thinking, I lowered my head and kissed her.

I kissed her, made it a little harder and faster, and she responded with the same kind of fire. She devoured my mouth, her fingertips hard at the nape of my neck as she slid downward, onto the ground, her and me in a never-ending kiss.

Her hands started to roam from my shoulders to my chest and down my abs. I mouthed at her neck, kissing and licking there while taking in every single one of her little moans and tiny panting breaths. I brushed my lips over the cleavage of her sweatshirt, and she arched up to me, pulling me on top of her.

“God, you’re beautiful,” I rasped, staring into her eyes.

Her response was to lock her thighs around my waist, pulling me straight down into her. She sighed into our kiss, arching her hips to press up against mine. I was in sweats, and the only thing she had on was the big sweatshirt. She was warm, and I trailed my hand up and down her thigh, moving slowly as I nibbled at her neck, just to hear her whimper.

“Charlie,” she breathed, making me face her. Her cheeks were flushed, and the love I felt for her took my breath away.

“Did you miss me all this time?” I asked against her mouth, still trailing my fingertips on her leg. I was dying. I wanted to do so much more with Violet. Just knowing that I could make her feel like this with clothes on, that this was all for me, made me dizzy.

She was vibrating at the contact. “So much. I love you so much, Charlie, I—”

I cut her off with another kiss just as she glued herself against me, locking her legs tighter around my waist. Her sweatshirt had slid up, and I could feel her trembling as her body lifted upward, toward me. I could feel how much she wanted this, how much she wanted me to my bones.

“Take this off,” she choked out, reaching down at my sweatpants to push them down, and I felt like I was gonna fucking embarrass myself if she started touching me right now.

“You first,” I muttered, and was about to get that sweatshirt out of the way just so I could kiss her all over, when—

*CRACK!*

Another loud sound, and I was pulled back into the present.

Good lord, what the hell was wrong with me? We were in the middle of an abandoned trailer vampire park or whatever, and I was just lying here kissing my girlfriend—we could’ve been *attacked*.

Though, not gonna lie, dying while kissing Violet and with my hands all over her sounded like a good way to go.

“Must be another killer raccoon,” Violet told me, letting out a throaty laugh.

I snorted. “Maybe we should take this inside.”

Violet bit her lip, looking at me through her eyelashes. “You read my mind.”

Feeling pretty happy with myself, I got to my feet and pulled her up as well. I straightened her sweatshirt out, and she giggled, wrapping her arms around my neck before she grabbed my hand, placing it dangerously low on her back with a grin.

I blinked. “Wow. What are you trying to do to me?”

She chuckled. “I guess you bring it out of…” Violet stopped speaking all of a sudden, her gaze flickering behind me and then upward. Her flirty gaze was replaced by one of absolute terror.

My stomach dropped.

“Charlie,” she whispered, gasping as she gazed up the sky. “The trees…”

I looked up into the branches…

And saw a dozen vampires perched up there, their eyes glowing orange.

**Episode 1751**

XAVIER

“Will you officially support me as Alpha now?” I asked my brother.

The question lingered in the air. Greyson and I stared at each other, and I felt so many things at once—anticipation, stress, pressure, hope.

I hoped, stupidly perhaps, that my stubborn brother would see the light and take a fucking step back. I still couldn’t believe that I’d been voted in as Alpha on Mrs. Smith’s vote, but it felt right. Rishika had said that this was temporary, but I knew that if I could prove myself with this battle, I would be able to show to everyone that I was Alpha material.

I’d made my case to Cali and the rest of the pack, and they’d chosen me.

That had to count for something.

For everything, perhaps.

I had been validated after spending a long time feeling like I wasn’t fully a part of my own pack. That was why I’d taken off so many times in the first place—I’d been desperately trying to find some kind of purpose.

But now, all that had changed.

Now, I was the Alpha, and my first order of business was obvious: get my dethroned older brother in line.

I watched Greyson’s face, could recognize the struggle on it. Would he let pride overcome what was right? Or would he finally recognize his real duty to the pack?

I had to push for the second option.

“Are you here to gloat?” Greyson asked. His voice was low. Dangerous. “Is that what this is?”

I shook my head. “I just want what’s best for the pack. That’s why I’m here. And I know that despite everything, that’s your priority as well.”

Greyson fell silent once more. I had to tread lightly with my brother right now. Wounded pride was a dangerous thing. Greyson supporting my stance as Alpha would be good, but it wasn’t like we would be ruined without him. Evidently. I just needed to keep a balance here and deescalate the situation. Or at least try.

Finally, Greyson bit out, “The pack has spoken. I will do as they wish.”

“Right,” I said. I was glad he’d decided to take a step back. Now, all that was left was to solidify this dynamic between us. Clearing my throat, I said, “Ravi is walking the perimeter of the dome and checking it for any weak points. Could you help him?”

Greyson scowled. He obviously didn’t want to do anything I asked. I debated making that an order, just to drive home the “I’m the boss” vibe and flex my Alpha muscles.

Perhaps I *did* want to gloat a little.

Then again, I was certain that that wouldn’t end well with Greyson. I almost laughed at how far we had come. At this point, and with Letifer right outside licking his lips, I didn’t want to needle my brother.

It was pretty hard, though, when he literally just glared at me without saying a single word.

“Well?” I asked. “Cat got your tongue?”

Grunting, Greyson spun on his heel. Huffing and puffing, he stalked off, but he was walking in Ravi’s general direction.

So at least there was *some* progress here.

That was pretty good, actually.

Hiding a smile, I turned to look back at the house. My old pack house. This whole thing felt oddly full circle—we were back here, and I was finally Alpha. Even if it was temporary, just until we defeated Silas and Letifer, I knew that this was just the first step. This was right.

This was balanced, for once.

I could see Cali through the window in the den, and my smile widened. I jogged up the front porch steps and back into the house. She was at the window seat, reading something on her phone, when I snuck up behind her.

“Ah!” She squeaked in surprise when I grabbed her around the waist. “Xavier!”

Grinning, I spun her around a little before setting her down. I felt invincible right then, with my mate, my pack house, my rightful position as leader. I wanted to celebrate.

And there was no better way to do that than to be with Cali.

I leaned down, watching her mouth part in shock before I kissed her deeply. She melted into me in an instant, her hand gripping my nape, her body flushed against mine. I could feel her pounding heart against mine, her scent turning me on like nothing else, the needy way she opened up for me to lick into her mouth. I wanted to stake my claim, my wolf howling on the inside.

I started to back her toward the couch, my hands roaming all over her, when she choked out of the kiss. “Xavier!”

“Uh huh,” I breathed, trailing my lips up her neck, my palms hard on her hips. I made a move to slide them lower, but then she actually pushed me back.

“Slow down there,” she said, gasping for air. Her pupils were dilated, her lips red, and I loved every inch of this picture. “We can’t do this, I told you—”

“And I told you that I’m not letting you break up with me,” I interrupted, raising an eyebrow.

She rolled her eyes, crossing her arms as she put more distance between us. “That’s extremely problematic and unhealthy, Xavier. Do you even realize that? You’re risking all your growth right now!”

“Am I, though?” I smirked, glancing at the couch, taking a step closer to her. “Would it be less problematic if I told you to lie down, spread your legs, and watch me as I put my mouth on your pretty little—”

“Xavier!” she almost shouted now, her whole face tomato red. “This isn’t a joke!”

I did laugh, though. It was fun to rile her up, always.

“It’s actually fucking horrible, all of it. It wouldn’t be fair to Greyson, not after what he just went through with the vote,” Cali declared, her eyes flashing with indignation.

My laughter vanished. Why the hell would she bring up Greyson right now? She hadn’t even voted for me, when even Greyson’s mother had known that I was the best thing for the pack right now. Clenching my jaw, I grabbed Cali’s shoulders, staring deep into her eyes.

“Why do you keep doubting my ability to be Alpha? Why can’t you see how much I love you? I can’t do this without you, Cali. I need you like I need air, and I…”

She swallowed audibly, staring up at me with wide eyes, caught up in my spiel.

“I want you more than anything in my life. Even more than being Alpha,” I whispered.

She was frozen, and I looked down at her pink, pouty lips. She would let me kiss her again. I knew she would, and then we’d fuck right on this couch, together, like we were meant to be.

“Xavier…” She breathed out my name, and I leaned down to kiss her again.

Then, suddenly, I felt something tingle in the back of my neck.

Scowling, I looked up.

A second later, Ava walked through the door. She paused, eyebrows arched. “*Oh*.”

“What do you want?” I asked sharply, pulling Cali to my side.

Ava shrugged. “I was just coming in here to get a book.” She pointed to the shelf against the wall.

I narrowed my eyes at her suspiciously. Nothing Ava did was ever coincidental. “Really.”

“Of course,” she scoffed, rolling her eyes. “Whatever—I can just come back later.” She shot a look at Cali. “I didn’t mean to interrupt the love birds.”

Cali cleared her throat, taking a couple of steps away from me. The distance fucking killed me. “You didn’t interrupt anything,” she said.

Ava had ruined the moment for us.

That was unacceptable.

“You’d better watch the way you speak to me,” I told her. “You’re lucky we’re letting you stay here at all.”

Ava gave me an annoyed look. “Oh, I would leave if I could, but those stupid witches made a freaking dome to cage us all in.”

I clenched my jaw. This girl was un-fucking-believable. “Do you have any idea how entitled and ungrateful you sound? The dome is the only thing keeping us safe.”

She huffed. “So what? It’s still a fishbowl.”

My fists clenched. She always got me so fired up over nothing.

“Xavier…” Cali cautioned, but it was too late. I marched up to Ava, lowering my face to hers in challenge.

“If you want to go out there after the dome is down and get yourself killed, be my guest. In the meantime, all I want to hear out of your fucking mouth is ‘please’ and ‘thank you.’ Do you understand? I’m—”

I cut myself off. Ava knew the best ways to get under my skin. How was the last time I’d spoken to her practically cordial? That feeling was completely gone now.

“The Alpha?” Ava asked with a little laugh, glancing at me with a contempt that scorched me. “Just for now, though. Didn’t they say that?”

“This is the last time I’m warning you about this, Ava. You’d better watch your mouth around me, or *else*.”

The way she looked at me set a primitive part of me on fire. The need to dominate was a strong one in wolves, in Alphas especially, but Cali was right there, and she was my woman, and I shouldn’t have been feeling this way about Ava.

I shouldn’t have been feeling this spark in reaction to her.

She wasn’t my mate, so this wasn’t right. Not after I’d broken the mate bond.

What the hell was happening here?

The silence was broken by someone clearing their throat.

It wasn’t Cali.

Ravi and Greyson had arrived, wearing matching cold expressions.

I stepped back from Ava, taking a deep breath to clear my mind, ignoring the warning bells ringing in my head.

“What?” I asked the two men.

Greyson didn’t look at me. He just stared at Cali.

But Ravi said, “We have a problem, Xavier.”

**Episode 1752**

MARTA

I was pouring myself some lemonade in the kitchen, minding my own business.

I could feel the tension in the house rising like a tsunami after that weird vote. I knew how vibes worked, and these vibes were pretty intense. Werewolves were intense, and Alpha werewolves were even worse—I wondered if telling either Greyson or Xavier to *please just chill* would work.

Highly doubtful, but also none of my concern.

Greyson had overall been good to me, but if Xavier was what the others wanted, so be it. He would be the big boss for now, and I was staying out of it all. It wouldn’t be smart to get involved in werewolf politics anyway, especially when I had enough of my own problems to worry about right now. Picking up my lemonade, I sat at the table and glanced at Lilac, who was perched on the chair next to me.

Staring at my glass, he sighed, all forlorn and longing.

“What?” I asked.

“I wish I could have some lemonade. Some chips too. Why won’t you eat some chips?” he asked me, frowning.

I snorted. “I don’t want any chips.”

“They would go with your lemonade,” he insisted.

“Do you realize that it’s weird for you to insist on me eating chips?”

“Sorry. I just literally live vicariously through you right now,” he said sheepishly, his ghostly cheeks turning a little pink.

A blushing ghost.

What had the world come to?

“Sorry I can’t kiss you right now,” I said.

“Me too,” he said. “Both because that means I won’t be corporeal enough to drink lemonade, and also because I don’t get to kiss you.”

He said that last part so simply and honestly that I felt my own cheeks flush.

“Yeah, uh,” I mumbled, looking down at my glass. “It’s just that I need to preserve my energy for whatever Big Mac has planned.”

“Are you really going to take part in her spell?” Lilac asked hesitantly.

“Of course. I should do what I can to help out,” I replied. “They’ve been so good to me. I want to pull my weight.”

Lilac frowned. “You don’t owe anyone anything, Marta. You know that, right?”

I scoffed. “Of course!”

“No, for real,” he said, getting all animated, flailing hands and all. “You are a person with great power—not just a tool to be used. Why do you think Big Mac is such a hardass? Because she’s super powerful, and she knows that if she went along with everything people asked of her, she’d be taken advantage of for her power.”

I shook my head. “That’s not what this is about. It’s for the benefit of everyone.”

Lilac sighed. “I’m just worried, you know? You were literally kidnapped by Letifer just a few hours ago. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

He sounded so pure when he said things like that—when he just openly admitted that he cared about me. It was lovely to feel that Lilac was protective of me, and he did it in such a sweet way, with his huge puppy eyes boring into me, that the urge to kiss him remained strong.

But at the end of the day, I felt like the most important thing here was to prove to myself that I could take care of *me* without depending on Lilac. He’d saved me twice already, and I very much wanted to save myself, for once.

“You should worry about yourself,” I said. “And figure out how you can reunite with your wolf.”

Lilac scowled. “True. It feels weird to have him be separated. I don’t know how or why that happened.”

I paused. “Maybe it’s a ghost thing? Was it like that in the spirit world?”

Lilac mulled this over. “I think so, actually.”

“Maybe we can ask that Rain guy? I’ll email him later.”

“You’d do that for me?” Lilac asked, perking up.

I snorted. “Of course. I think you’re—”

Lilac grinned. “Devastatingly handsome?”

I smirked, chuckling. He had a way of fixing my mood. “Sweet. You’re sweet…” I arched an eyebrow. “When you’re not being annoying.”

He laughed, delighted and adorable, and butterflies erupted in my stomach. I was about to refill my lemonade—just so Lilac could indeed live vicariously through me—when Artemis came into the kitchen.

She literally didn’t even acknowledge me.

She went to the fridge to pull out the milk. After that, she filled the kettle with water to make tea. The entire time, she completely ignored me.

“Wow.” Lilac arched his eyebrows. “Rude much?”

I smothered a scoff.

“We should try to get a look at her wound again,” he told me conspiratorially.

I eyed Artemis’s side. I didn’t want to assume anything, but Lilac had a point when he’d said that Artemis was injured exactly where he’d bitten Letifer.

“You need to stop with your conspiracy theories,” I whispered to him.

He shrugged. “Being cautious isn’t a conspiracy theory.”

I thought for a moment. Could there be a covert way to see the shape of the wound, to prove to Lilac that he was just being a worrywart? If I could prove to him that it wasn’t a bite mark, then maybe he’d let this go.

Just as I had the thought, Artemis looked up.

Looking awkward, she immediately broke eye contact and stared down at her empty cup.

Just then, Big Mac came in, holding a sad-looking Mrs. Smith by the hand.

“Yikes,” Lilac said, looking at Mrs. Smith. “What’s up with her?”

“I’ll make your famous white chocolate mocha to cheer you up,” Big Mac told Mrs. Smith, kissing her tenderly on the cheek. It was weird to see someone as ferocious as the witch act so tenderly, but I liked it.

“Thank you, MacKenzie,” Mrs. Smith murmured. “Is it okay if I go upstairs to lie down? I’m starting to get a crying headache.”

Big Mac pressed her lips together before wrapping her into a hug. “Of course.”

The moment Mrs. Smith was gone, Big Mac started rummaging through the kitchen drawers, grumbling things that I couldn’t make out. Meanwhile, apparently without a care in the world, Artemis continued steeping her tea.

“You know what I enjoy?” Lilac told me conversationally. “That Big Mac and Artemis are literally in the same room but seem equally uninterested in each other. It’s like watching cats interact.”

I, unfortunately, was not that much of a cat.

“Is Mrs. Smith okay?” I asked Big Mac.

Big Mac paused, turning to me. “She will be,” she said with a sigh.

That was literally the most vulnerable I’d ever seen the witch.

“Ah, there you are!” Kira’s loud voice came from the kitchen entryway. I turned to see her standing there, looking as imposing as ever, with Didi in tow. “We’ve been looking for you, Big Mac.”

Didi nodded and then waved at me, which was great, because at least *some people* around here had manners.

“What’s going on?” Big Mac asked Kira and Didi.

Taking a deep breath, Didi said, “I have a plan.”

I perked up. “A plan?”

“This is exciting,” Lilac enthused. “And I was getting a little bored!”

I snorted, just as Big Mac told Didi, “Tell us.”

She stepped up to the table, pulling out a chair, and gestured for Didi and Kira to join us. Didi gave me another friendly look before she reached out to the seat that—

“No!” I blurted out with a squeak.

Didi raised an eyebrow at me. “What?”

“Lilac is sitting there,” I said sheepishly.

Lilac was clutching at his chest. “My god, that was close! I almost got squashed!”

Didi, meanwhile, simply nodded and pulled out a different chair, entirely ready to accept this weird ghost stuff. Maybe because she was a spirit herself.

Without another word, we all sat down, and I looked around at all of them. Didi, who had come back from the dead; Big Mac, with her vast knowledge on basically everything; Kira, who seemed like an infinite source of offensive magic. Was this what it felt like to have a coven? It was very nice, actually. Almost like a family.

A family that could kill people with their minds.

But anyway.

“What’s your plan?” Big Mac asked then, her eyes fixed on Didi.

Didi glanced up at Artemis, who was still waiting on her tea. Her expression was blank, absent-minded. It was a little odd, if you asked me. Big Mac cleared her throat, realizing why, exactly, Didi had looked at Artemis.

“It’s okay—we’re all in the same pack. We can speak freely here,” Big Mac said seriously.

“Unless one of you is an evil spy who was bitten by a genius werewolf,” Lilac said under his breath.

I shot him a look.

“What?” he said. “I’m just saying! Listen to the ghost!”

I ignored him as Didi took all of us in, one by one.

“I think there’s a way to kill Letifer,” Didi said. “But the catch is that I have to be the one to do it.”

**Episode 1753**

I looked between Ravi and Greyson, holding my breath.

*What is it this time?* I wondered.

“What’s happening?” Xavier asked Ravi.

“The dome is weakening,” he replied seriously.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked. “Greyson?”

“We were able to partially push through at some parts,” he told me. He was barely looking at me, and that hurt.

*This is such a mess.*

“We don’t think the revenant army has figured it out yet,” Ravi continued. “But we worry that it means we’re on a ticking time clock right now.”

Xavier paused, nodding. “I’m going to ask Big Mac and Kira how much time we have left.” He turned to me, giving me a lingering stare before he turned to Ravi. “Let’s go.”

The three men headed out, but not without both Greyson and Xavier shooting me one last glance. Xavier’s was resolute, Greyson’s was unreadable. And all the while, battle was brewing outside these walls.

*What the hell can I do to help them right now?* I thought.

“The dome is dying, and the pack still doesn’t have a plan. This is just swell,” Ava scoffed, and I was startled. I’d forgotten about her—she’d been quiet for so long.

Feeling my whole body tense up, I turned to her. “I thought you were here for a book. Not to judge the pack’s war tactics.”

Ava smiled, a little bit sardonic. “Oh, was I? Must have slipped my mind.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. Was this another one of her games? Had she come in here just to mess with me and Xavier? What did she want, really? Could I EVER fucking reason with her? That had failed in the past, but Ava did keep insisting that she was different now. *Right?*

“For someone who says she’s changed and wants to redeem herself, you’re a little too sarcastic at the moment, talking back to Xavier and all that,” I said, ripping off the Band-Aid. “What’s up with that?”

Ava seemed shocked to be called out. I wanted to yell at her, *You’d better get used to it, honey!* But then she just shrugged. “The world is ending. I’m kinda in a bad mood.”

I snorted. Now THAT was a mood.

“I feel like you must have felt like an outsider in this house and this pack for a while now…” I trailed off.

She scoffed. “What gave that away?”

I did *not* appreciate her tone, but I powered through. “I just wanted to say that I know how you must be feeling right now.”

“Do you, though?” she asked me coldly.

I raised an eyebrow. “I was the only human in the pack not too long ago, and everybody saw me as a nuisance. I think I probably had it even worse than you.”

Surprisingly, Ava did shut up at that.

“Anyway,” I went on, “the point is that if there’s anything I can do to help you, you should let me know.”

Ava let out a choked laugh, clearly stunned. “What the hell kind of game are you playing here? Wow.”

“This isn’t a game to me,” I said, my voice even. I was trying to be imposing, *dammit*. This was serious business to me! “I have the most reason of anyone not to trust you, but I’m trying to extend an olive branch here.”

Ava narrowed her eyes at me suspiciously. “Don’t do me any favors.”

Then she stomped out of the room like a fucking dramatic teenager, and I rolled my eyes.

“Oh my god, *please* don’t make me chase after you!” I called.

But Ava didn’t stop, so I guessed I would have to chase after her, after all. At least I needed to do it if I wanted to drive my point home—I really did feel like we could work together here and have a truce. I wanted to be the bigger person for once, but Ava wasn’t helping matters.

*Typical!* I thought and huffed, following her.

I could see her rushing up the stairs already.

“I’m not trying to eat you, you know,” I called after her. “Stop acting like a brat!”

I got to the top of the stairs, but I couldn’t see Ava anywhere—she must have gone into her room. How *rude*. She really was a brat, and it was my fault for trying to be friends.

“Sorry for bothering you with my friendship, asshole,” I muttered.

*Wait…*

Had I *really* scared away my boyfriend’s ex by threatening her with my friendship? That was a method of intimidation I’d never thought of before. Maybe I could scare Letifer away like that too? Just walk over and be like, “*Hey, girl, do you wanna hang out? My dad makes a mean waffle plate!*” And then Letifer would feel so awkward that he would just run away.

*Here I am, crafting attack plans that nobody appreciates. All my potential is being wasted!* I thought, shaking my head.

I was about to head downstairs to share my genius plans with someone who would appreciate them—probably Marta, because she was too nice to tell me I was a moron—when I heard a low sob coming out of Astrid’s room. I scowled.

*Shit, that sounds bad.*

I knocked on her door. “Astrid?”

No reply.

I slowly opened the door to see my mother sitting by Astrid’s bed, wiping her brow with a damp cloth. I swallowed roughly, worried. “How is she doing?”

Mom shook her head. “She doesn’t seem to be getting better. Torin is starting to run out of things to try.”

My worry grew. “Could we ask Emmett about that serum?”

“Torin is reluctant to try it,” Mom said. “Emmett said it was experimental, and that he already had to change something to make it work on werewolves instead of vampires. So there’s no knowing how it might affect Fae.”

This was very, very bad news.

I watched Astrid. She was whimpering, her eyes closed, her beautiful face so pale. There was sweat gathered at her collarbones, and she was obviously in pain. *Ugh*. I couldn’t lose anyone else to this revenant horde. I’d spent this whole time feeling trapped. Usually, I could at least *do* something to help, but with this dome around us, I felt even more useless. Just stuck in here with nothing to do.

*And, honestly, my friendship attack plan doesn’t sound so smart*, I admitted to myself.

I sat on the other side of Astrid’s bed and took the Fae’s hand, taking a deep breath. The least I could do was sit here with my friend. That was something. I was a little relieved to see that Astrid had stopped moaning and was now muttering in her sleep.

I frowned in confusion.

“What is she saying?” I asked Mom. “That’s not English.”

She nodded. “It sounds like ancient Fae—an older dialect—but I can’t really understand either.”

Well. That wasn’t good at all.

“She’s been going in and out of consciousness all day,” Mom continued. “And whenever she’s asleep, she starts to mutter this stuff.”

“You think she’s dreaming?” I asked cautiously.

Mom nodded. “Possibly. But at least she’s not screaming.”

That was an upside, actually.

“I’m going to go shower and change quickly, okay?” Mom said. “I’ll be right back.”

My throat tight with emotion, I nodded.

A moment later, Astrid and I were alone in the room. I sniffled, squeezing her hand.

“We’ll figure out a way to help you. I promise,” I said in a whisper.

Astrid didn’t reply, of course. She just kept muttering under her breath.

I tried to focus on her words in the silence, my ears and mind tuning out everything else.

I realized that what Astrid was saying wasn’t random.

It was the same thing, over and over again. That wasn’t alarming whatsoever, was it?

*What could it be?* I wondered, and then I realized that I should at least try to write this down. I fumbled in the bedside table for a piece of paper, then focused on Astrid’s muttering again. I could scribble down what I heard phonetically—that was a good idea. For real, this time!

The door cracked open then. It wasn’t Mom, but Torin, and I exhaled sharply. I didn’t want him to see her like this, but I couldn’t stop him. I knew that. Astrid was his best friend.

“How is she?” he asked me in a serious tone that was so unlike him. If Torin had lost his happy-go-lucky attitude, then shit was definitely serious. But maybe I had something here.

“She’s been mumbling this for a while. I wrote it down phonetically,” I said, and showed him the piece of paper. “She just says the same thing, over and over. Mom says it’s an ancient dialect she doesn’t understand, but maybe you do?”

Torin took the piece of paper, and when his eyes fell on the letters, they widened.

He swallowed audibly. “This… This doesn’t make any sense.”

I stared at him, anxious. “Do you understand it?”

He nodded sharply. “Yes. It says, *‘It cannot be defeated without my power.’*”

**Episode 1754**

LOLA

I decided to check on Emmett in his makeshift basement lab. Mostly because everybody had more or less told me he was my responsibility, since I was the one who’d convinced the Alphas to let him into the pack house. I guessed that I was stuck with him for now.

Annoyed, I knocked on his door.

“Come in,” Emmett called.

When I walked in, I was surprised to see Jacqueline sitting on a chair, with Emmett hovering over her. He seemed to have just finished injecting something into her arm.

“Whoa, what’s up?” I asked.

“The serum wears off on vampires, Lola, remember?” Emmett told me in his most teacher-like way. “I’ve created a schedule for Jacqueline to get her shots, so that she doesn’t turn into a revenant again.”

“I would not like that,” Jacqueline said darkly.

“Neither would we,” I told her in a dry tone. “That seems smart, but…” I paused, a sinking feeling invading my stomach. “Does that mean the serum is going to wear off on Greyson and Xavier as well?”

Emmett nodded seriously. “That is a definite possibility. But since the werewolf serum is slightly different than the vampire one, I can’t know for sure.”

“For real?” I squeaked.

“It’s fine,” Emmett said casually, as if he hadn’t just been stressing about this. “I’ll just need to run more tests.”

I scowled, remembering his “tests” on Jay. *Asshole*. “You better make sure that you’re doing all of this for the good of the pack, and not because of your weird scientific curiosity,” I declared.

Emmett raised an eyebrow. “Can I not do both at the same time?”

“This is my pack, my friends, and you’re not allowed to harm them,” I snapped, getting in his face. He flinched. *Good*. “So you listen to me, and you listen hard, you—”

I choked the moment his scent invaded my nose.

*Fuck*.

My vampire heat flared up in an instant, and I took a stumbling step back.

Emmett smirked. “Are you okay, Lola? You seem a little flustered there.”

I gagged, and Jacqueline did the same. “Ew! I don’t need to witness this weird tension between the two of you!”

“It’s not tension,” I snapped. “It’s a biological reaction to someone who I normally would never find attractive.”

Emmett frowned. “That wounds me.”

“Good,” I snapped.

Jacqueline huffed. “Still. I don’t like it.”

Was this girl serious?

I sneered at her. “Nobody likes it, Jacqueline, that’s the point!”

“I’m fine with it,” Emmett piped up. Casually, he added, “It’s always nice to be desired.”

I raked my hands through my hair. “Oh, my god, I’ve had enough of the two of you for today!”

I made a move to walk the hell out of there when I noticed a cot in the corner of the room. Irma lay there, an IV in her arm.

“What’s going on with her?” I asked, frowning.

Like this was totally normal, Emmett said, “I have Irma sedated. She’ll be my control patient.”

My stomach clenched at the absolute horror of that. What kind of creepy-ass scary movie had I just walked into? What the *fuck*? Irma had been tough on me, sure, but she was always fair, and she didn’t deserve this. Literally nobody I knew—sans Silas—deserved this kind of guinea pig treatment. Not even *guinea pigs* deserved this kind of treatment!

I wondered if I should tell Xavier about this. Or Cali. My god, if Cali knew, she would set this entire lab on fire just to save this one innocent person. The timing was really fucked up too, with Letifer at the walls and all that.

How could I protect Irma’s rights as a patient here without pissing off Emmett, though? That damn mad, freaky, entirely unethical scientist could actually be the solution to all our revenant-bite problems, and there was a chance that the serum would wear off and the Alphas would need another injection to remain themselves.

Could Emmett be the only way for Xavier and Greyson to stay alive?

*Shit*.

“What are you thinking, Lola?” Emmett asked me in that curious and entirely creepy tone of his.

I glared at him. “Does HIPAA exist for vampires?”

He looked confused all of a sudden—as if he’d never even considered the idea that any of the things he’d been doing were wrong. Then Jay’s voice came from right outside.

“Lola, are you in there?” He opened the door without asking, and I appreciated his vibe. Emmett was useful, but that didn’t mean he deserved any respect. *Creep*.

“What’s up?” I asked, instantly moving closer to Jay. At the same time, I noticed Jacqueline staring at Jay with a seductive smile. It seemed like her obsession with everyone in this house dying sooner than later had been replaced by horniness over my mate.

Seriously, why did I let her stick around here, anyway?

“There you are,” Jay told me, taking my hand. “I was wondering where you were.” He shot Emmett a menacing, suspicious look. Which, hard same.

“I’m fine,” I told him. “I just wanted to double-check that Emmett was doing all he could to make sure the serum’s working.”

Jay nodded. “But what’s the plan there? What are we going to do once we get the serum perfected?”

“The ideal situation would be to inoculate everyone in the pack house against a revenant bite,” Emmett explained, back to being a professional instead of a mad scientist. I wondered how long it would last this time.

“But what about the revenants outside?” Jacqueline asked.

“What are you even talking about?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I mean, the serum brought me back; why can’t it do that for that army of revenants out there? Why can’t we figure out a serum that works on all supernaturals and humans alike?”

Nobody spoke for a moment. I gaped at Jacqueline. “That’s… actually a good idea.”

Jacqueline scoffed, her smile sardonic. “Yeah, I come up with those every once in a while.” She turned to Jay and winked. “I’m more than just a gorgeous face.”

Jay snorted, and I was highly offended.

“Do *not* wink at my boyfriend—I will literally cut you,” I declared.

Jacqueline raised her hands. “Okay! Jeez, so touchy.”

I was touchy all right.

I grabbed Jay by the arm, and then told Emmett, “We’ll leave you to work on the serum. Jay and I can go ask the others about any ideas to get it to the army out there without risking anyone’s life.”

Jacqueline waved at us happily. “Come back and visit soon!”

I narrowed my eyes at her.

“What?” she said. “I didn’t mean just Jay! I meant both of you!”

Jay meanwhile looked flustered, which was unacceptable.

“I’m watching you,” I told Jacqueline, and we got out of the room quickly.

“Lola—”

“Whatever you wanna say, say it when we have some privacy,” I declared.

Jay looked sheepish, and I marched into the powder room on the first floor to throw some water on my red, angry face. Jay squeezed in behind me and closed the door. He sighed deeply.

“Are you okay?”

I glared at him through the mirror. “I’m fine. Why wouldn’t I be? I love seeing my mate flirting with evil vampire mean girls!”

Jay was still blushing. The monster. “Lola, you know I wasn’t flirting. I just thought it was weird the way Jacqueline did that.”

I pressed my lips together, staring at him. Was I a hypocrite for making a scene when my vampire heat had made things weird between Emmett and me a moment ago? *No*. I didn’t like Emmett. I would never flirt with him—in fact, I found him extremely off putting as a person.

But no matter what Jacqueline did, deep down, I was certain that Jay would never fuck around on me.

“I know,” I mumbled. “It’s not your fault that Jacqueline is a pain in my butt.”

Jay gave me a little adorable smile, all shy and beautiful. He glanced at my behind. “I do love your butt, though…”

I scoffed, elbowing him.

He laughed, grabbing my arm and spinning me into his strong arms. “We could die tomorrow, you know. I really don’t want to waste any time fighting with you, when we can be together instead.”

I swallowed, taking in his intense gaze, the way his body fit so amazingly with mine. “I feel the same way.”

The moment the words were out of my mouth, Jay captured my mouth in a devouring kiss. Heat spread all over me, a wildfire that made me feel like I was melting. *Mine*, I thought, the mate bond throbbing inside me. One of his hands moved to the back of my neck to keep me where he wanted me, and the other slid down to grab my ass. I moaned, sliding my hands up his T-shirt, down his chest and abs, then even lower. He groaned into my mouth, hard for me already.

I unzipped his pants quickly, and he picked me up, making me sit on the vanity. I spread my legs and pulled him in between. He lifted my skirt and slid my underwear down, our movements hectic until he paused and cradled my face between his hands. Panting, we stared into each other’s eyes.

“No matter what happens next, know that I love you, Lola,” he whispered. The emotion in his gaze made me catch my breath.

“Me too. So much,” I whispered, pulling him in for another passionate kiss.

**Episode 1755**

CHARLIE

*Vampires!* I thought, the urge to shift hitting me full force.

*No!* Violet mind linked. *I don’t think they’ve seen us yet.*

My heart pounding, my arm tight around Violet, I kept looking up, at the vampires perched on the branches. But Violet was right; the vampires weren’t looking at us.

*What the hell is happening here?* I asked Violet. *Why would they just be quietly hanging out up there?*

*Maybe they’re surveying the area?* Violet suggested.

If they decided to survey the area right underneath them, we were screwed.

*What should we do?* I asked.

Violet swallowed roughly, staring into my eyes. *I don’t think just the two of us can take on a dozen vampire revenants at once. We need to get away right now.*

*What if they notice us moving?* I asked.

*They didn’t notice us freaking making out and rolling around on the ground moaning,* Violet said, eyebrows arched. *It’s gonna be fine.*

Violet seemed determined, but I felt like shit. I didn’t want her to get hurt—especially since I was the reason why we were here in the first place. Romilly, running patrol—it was all happening because I was at this goddamn hunter camp.

*Follow me!* Violet said all of a sudden, interrupting my thoughts. A second later, she dropped to her knees and started to army crawl toward one of the closest trailers.

*Stop it, I didn’t agree to this! Violet, come back! Or not! Oh my god, what are you DOING?* I said, but she just paused to wave me over. When did she get so stubborn? I was kinda digging it, not gonna lie, but it wasn’t ideal right now.

This girl was gonna be the death of me.

*Follow me and stop flailing!* she replied, waving me over again.

Annoyed, I hurriedly crawled after her, grumbling like an old man inside my head.

*It’s gonna be fine*, she told me, making a move to crawl into the space right under the trailer. And then I realized that perhaps Violet was right and this was a great plan—just hiding in plain sight. I shouldn’t have doubted her. I shouldn’t have—

A screech made my blood run cold.

*Violet? VIOLET!*

That damn fluffy raccoon was the thing screeching! Before Violet could hide herself, it jumped straight out from under the trailer and raced across the field. In a matter of seconds, a vampire jumped down the branches and snatched up the raccoon as if it were a fruit, then tore into it. The nightmarish sound of the screaming raccoon and flesh getting torn apart suffocated my ears.

That little buddy didn’t deserve that ending.

Before I could finish that thought, though, the other vampires fell to the ground as well, almost inaudible in their landing, and then…

They turned their orange eyes on us.

“Violet, stay behind me,” I said through gritted teeth, grabbing at her arm to pull her up after I stood myself. I planted myself in front of her, my chest heaving, the instinct to protect my mate so intense I felt dizzy with it.

I’d rather die than let anything happen to Violet.

“The hunter camp knows we’re here,” I called loudly. “You’d better let us go if you don’t want any trouble!”

*Oh, good thinking, Charlie!* Violet said.

I was quite proud of that one as well—thinking on my feet while looking death in the eye. But unfortunately, the vamps didn’t look like they’d heard me.

They barely seemed sentient at all.

They only made grunting sounds, their faces blank, no comprehension in sight. They moved toward us in weird unison.

“What the hell?” I choked, reaching back to hold Violet. “They’re like zombies.”

The revenant vampires kept closing in on us in a circle. *Shit*.

“They’re revenants, like the one we fought before. They’re not as lightning fast as normal vampires. We can work with that, but…” Violet trailed off.

“But what?” I looked around wildly. There had to be at least a dozen of them, and they were slowly reaching toward us.

“But they’re not going to go down with just a stake to the heart,” Violet said, breathless.

I remembered Zachery setting up the fire earlier. The way the vampire’s skin had turned into burning paper in the flames.

“A fire,” I said. “We need to build a fire right now, otherwise…”

“Otherwise they’re all gonna come back to life,” Violet choked out.

The vampire in the middle snarled, raising his finger.

He pointed at Violet, and I roared, shifting into my wolf.

Violet shifted at the same time, just as all the vampires broke into a run.

The next few moments passed in a blur—I was fighting five of them at once, but even though they were somehow stronger than the average vampire, they were indeed slower, which was my only advantage.

*On your right!* Violet mind linked.

I ducked just as one lunged at me, watching as it fell on one of the others, creating a domino effect. I used my claws and hind legs to kick two or more of them away, so I could break up their attack modes.

*Use your claws, let’s go for their eyes!* I mind linked back, realizing that that was the best strategy—taking away their orange-fire vision to confuse them.

Violet listened, and in what felt like seconds, the two of us were attacking and defending each other in unison. We were amazing together—definitely better as one instead of apart.

I was so proud of my strong, capable mate that I could’ve preened with pride.

There were just five of them left now, and Violet said, *We need to figure out a way to set up a fire, otherwise the others are gonna come back to life.*

*I don’t think we have the time to set up a fire*, I replied. *But now that there’s less of them, there’s a solid chance we could just run away.*

Violet nodded her agreement and lunged at one of the things. Another one of them came at me just at the same time, and I ripped its throat out with my teeth, spitting out the pieces to release myself from the scent and taste of death.

But then, between my growling and their hissing, I heard another sound.

A yelp, coming straight from my mate.

I turned to see that one of the creatures had slashed at Violet’s flank, catching her thigh.

*Get your fucking hands off her!*

I roared, leaping at the vampire. It didn’t stand a chance—I was so fucking furious that I sliced through the entirety of its body, from the head down to the belly. The thing fell to the ground, wide-eyed.

*Does it hurt?* I mind linked, my wolf whimpering with worry as I turned to stare at Violet.

*No*, she said. *It’s fine. Let’s get out of here, now that we can!*

We broke into a mad run into the trees. We were racing through the foliage, trying to zigzag in unison and stay together, even as we fought to make the vampires lose our trail.

*Wait, are we going in the right direction?* Violet asked frantically. *Where’s the camp?*

The moment she finished her question, we burst out of the forest and stopped short at the edge of a cliff.

*Shit. Shit shit shit!*

*Charlie, oh my god…* Violet turned to me, her wolf’s eyes wide.

I turned back and held my breath. My heart was pounding, and my limbs felt light yet somehow heavy, my whole body running on pure adrenaline.

The revenants had slowed down after they spotted us.

They moved ominously toward us, like wild predators.

*What do we do?* Violet asked.

I edged closer to the cliff and looked down.

*I don’t like that look in your eye*, Violet said, sounding alarmed.

*We need to do this, Violet. The fall is long, but maybe not too long? There’s a river down there. If we angle it right, we can just make it*, I replied.

*Seriously?* Violet replied, her wolf panting. *The water must be freezing!*

*We’re wolves, we won’t die from hypothermia!* I turned around. The revenants were even closer now, their evil grins wide.

They thought they’d trapped us, and now they were ready to play with us as if we were food.

*It’s our only chance*, I told Violet. *Do you trust me?*

Violet’s wolf paused. Then her bottomless eyes peered into mine, and she nodded.

*On three*, I said. *One, two—*

*Three!* Violet said it with me, at the same time.

And then we leapt off the cliff together.

The water was truly freezing—*fuck!* I paddled upward, looking around for Violet. When I broke the surface, panting, so cold I could’ve died, I looked around.

Violet was nowhere to be seen.

My wolf howled.

*Violet? VIOLET!*

For a horrible moment that felt like a century, there was no sound other than that of the water.

But then…

*Charlie!*

I turned to see her swimming upstream from me. Thank god.

The relief I felt was incredible. Howling with joy this time, I swam toward her. The current was strong and carrying us along, luck on our side for once.

*We’re okay, Violet*, I said. *We’re gonna be okay.*

Her incredulous laughter echoed in my head.

We were gonna be okay.

When we finally reached the shore, I shifted back to human before falling onto the sand. I was exhausted, so tired that even the gritty specks felt sharp against my skin. I turned to Violet—she had shifted as well, falling onto her back beside me.

We were both breathing hard, trembling from the cold.

But we were okay.

“We’re okay,” I said out loud.

Still panting, Violet turned to face me. Slowly, her gaze focused on mine, and she smiled. “We’re okay…”

Still running high on adrenaline, I started laughing in relief. Violet joined in, gasping with it, sniffling. “Holy shit, that was insane!”

I grinned. “I know. But at least we’re alive.” I pulled her into a tight hug and felt her melt against me. God, I loved her so much. I faced her a moment later, my breathing even now.

Pushing her damp hair from her forehead, I whispered, “I was so scared of losing you back there…”

Violet smirked. “You didn’t have to worry, I’m a strong fighter.”

“I know. But I still worry.”

“Me too,” she mumbled, stroking my cheek.

I gave her a peck, rejoicing in this closeness. “I always knew we were better together.”

Violet gave me a breathtakingly beautiful smile. She kissed me deeply, with so much passion and relief that I groaned into it. I pulled her closer, my hands roaming all over her bare, wet body, the heat we shared so amazing that—

“What the *fuck*, Charlie?”

Violet and I broke apart like we’d been electrocuted.

And when I looked up, I saw none other than Zachery, staring at us in shock.

**Episode 1756**

GREYSON

Xavier pushed his hand against the dome. I watched, my stomach dropping, as it gave a bit. That was a lot when the people/entities/whatever-the-fuck on the other side of the wall wanted to destroy us.

Xavier frowned. Good to see that he was with the program.

“Should we do something?” Ravi asked. “Where’s Big Mac?”

I opened my mouth to reply, but Xavier beat me to it. “She’s inside. We need to ask the witches how long the magic will hold.”

I scowled. That was what I was going to say. First the pack, and now this guy was stealing all my lines. I hated how overly energetic he was about this whole thing—like, *Calm down, man. We get it, you’re the Alpha.*

I wondered if I could give him grief about it without coming off as a petty, jealous asshole. Doubtful. Also, this role reversal was definitely making my identity crisis a million times worse. I wasn’t the petty, jealous one—I was the cool, sensitive one with the great hair.

I hated everything.

But hey, I kept my mouth shut, because this was what the pack wanted. And since they stood by their choice, what I would do was sit back and drink my Earl Grey while Xavier fucked everything up for them*.* They would be destroyed, and I would hang around just long enough to say, “*Hah! I told you so!*”

*Greyson!* Cali’s scolding voice echoed in my head, aghast. *You don’t really believe that! You’d do anything to help the pack!*

Since when did my conscience sound like Cali? I did not need this guilt. Did the pack feel guilty for using me and throwing me away like yesterday’s trash? Nope, they did not.

Stewing, I followed Xavier and Ravi back to the house. I reminded myself that this wasn’t about me being petty—it was about me wondering if I was even *needed* here anymore if no one really thought that I’d done a good job as Alpha (after I’d saved their asses over and over). They’d all voted for Xavier, anyway, so what was the point of me sticking around?

Okay, not everyone had voted for Xavier.

That had to mean something, right?

But did I really want it to mean anything at all? Why would I stick my neck out for them when it was apparent that for the majority, I just wasn’t enough? I didn’t think they were that great a bunch, either—mediocre pups, most of them—but I didn’t make a big deal out of it.

*Oh my god, Greyson!* Cali’s voice in my head again. *Stop it!*

I ignored my conscience.

“I need to talk to you,” Xavier told the witches when we got to the kitchen. Didi, Marta, Big Mac, and Kira were sitting around the table, and Artemis was hovering by the sink, fumbling with something.

“What’s going on?” Big Mac asked.

“The dome seems to be weaker,” Xavier replied.

“Makes sense,” Kira said. “We probably only have a few hours left.”

“Until the morning at most,” Big Mac added.

I looked outside through the window. The sun was setting. That didn’t give us much time. We needed to make a plan.

“Okay, so we need to make a plan quickly,” Xavier said, and there it was again. He *kept stealing all my lines*. Somehow, it felt almost like everyone was actually right, and Xavier was doing literally everything I would have done. Which made me feel replaceable and useless again and forever. *Awesome*.

“Oh good, you’re all here.” Lola entered the kitchen, smoothing her hair back.

Jay followed a moment later, and I gave him a look. They both looked flustered, and their hair was just a little messy—enough to make me realize what was up. Jay met my gaze, shrugging coyly when I arched an eyebrow at him.

The world was ending and he was out there getting some, the jackass.

Wait, that was a good idea, actually.

Where was Cali?

“What’s going on?” Xavier asked Lola.

“I have some news from Emmett,” she said.

“What kind of news?” I asked.

“Jacqueline had an interesting idea, actually,” Lola said, and literally everyone in the room groaned apart from Artemis, who generally seemed not to give a fuck, and Marta and Didi, who seemed curious.

“No, seriously!” Lola exclaimed, looking between me and Xavier. “She thought that we could inject the serum into the army of revenants and like, make them normal again.”

Nobody spoke for a moment.

I frowned. “That sounds dangerous. Not to mention impossible.”

“Dangerous or not,” Xavier piped up, “that’s not a bad idea. It’s the most promising plan we have to avoid a fight.”

I shook my head. “You can’t just ask someone to risk their life like that.”

Xavier glared at me. “We don’t have time to argue this. And I’m Alpha now—you can give your opinion, but my word is final.”

“I thought we were all about democracy around here.” I scoffed. “Why don’t we put Jacqueline the vampire’s plan to a vote, then? Because it’s not *your* plan, Xavier—or your idea.”

“It doesn’t fucking matter. If it works, it works, and—”

“And if it doesn’t, everyone dies!”

Xavier paused, his eyes narrowed on me. I realized that everybody was awkwardly watching us quarrel, yet again. I wanted to push back against Xavier, but I remembered what Rishika had said during the vote. That the pack had felt like they were not a priority and needed leadership.

At the end of the day, I didn’t want to be the reason anyone felt unsafe. And honestly, perhaps doing my best for the pack just hadn’t been enough. Hadn’t been right. And that was why they’d discarded me.

I remembered all the times I’d groaned under the weight of their needs and expectations. Perhaps they’d felt that as well.

Maybe they’d felt that me being their leader cost me too much mentally.

“Do you have anything else to say, Greyson?” Xavier asked, peering at me.

It took all of my willpower to step back. To admit, “No. I don’t think I’m needed here. You got this.”

And that was the truth.

I felt like I was doing more harm than good being in that room, so I left the kitchen. I had no idea where to go, what to do, but as ever, I gravitated toward Cali’s room. Her door was ajar, and I lingered at the doorway. She was at her computer, looking something over, and I hesitated. She was busy, and I was… a nuisance. It felt like everywhere I went in this house right now, I was unwanted and irritating, causing more problems than not.

I ignored the way my hands started shaking at the thought and was moving to leave when Cali looked up from her computer. “Greyson! What are you doing lurking there?”

“Sorry to bother you, I’ll go—”

“What?” She frowned. “What are you talking about, come in!”

The moment I got into the room, she was up and walking toward me, reaching out for me to wrap her into a hug. She squeezed herself against me, kissing my chest, and something in me eased. At least Cali loved me. She cared about me. Maybe she still admired me, just a little—at least for all the effort I’d put into being Alpha.

“Are you okay?” she asked quietly.

I didn’t reply. The feeling of her in my arms was the only thing that could comfort me right now.

“It’s going to be fine, I promise,” Cali murmured, patting my back.

I smiled bitterly, facing her. “How can you know that?”

Cali looked up at me, her eyes full of emotion. “I have faith in all of you.”

I wanted to believe her. I wanted to believe that everything would work out for the best, but I couldn’t feel like that right now. Mostly because my place in this pack felt so unstable and unnecessary. I remembered a time when I hadn’t even *wanted* to be a part of any pack.

I’d lived so much of my life as a Rogue. I’d only come back to help get rid of Silas, but once we defeated him for this second time—if everything went well—then what would I do?

What purpose would I have in this pack house?

The only thing that I had left right now was my love for Cali.

That, and Cali herself.

I looked down at her, at her gorgeous face and the warmth in her gaze and her beautiful lips, and I couldn’t help myself. I leaned down, brushing my mouth over hers, ready for the sting of rejection—she would push me away, tell me something about the *due destini*, about how this wasn’t right for Xavier.

But instead of scolding me, Cali opened up to me.

She shivered against me, wrapping her arms around my neck, letting me kiss her like a desperate man drowning with her as my only anchor. I didn’t care if she felt bad for me—I would take her crumbs of affection over nothing.

They weren’t crumbs, anyway.

They were her taste and her touch and her heart pounding for me, because she *did* love me.

No matter what, at least I knew that Cali loved me.

To her, I wasn’t useless.

To her, I wasn’t replaceable.

To Cali, I was Greyson, her mate, and that had to mean something.

“Cali,” I rasped, breaking the kiss to face her. She was breathing heavily, biting her lip as she looked up at me, still holding me tight. She waited for me to speak, as if whatever I had to say was important. As if *I* was important.

Staring into her eyes, I asked, “If I wanted to leave the pack, would you come with me?”

**Episode 1757**

ARTEMIS

I threw out my teabag, keeping my expression neutral. Nobody was paying attention to me right now—not with the conversation that was happening around the kitchen table—but I needed to remain inconspicuous. I needed to continue listening in on every word shared between the witches and the new Alpha.

Eventually, Big Mac said, “… I think that’s all for now. Do you have any questions, Xavier?”

The Alpha shook his head. I wondered if we were supposed to be scared of him, now that he had that kind of title. If so, it wasn’t working.

“We’ll go check on the dome,” Big Mac said, nodding in Kira’s direction.

The two left the kitchen while Xavier and Ravi followed Lola off to talk to the crazy vampire scientist guy. Only Marta and Didi remained, talking quietly, still sitting at the table. I took a sip of my tea, staring at Didi.

My heart clenched at the sight of her.

*I think there’s a way to kill Letifer*, Didi had said earlier. *But the catch is that I have to be the one to do it.*

Could she really have meant that? Could she truly be capable of such an act of violence? She felt like a real wildcard, one that I’d never anticipated. I had no idea what to do about the situation, and I hated the uncertainty of it all.

I wondered if I could hurt Didi.

If I could get away with it.

*None of this is right.*

I rubbed at my chest, fighting to soothe the ache. Why did it hurt so much? Why did everything hurt so much?

I caught Marta’s eye for an instant, then looked away again as she continued chatting with Didi about some potion or another.

Why the hell was that little medium always staring at me?

She was trouble, but I knew how to defend myself.

I knew how to attack, as well.

*I could attack her.*

My brain felt so heavy suddenly, like there was a chain wrapped around it.

“There you are,” Rishika said after walking into the kitchen, interrupting my thoughts. “You went to make tea so long ago.”

I swallowed nervously. “What?”

Rishika raised an eyebrow, looking down at the cup in my hand. “The tea you’re drinking?”

I shook my head. “Right. I was just coming back.”

Instead of answering, Rishika took my hand and squeezed it, leaning in to brush her lips over mine. For a moment, the tension in my head eased, and the fist around my heart loosened. And when Rishika pulled away, smiling as she pushed my hair back, I stared into her eyes and it suddenly felt like I could breathe again.

I could now look at Marta and not think that she was a danger to me.

I could now look at Didi and not worry about whatever plan she had to fight Letifer.

I didn’t want to hurt either of them. *No*.

But it had happened again—Rishika’s kiss had released something inside me. It had made me realize that I’d once more been taken over by those dark impulses, by those thoughts and voices that made me do…

Bad things.

I’d been doing bad things.

Pain suddenly spread through my body. It felt like guilt.

I gripped Rishika’s arm tighter, staring into her eyes.

“What?” she asked, looking surprised.

I wanted to tell her the truth. I wanted to confess to Rishika all the bad things I’d been doing, but just like every other time I’d tried to break the chains, my throat closed up. Whatever it was that had pulled me into the darkness was also keeping me from telling anyone the truth in these moments of clarity.

In these moments where I was myself.

And those moments were happening less and less often.

“Are you okay?” Rishika asked, frowning in confusion.

I realized that my eyes were burning with unshed tears.

“Hey, what’s wrong, baby?” Rishika asked, alarmed. She caressed my cheek, my arm, looking at me as if I were precious when I deserved none of her kindness. None of her emotion.

I couldn’t speak and tell her the truth, anyway.

I couldn’t ever fully be myself, anyway.

“Just…” I swallowed. “I’m tired.”

Rishika nodded, full of understanding. Always. It made me feel ten times worse about lying to her. About not fighting whatever was inside me.

“Why don’t we go upstairs? You do look exhausted,” she said.

As she led me out of the kitchen, I didn’t spare Marta or Didi a look.

I was just glad I hadn’t hurt them.

With my heart pounding in my throat, I followed Rishika upstairs and into our room. She helped me lie down on the bed and sat next to me.

“Here you go,” she murmured, and brought my head to her lap. She started running her fingers through my hair, her fingertips digging into my skull, alienating some of the pressure that always overcame it.

It felt so good I could’ve cried.

Maybe I could just pretend that this was the only thing that existed in my life. Just this moment and Rishika—her care, her beauty, her emotion. Everything would be so much easier if that were the case. Rishika would be able to keep everything bad at bay, and at least with her, when we were like this, I could be myself.

At least for a little while, I could be myself.

Her kiss did that to me.

I opened my eyes, looking up at her. She had this half-smile on her mouth, and I wanted to kiss it. I reached up and pulled her downward, her mouth on mine. She was surprised for a moment, but then responded with the same kind of vigor. I sat up and changed our position, pulling her on top of me, my lips never leaving hers. I needed to live this moment with her, just to remember what it was like to fully feel.

I needed her like nothing else.

“I want you,” I said against her neck, and the way she shivered fired me up.

I took her top off, crazed at the feel of her skin, the heat of her, and a moment later, all our clothes were gone. Her mouth was against mine, relentless, wet, and open. My hand was between her legs, sliding up and down where she was hot and trembling for me, rubbing circles, on and on till she moaned into my mouth. Her hips arched up to my touch, her whole body shaking, her grip on my arm tight as she urged me on.

She was gorgeous when she fell apart.

She stared at me, grinning and delirious, and spoke against my lips. “My turn.”

She started kissing from my neck down my chest and waist, her mouth leaving trails across my flesh, creating a feeling of freedom, of elation that spread across every inch of me. If her kiss was a cure for me, then I needed to feel it all over.

She settled between my legs, looking up at me with a smirk, and she seemed so content that I wanted to cry at the knowledge of my lies. But it didn’t matter, because she was forgiving. With her mouth right there, gently licking and kissing me, her fingertips tracing me so lightly I couldn’t get enough, she made me feel like she’d forgive anything.

I grabbed onto my pillow, my spine arching to get more of what she gave, and then she reached one hand up to hold mine. I gripped it, our fingers intertwining. Her dark eyes stared up to me, her tongue right where I needed it, and in what felt like mere moments later, I shattered.

I shattered, and yet this was the most like myself I’d felt in what felt like so long.

“You’re beautiful,” I said afterward, pulling her close.

She kissed me again, and for a moment, everything felt real.

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The clock on the wall was making too much nose. Rishika had dozed off, holding me tight in her arms. I longed for her peace. I didn’t want to drift off, because there was no telling who I would be when I woke up. My lids were heavy, though, and soon enough, I gave in.

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When I woke up, it was in darkness.

I didn’t know for how long I’d been asleep.

Rishika was sleeping beside me.

A force was calling me from outside. I stood up and got dressed methodically, every movement weighed. I slipped out the room and downstairs, and it was so late at night.

It was just the right time.

I crossed the yard. The night was eerily quiet, and I could see the dome glistening under the moonlight. I approached the edge of it, tracing the wall.

A second later, orange eyes glowed at the tree line.

I smiled to myself, pushing against the weakened dome.

I pushed and pushed, putting all my power into it. The resistance became less and less with every try, until it gave.

Until the dome’s magic gave up, no longer a match for me.

I was through to the other side now, my feet on steady ground.

I looked around, and there they were.

Orange eyes.

An army of revenants, greeting me with a bow.

**Episode 1758**

My mind was a wild, rushing blank. I didn’t know how I could possibly respond to the outrageous thing Greyson had said. *Leave the pack house?* Leave the pack? And go where?

I swallowed hard. “Greyson, you’re not thinking straight—”

“Dammit, Cali,” he snapped, spinning on his heal and starting to pace the room. “I *am* thinking. Maybe I’m thinking clearer than ever. Maybe I’ve been fooling myself to think that I could be part of this pack, or any pack—let alone Alpha.”

“Greyson—” I started, but he didn’t seem to hear me.

“I came here to help the pack defeat my father. That’s it. Don’t forget I was a Rogue before this,” he snarled, rounding on me. “And I was a hell of a lot happier being Rogue. Answering to no one, responsible for no one.” He shook his head, his jaw set. “I’ll stay until we defeat the Silas-Letifer threat that’s waiting for us beyond the dome, but after that…” He trailed off, his face flushed.

“You can’t be—”

“After that, maybe I should start thinking about leaving again.”

“Greyson,” I whispered, cold fear settling in my gut.

“Maybe going back to my own life is exactly what I need,” he murmured, lost in his thoughts. Then he turned, and his eyes were laser-focused on me. “And if I do, I want you to come with me, Cali. And who knows? Out there on the road, maybe we’ll find a mystic who can find a way to cure the *due destini* curse, and we can be together. Truly be together.” He took a step toward me, his face tense. “What do you say?’

What did I *say*? I couldn’t *say* anything. I was shocked. It was all so sudden. “I… I don’t know,” I stammered. “I wasn’t expecting this…”

“I know,” Greyson said, “but I want you to think about it.”

It would be impossible not to. I thought about what life might be like away from the pack house and all the weird pack house drama. All the threats and tension. Not having to worry about keeping people safe all the time. Not having the kind of responsibility Greyson always felt here as Alpha.

And he was right. There were no solutions to the *due destini* here. We had looked and found nothing. But there had to be answers out there. Somewhere.

I bit my lip, thinking hard. There was so much that tempted me about this. I had seen Greyson’s visions—I knew the life we could have. The two of us, together. Happy. But…

But I couldn’t leave the people I loved. They were all here—Lola, Artemis, my mom and dad. And Xavier. How could I walk away from Xavier? It was unthinkable.

I looked up at Greyson and saw that his eyes looked like storm clouds. He was in turmoil—and the stress was tearing him apart. I wanted to do something to help him. I wanted to comfort him. But how? What he’d asked of me was impossible, no matter how tempting it seemed.

Taking a deep breath, I gave him a small smile. “It’s something to think about, Greyson, but I don’t think we have the luxury of making those decisions now. There’s so much going on already.” I reached for him, laying my hand on top of his arm. I could feel his muscles curled like springs beneath my palm. “Maybe you just need to get some rest—”

“I don’t need rest, Cali,” he snapped, jerking his arm from my grasp and storming away from me. “Jesus, Cali. I needed one more vote—one more person to choose me—and it came down to you. I thought I could count on you, but…” He turned to look at me, his glare icy cold. “I should have known better.”

Before I could even begin to think of a response, he yanked the door open and stormed out.

“Greyson!” I cried. I hurried after him, my heart in my throat, but he was already disappearing down the stairs. “Greyson! Stop!”

Downstairs, the front door banged open. “Big Mac! Big Mac! Where are you!”

The sound of Kira’s desperate voice stopped me in my tracks before I regained my senses and hurried down the stairs toward the sound.

“Kira? What’s up?” I asked breathlessly. “Why are you screaming like that? You’re going to give me a heart attack. What’s going on?”

Kira was at the foot of the stairs, her eyes wild with alarm. “Cali! Where’s Big Mac?”

“I’m not sure,” I said uncertainly. “Hey, slow down—”

“The revenants are gone!”

It was just shock after shock today. “What?” I finally managed, though my voice was strangled. “What are you talking about?”

She shook her head, gasping for breath. “They’re gone. They’re not outside the dome anymore. They’ve disappeared,” she said, incredulous. “Just like that.”

“But… how?” I asked, a chill shivering down my spine. “How could they do that so suddenly?”

“I have no idea, but it can’t be good,” Kira said. Her face had gone pale.

I knew Letifer was a spirit of some kind—and a warlock—but the revenants had all appeared to have bodies. Real, physical, corporeal bodies. So where had they all gone?

“What’s going on?” Xavier demanded, running in. He was followed by a few other pack members, all looking alarmed. “Who’s screaming?”

“The revenants are gone,” Kira said. “All of them.”

Xavier’s jaw flexed as he took this in, but he stayed calm. “Okay. I’m going to need a perimeter check immediately.”

“I’ll go,” Mace volunteered.

“Me too,” Ravi said, nodding.

“Full perimeter,” Xavier said sharply. “Check for anything unusual.”

Ravi and Mace nodded and disappeared out the front door.

“I’m going to step outside, too,” Big Mac said. “See if I can sense anything odd.”

“Maybe we should all go,” I said, and because no one objected, I followed as Xavier led the way outside.

It had been creepy as hell outside with the dome covering us during the day, and now that night had fallen, it was ten times worse. The trees inside the dome were still as stone, like they’d been petrified. Nothing stirred. I forced myself to look out, beyond the safety of the dome. I squinted into the darkness, trying to identify what was tree and what was human—or revenant. I was searching for orange eyes, but at the same time, I was terrified of finding them.

I looked up at Xavier, who was striding confidently at the front of the group, Kira, Big Mac, Mace, Ravi, and I all following in his wake. He looked so comfortable at the front, so natural leading the group. As much as I hated seeing Greyson torn up about what the pack had decided, Xavier looked like a natural Alpha.

It shouldn’t have been so surprising, I reminded myself. After all, he was born to do this.

Even with all the danger surrounding us and the tension within the pack, I felt a thrill, deep in my stomach, at seeing Xavier assuming the role he was meant to have. But I knew I couldn’t let the pride I felt sway me, and I tried to focus on the matter at hand.

“Everyone just mind your Ps and Qs, here,” Big Mac muttered as we approached the edge of the dome. “This dome is the only thing between us”—she jerked her chin—“and them.”

I whipped my head around. I still didn’t see any revenants, and it was starting to freak me out. It wasn’t that I *wanted* to find them, but I couldn’t make myself believe that they’d just gotten bored and left, never to bother us again.

No, their sudden disappearance was ominous, and I could definitely see why Kira was so worried. She was still pale as a sheet, and her eyes were darting around nervously.

Big Mac stepped forward and placed her hand against the dome. I watched as it gave a little under the pressure of her touch, like risen bread dough.

I bit my lip, trying not to cry out with fear. I was sure Big Mac knew what she was doing, but it was hard to not worry about the dome collapsing completely. I held my breath, but the dome remained as solid as ever while Big Mac touched it, and after a moment I breathed again, relieved.

Big Mac closed her eyes, concentrating, like she was listening hard to a distant sound. All around us, the dome began to glow. Just at Big Mac’s hand at first, but then it spread. Slowly at first, then faster and faster, climbing upward over us, lighting up a bright neon blue.

When I looked up in wonder, I saw that the dome still covered the whole pack house, and I felt comforted by the sight of it.

But then Big Mac’s eyes shot open, and she gasped.

Kira and I jumped back, startled. Everyone stared at her.

“Big Mac?” Kira said tremulously.

She didn’t seem to hear Kira. She stared ahead, like she couldn’t see any of us. “There’s a tear in the dome.”

**Episode 1759**

GREYSON

I glared out the window into the dark night, replaying the conversation I had with Cali over again in my mind. It wasn’t helping my mood. I still couldn’t believe it. She’d treated me like some kind of child throwing a tantrum. She’d told me to go sleep it off, for fuck’s sake. Like I was just confused. Like I didn’t know my own damn mind.

I turned from the window with a growl. I knew my own mind. I’d been trying to find my way through it for hours. Ever since the vote. And now I was trying to figure out what my next move should be.

*Alpha.*

Everyone around here was acting like this was so damn easy for me, like being Alpha was just this random job I’d picked up for a couple of months, and now that it was over, I could move on. But they didn’t understand—that wasn’t how it worked. I had sacrificed everything to be Alpha of the Redwood pack. I’d even tried to give up Cali to do it—that was why I’d chosen Joss as my Luna. I’d always put the pack first, even when it hurt like hell. And now…

Now, my chest ached, like a great weight was pressing down on it. I felt empty inside. Damn near hollowed out. I had lost them. The pack. I hated this feeling—like I wasn’t whole anymore. Things weren’t like this when I was a Rogue, but that was before I had met Cali, before I tried to be a better person for her. How ironic that becoming part of a pack, leading that pack, had started to feel so right.

My eyes felt like sandpaper. I closed them and pressed my fingers against my lids.

Xavier was walking around acting like he’d won some kind of glorified arm-wrestling match against his big brother. But it was more than just a competition. Being Alpha was *more*. It wasn’t about winning—or losing. Not to me. It was deeper, more fundamental. When the pack had voted for Xavier, it meant they’d voted *against* me. That they saw me as someone unworthy of leading them, after everything we’d been through. And I hated that. It churned my stomach.

The look in Cali’s eyes when I’d asked her to run away with me… Like she was searching for a gentle way to let me down—like she wanted nothing more than to find an escape route.

That was the final straw.

I gritted my teeth and strode over the closet. I yanked it open, pulled down a duffel bag from the top shelf, and started shoving shirts and pants inside without paying any attention to what I was packing.

If Cali didn’t want to come with me, that was fine, but that didn’t mean I had to hang around. No one was ever going to accuse me of not being able to read a room. I was going to leave this place as soon as Silas and that damn dome were gone.

There was a rapid knock on the door, and before I could answer, Rishika flung it open.

“Greyson, have you seen Artemis?” she demanded, blunt as ever.

“No,” I said, surprised into answering.

Her face was drawn, and her eyes filled with tears. “I’ve looked everywhere, and I can’t find her.”

“I’m sure she’s around—”

“Something’s happened to her,” Rishika said desperately.

This stopped me. “What do you mean? How do you know?”

“Instinct. I can’t shake this terrible feeling. I’m worried, Greyson.”

I stared at her, bitterness rising. “So why are you coming to me with this? Why don’t you go to your Alpha?”

This seemed to startle Rishika a little. She frowned. “Just because I voted for Xavier, doesn’t mean that I don’t see you as the true Alpha, Greyson. Xavier is temporary.”

“You try to convince Xavier that his Alpha status is *temporary*,” I snapped, turning back to the closet.

“It’s to protect you,” she went on. “From whatever’s coming next—”

“I don’t need protecting, and I don’t need this placating bullshit, Rishika!” I snarled and, dropping my bag, stormed past her out the door.

But she grabbed my arm, stopping me. “You have to know that I see you as the true Alpha, Greyson. I respect your leadership of this pack. I always have. I always will.” Her dark eyes were grave. “Right now I don’t care who helps me get Artemis back, as long as I get her back safe.”

I stared down at her determined face, thinking hard. Rishika had never once bullshitted me, and it was possible that she had a point. It was also possible that not everyone was thinking about this in terms of a *Greyson vs. Xavier* battle. Like Rishika, they were probably all thinking about how to survive this war with the revenants.

And I needed to do the same thing. For the good of the pack.

I needed to snap out of this.

Taking a deep breath, I nodded. “Yeah,” I said huskily. “Yeah, okay. Have you checked for Artemis around the perimeter of the dome?”

“No,” she said slowly, “but I can’t think of any reason why she would have gone out there.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Maybe she wouldn’t. Not willingly.”

Rishika’s eyes went wide. “Okay,” she said quietly. “I’ll check.”

“I’ll go with you,” I offered.

We headed downstairs and out of the house. When we got outside, we saw a group of pack members clustered by the edge of the dome, which was lit like it had been electrified. Rishika shot me a worried looked, and we walked toward them.

“What’s going on?” I asked as we drew closer.

Cali turned to me, her eyes wide with fear. “Oh god, Greyson. There’s a rip in the dome.”

“What?” Rishika gasped.

Cali nodded. “Big Mac’s seeing if she can fix it.”

I looked at Big Mac, who had her hand on the dome and looked as though she was concentrating hard. “How did it happen? Do we know?”

“Probably the last time the revenants hit,” Cali said.

“How big is the tear?” Rishika asked.

“Big enough to be worrisome, or I wouldn’t be standing around out here,” Big Mac muttered.

“Big enough for a person to get through?”

Rishika’s words gave everyone pause, including me. The idea that someone could get *in* while we were vulnerable was not a cherry thought.

“Why are you asking?” Mace grunted.

Rishika glared at him. “Artemis is missing. We have to go after her.”

There was a collective gasp, and Cali clapped a hand over her mouth. As if on instinct, a few eyes turned to me. It was a familiar feeling, and—Alpha or not—I knew I had to step up.

“I’ll look for her,” I said. “I’m good at tracking.”

“I’ll go with you,” Rishika said quickly.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “You’re still needed here. You have to train this group. You need to prepare the pack for any attacks that may come in the morning.”

Rishika looked frustrated, and like she was about to argue back, but she turned on her heel and stormed back toward the house.

I watched her go, hoping she was okay. Hoping she would understand my logic. I knew she was really worried about Artemis, but the pack needed her.

“I’ll go with you, Greyson.”

I looked down to see Cali looking up at me.

“No way,” Xavier said quickly. “Absolutely not. It’s not safe out there.”

Cali’s eyes flashed. “I don’t care,” she said stubbornly. “For the thousandth time, I can take care of myself, and besides, this is Artemis we’re talking about. My sister.”

Xavier looked torn, and I could guess what was going on behind his eyes. He didn’t like the idea of Cali and me running off on some adventure together—that was part of it. But also, Xavier was used to being the one who did these kinds of covert rescue missions. He didn’t like the idea of being the responsible one, staying back and holding down the fort.

“This is what being Alpha means,” I reminded him. “This is what you wanted. You need to man up and do what’s best for the pack.”

Xavier’s scowl told me I was probably right about his internal battle, but he didn’t argue. He gave one sharp nod of acknowledgement and turned away from me.

“I’ll go, too,” Mace said. “I’ll bring a couple of my guys with me. We can track the revenants. They’re not here, but they’re somewhere, and we need to find out where. We’ll report back what we can find out.”

“Hey, I figured you could use these.”

I looked up to see Rishika jogging back over holding a couple of packs. She handed one to me. “What’s this?”

“Supplies,” she said with a shrug. “Extra clothes in case you have to shift, flashlight, flares—the basics.”

Big Mac nodded. She turned to the dome, and the tear opened wider. It began to glow red. Cali gasped. “Once you leave, I’m going to seal this up again,” the witch said. She looked grim. “That means you’ll be cut off all night. Alone to face whatever the hell is out there.”

I nodded. “I get it.” I turned to Cali, and, taking her hand, we stepped through the tear.

**Episode 1760**

VIOLET

I gave an involuntary squeak of surprise and rolled away as I saw Zachery standing a few feet behind us. I covered myself with my hands as best I could, trying to hide from him as Charlie jumped to his feet.

“Wh-What are you doing here?” Zachery stuttered, his eyes going back and forth between the two of us. He looked completely flummoxed.

Charlie shot a glance down at me, and I could read the scrambling look in his eyes. What the hell we were supposed to say to *tha*t?

“Hey! What’s going on over there?” another voice rang out. It was Sophie, striding over to us. She took one look at me and Charlie, and her eyes widened in surprise before they narrowed in understanding. She jumped forward, yanked off her oversized fleece jacket, and wrapped it around my shoulders. “Stop standing there staring like an idiot and give Charlie your jacket,” she barked over her own shoulder at Zachery.

Zachery blinked at her, like he hadn’t even noticed her arrival until just that moment. “Wh-What? Why?”

She rolled her eyes. “Can’t you see that Violet and Charlie were just attacked in some horribly vicious way and must have fallen into the river?”

Sophie said this with so much certainty, for a moment *I* almost believed it was true.

Still looking like he’d been hit by a speeding truck, Zachery pulled off his jacket. His movements were jerky and awkward, like a zombie in a movie, but he threw it at Charlie, who took it gratefully.

“Thanks,” he muttered, pulling it on.

“Okay, people,” Sophie said briskly, “enough standing around, let’s get moving back to camp.”

She started toward a path that led up the cliff face of the hill, and I followed, feeling completely mortified. I was glad it was dark—maybe the shadows were covering my burning red face.

“Thank you,” I whispered, drawing even with Sophie. “You saved our asses.”

Sophie shot me a sideways look. “No problem. But why the hell did you shift?”

“We ran into a den of revenant vampires,” I murmured.

Sophie’s face went pale with shock, but she kept her eyes forward. “Damn,” she said in an undertone. “No wonder you two are in such… *disarray*.”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “I’ll say.”

We hiked in silence for a long time, the only sound the breaking of sticks and the crunching of leaves beneath our feet. Even the woods were quiet—the birds seemed to be watching us warily as we passed, puffing out great gusts of steam as we breathed into the freezing night air.

*Are you okay?* I asked Charlie, after a while.

*Yeah, I’m fine*, he replied. *Are you?*

I gritted my teeth. *You mean other than being completely humiliated? Sure. But what about Zachery? What about what he saw?*

I heard Charlie sigh through our mind link.

*Let me handle Zachery. He’s my friend.*

I thought about the shocked look on Zachery’s face when he’d found Charlie and me. There’d been something else on his face, too. Pain. He’d been hurt. I squirmed inside Sophie’s warm jacket—which thankfully was long enough to come down to mid-thigh on me. While I found Zachery a tad… much, this wasn’t exactly how I planned on letting him down easy. He was nice, but he’d just made too many assumptions without checking any of them out with me first. I’d never even wanted to go on that stupid double date with him in the first place. He’d practically steamrolled me into saying yes.

But it wasn’t like he was a bad guy.

*Be careful*, I said to Charlie. *And don’t give away too much. We don’t know how much Zachery saw.*

*Right*, Charlie agreed.

When we arrived back at camp, I looked up, surprised. We’d gotten back a lot faster than I would have thought possible. I hadn’t realized it, but when Charlie and I were running from the revenants, we must have come a lot closer to camp than I’d thought.

I let Sophie usher me toward our cabin as Charlie and Zachery veered off toward theirs.

I remembered something suddenly. *Shouldn’t we check in with Romilly?* I asked Charlie.

*We will in the morning*, he replied. *I need to deal with Zachery right now.*

*Okay. Good luck.*

Secretly, I was relieved that I was going with Sophie, and avoiding what was bound to be a pretty awkward conversation with Zachery. I shook my head. I felt bad for Charlie, but… better him than me.

Back in the safety of the dorm room, I immediately reached for a towel, a robe, and my toiletries and headed out to the bathroom for a shower. Sophie’s jacket had spared me a lot of humiliation, and it was certainly warmer than nothing, but I’d shivered the whole way back to camp. A long, hot shower was calling my name.

The bathroom was blissfully empty when I got in there, and I turned up the hot water as high as it would go, reveling in the steam it created when it hit the cold night air. I missed Oregon, but there was something incredible about the crisp night air of the Midwest, too, and I took in deep lungfuls as I let the warmth of the water sink into my skin. Werewolves had stronger constitutions than humans and were less likely to get sick, but a couple of my fingers and toes had definitely felt on the edge of hypothermia during that walk back.

After too short a time, the hot water ran out, and I hopped out before it ran cold. I wrapped up in my robe, tied my hair into a high knot, and—feeling a lot better than when I’d walked in—headed out of the showers.

But I stopped short when I saw Zachery standing in the doorway.

My temporary calm from the shower faded away in an instant.

“What are you doing here?” I finally asked.

“We need to talk.”

I raised my eyebrows. “We do?”

What the hell did we need to talk about? Hadn’t Charlie already talked to him?

*Charlie? Charlie! Did you talk to Zachery?*

I sent the signal out, but maybe Charlie was too far away—or maybe he was asleep or something—because he didn’t respond.

Zachery—still giving me that hard stare—took a step toward me. “What’s your *deal*, Daisy?”

I was taken aback by the anger and vitriol in his voice. I’d never heard it before. It didn’t sound anything like the happy-go-lucky Zachery I’d met before.

“I don’t have a deal,” I said warily.

“I thought you were different,” he said, his eyes narrowing. “I thought you were nice.”

I didn’t like where this was going. Not one bit. But, stubbornly, I dug my heels in. “I *am* nice. What the hell are you talking about?”

Zachery glared at me, his face twisted with anger, his eyes flashing with pure venom. “Bullshit. You’re not *nice*. You’re just like every other girl who’s ever played around with my heart and then crushed it because she could. I didn’t think you were a cheater, Daisy, but I should have known that any girl who looked like you would get around.”

*Get around?* I stared at him, shocked. I felt like I’d been slapped in the face. I hadn’t been expecting this from Zachery—*at all*. He’d always seemed so harmless—clueless, maybe, but basically harmless. But now, he was looking me in the face, spewing this toxic filth like he had every right in the world to say these things to me.

I felt anger surging up in me, hot as fire. “How the hell could I have *cheated* on you? We were never together—”

“Then what about our kiss?” Zachery demanded, lunging closer to me. “Did that mean nothing to you?”

Basic self-preservation kept me from shouting *YES!* in response. It was true, but I had an instinct that I should tread lightly. Something was off here, and the wisest thing to do would be to walk away.

I shook my head. “We shouldn’t do this here. I don’t have to have this discussion with you right now. Maybe we can talk about this later, when you calm down and I’ve been able to get some rest from the crazy night I’ve had.” I started to step past him, out the door, but he grabbed my wrist to stop me. “Hey, let go.”

He didn’t let go. He squeezed tightly, and pain radiated up my arm.

I twisted my wrist in his grip. “Zachery, you’re hurting me.”

But still, he held on.

Frustrated now, I stopped playing around and tried to pull free, but even using all my strength—my werewolf strength—I couldn’t break his grip.

“Zachery, let me go!”

What the hell was happening? Why couldn’t I get away from him? Was that the hunter in him coming out? My heart was beginning to beat fast with panic as I twisted my wrist painfully within his grasp, but to no avail.

Then I heard a familiar voice growl, “Get your hands off her.”

**Episode 1761**

LOLA

The bedroom door opened unexpectedly, but I was pleased to see my mate standing there.

Jay looked in. “Hey.”

I smiled, glad to see him despite all the worries spinning through my head. “Hey.” When he stepped inside, I frowned at the plate in his hand. “What’s that?”

He shrugged. “Everyone is kind of scattered—I don’t know where half the pack is, truth be told—but there are plenty of great leftovers in the fridge. All Cali’s dad does is cook.”

As I took the plate Jay offered, my heart gave an almost painful squeeze. “You’re too good to me, Jay.”

He shook his head. “I don’t even know what that means.”

He sat down next to me on the bed as I began to eat. I scarfed down warmed up mashed potatoes, turkey, some kind of wild rice thing with mushrooms, and a big serving of lasagna. It was gone faster than I would have thought possible. Super ladylike of me, inhaling my food. It was funny I had an appetite for this at all.

“I guess I was pretty hungry,” I muttered.

Jay chuckled. “I guess so,” he said, taking the plate from me and setting it down on the floor. He settled back on the bed, resting on his forearms, and looked up at me, his expression serious. “So, what are we going to do about Emmett?”

I sighed. “I don’t know. He’s so… unreliable. And I’m worried that he’s keeping things from us.”

Jay gave another wry laugh. “Yeah, he’s *definitely* keeping things from us, that’s for damn sure.” Then he shrugged. “But as long as he can make a serum that neutralizes the revenants, then I don’t care what he keeps to himself.”

“*I* care,” I said, getting to my feet. “God, Jay. I hate what he did to you for his mad-scientist experiments. I should have never let you volunteer for that shit.”

“Come on, Lola. I mean—yeah—it was kind of rough, but it all turned out okay in the end,” Jay said in a placating tone.

I rolled my eyes. “*Kind of rough*? You call getting that crazy, burny, acidy, vampire venom spilled all over you *kinda rough*?” He shrugged, and I felt my frustration rise. I didn’t get how he could be so casual. “Your wolf still hasn’t returned, Jay! That’s not *turning out okay*, is it?”

Jay stood and gathered me into his arms. “Lola,” he said quietly, into my ear. “With or without my wolf, I’m still here, aren’t I? I know you were worried, but I’m fine now.”

“But your wolf—”

“My wolf will return,” he said confidently. “We’re together, and that’s all that matters.”

He was right. I hated that he was right, but he was right, and I relaxed into his arms. We were both fine—alive and well and back at the pack house. Things weren’t perfect. Jay’s wolf hadn’t returned, and the house was surrounded by revenants, which wasn’t ideal. But we were together. And even though my vampire heat hadn’t been cured, at least I remembered my mate now.

I wrapped my arms around Jay and pulled him close, pressing myself against him.

He leaned down and pressed a soft kiss to my lips. “You know,” he murmured, “we weren’t able to finish what we started in the bathroom downstairs.”

Heat shot through me, quick as a jolt of lightning. “I know.”

He smiled. “Maybe we should do that now.”

I threw back my head to laugh and shifted on the bed. I had his pants unbuttoned and halfway down in record time. My vampire heat was barely under control, and I’d been thinking about this since the moment he’d walked into the room, so I was ready to go.

I pushed him into the mattress and straddled him, swiveling my hips, grinding into him for the pleasure of feeling him go hard against me.

His gaze was dark with lust as his fingers pulled at the button of my jeans, then yanked them down my hips. “You need to get these clothes off,” he commanded. “Now.”

I had no choice but to obey. I grabbed my shirt and pulled it over my head, tossing it to the ground. My bra followed, and Jay grabbed my breasts. I leaned down, letting them fill his hands. He ran his thumb over my nipples, gently at first—almost a caress. I closed my eyes with a hiss of pleasure.

His speed increased, as did the pressure. The caress became more forceful. His fingers dug into my flesh, then pinched my nipples, which grew hard with the stimulation.

As I tipped back my head to moan, he let go of my breasts and grabbed my hips, flipping me onto the mattress so he hovered over me.

“I thought I told you to take your clothes off,” he said, his smile wolfish. Without waiting for me to respond, he dragged my jeans the rest of the way off and threw them to the floor, then slipped his hand into my panties.

I gasped as his finger slid inside me. Sheets twisting in my hands, I rocked and bucked, coming hard against his hand as he circled his fingers over my sweet spot.

“Just like that!” I panted. “Right there, Jay, *yes*!”

One orgasm wasn’t going to be enough, and I was reaching for him before it was fully over. I ran my hand over the shaft of his cock and heard him sigh with pleasure.   
 “You ready for me?” he asked, his voice husky with want.

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t. Instead I looked up at him and slipped off my panties.

He grinned and plunged forward, burying himself inside me.

“Oh, fuck, Lola,” he grunted, closing his eye. “Fuck.”

I canted my hips up and wrapped my legs around him, drawing him deeper inside of me.

His eye rolled back in his head.

We came together, hard and fast and powerful enough that I ripped the sheets off the bed.

Afterward, Jay rolled over onto the bare mattress, spent. “That was great,” he panted, grinning at me.

I smiled back, but as I glanced over at the clock, my smile slid away, and I jumped to my feet. “Oh my god.”

“What?” Jay asked, looking up.

“I meant to check on Emmett’s progress half an hour ago. Shit.” I scrambled around, searching the floor for my clothes, and pulled them on.

“Hang on,” Jay muttered, getting to his feet.

He pulled on his jeans, and together we hurried down the stairs and to the basement.

Emmett looked up from his beakers when we walked in. “Oh, hello.”

“How’s it going?” I asked, looking around. I had no idea what he was doing, and I kicked myself for not having paid more attention in sophomore biology lab.

“Good,” he said. “I think I have a good prototype of a serum that could work on a revenant, regardless of whether it began as a werewolf, a vampire, or a corpse.”

“Oh,” I said, surprised, “that *is* good.”

“Yes, I’m pleased with this development. It happened faster than I would have thought possible. Needs must, and all that. So now we just need to figure out how to get it delivered to the revenants outside.”

“*Oh!* I’ve got it!”

Emmett and I both looked at Jay, who looked excited.

“What about dart guns?” Jay asked, looking between us.

Emmett let that suggestion echo through the small room for a moment, then he blinked slowly. “The numbers say that we would need far more serum than I currently have. Unless you have a dozen sharp-shooters in the pack house that I’m unaware of, who can hit the revenants dead on before they make it to the house.”

“I guess we don’t,” Jay admitted. “Well, at least I was coming up with *some* ideas.”

“*My* idea,” Emmett said, “was to turn the serum into a gas and use it like fumigation.”

“Gas the bastards?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Basically. It’s the best way to hit as many revenants as possible while conserving our resources. And we’d also be able to maintain a safe distance. But I do need to test it on a revenant first, so I’m going to test it on Irma.” He held up a strange object.

“What the hell is that?” I murmured, looking at the thing. It looked like a reverse engineered gas mask.

“I’ll use it to deliver the gas to Irma,” Emmett explained casually.

“Are there any risks?” I asked. The sight of that creepy mask was starting to make me feel uncomfortable.

“Well, there’s always the risk of death,” he admitted.

“Forget it,” I said quickly.

“Lola—” Emmett started.

“You can’t do it,” I insisted. “Even in the name of science. Irma is our friend. It’s not worth the risk.”

Emmett took a deep breath, like he was calling on some deep reserve of patience. “We don’t have the time to take extra steps here, Lola. We need this cure to work before the dome comes down in the morning. You know that.”

I did know that. I bit my lip, thinking hard. He was right. Goddamnit, Emmett was right.

“Okay,” I finally said with a nod. “Do it.”

**Episode 1762**

The dark woods were nearly silent as we walked through them, and—edgy as I was—I jumped at every sound. No matter the time of year, no matter the circumstances, being deep in the woods always had a slightly ominous feeling. Still, it felt creepier tonight than ever before.

I whipped around at a small rushing, fluttering sound behind us, but was relieved to see it was just an owl taking flight from a tree. I took a shaky breath. I was terrified. The way all the revenants had just disappeared… I hurried to catch up to Greyson. I wanted to stay close to him.

He looked down at me. “You okay?”

I nodded. After a moment, I added, “I’m actually pretty surprised you didn’t try to stop me from coming.”

He shrugged one shoulder. “I should have tried, but I knew it would be useless. It’s Artemis.”

I looked up at him, surprised. He was completely right; but I was surprised to hear him admit it.

“Besides, he added, “aren’t you always reminding me that you’re Fae and can take care of yourself?”

I nodded. Greyson was speaking to me, which was good, but he still seemed a bit tense and prickly. Probably because of the vote, and our conversation afterward. He hadn’t seemed happy about that. I watched him as he walked. He was moving slowly, scanning the trees and the ground for movement, and for any sign of Artemis. I could tell he was concentrating—smelling the air, listening hard, using all his werewolf senses.

Without warning, Greyson stopped, and—my eyes elsewhere—I ran into his broad back. I stumbled a bit, and he turned quickly, grabbing my arms, steadying me.

“You okay?”

I nodded with a nervous laugh. “I’m fine. Sorry. I wasn’t paying attention, I guess. Did you find something?”

He narrowed his eyes. “I caught a whiff of Artemis’s scent, but it’s being masked somehow.”

My heart dropped. “Does that mean she really was kidnapped?” My mouth went dry. “Like what happened to Marta? Should we check the pond?”

He shook his head, still thinking. “No. The scent isn’t leading back to the pack house.”

“Where *is* it leading?”

He thought for a moment. “Toward the town. The one just north of us.”

I frowned. “But… why? What would Artemis be doing there?”

We looked at each other for a moment and—in silent agreement—hurried along the path and down toward the main road. Well, “main road.” It was always quiet as hell up here, and this late at night we were able to walk side by side along the shoulder of the road completely undisturbed.

I glanced at Greyson’s profile, lit by the moonlight, as we walked. I wondered if he was still thinking about leaving the pack house. I wanted to ask him, but I hated to bring it up—not after he’d had such a bad response to our last conversation on the subject.

I mean, it wasn’t like I didn’t sometimes daydream about taking off with him. He was my mate, after all. Of course, I’d thought about what our lives would be like if it was just the two of us.

And now, walking along the road—literally just the two of us—I let myself think about it again. What it would be like to pack a bag, climb into his car, and take off. Together.

I reached for his hand, lacing my fingers through his.

He looked up at me, clearly surprised, but didn’t pull away.

We walked in silence along the road, hand in hand, until we came to a fork. Greyson stopped and looked around.

“The town is this way,” he said, pointing with his free hand to the left, “and Artemis’s scent veers off here,” he said, pointing to the right, which stretched into darkness.

I sighed. “Of course it does.” I gripped Greyson’s hand tighter. “Let’s go.”

The lights on the utility poles along the road were burned out, which seemed particularly ominous. There was no light and no sound but our own footsteps in the gravel on the road.

Until we heard a shuffling step behind us.

My heartbeat stuttered, and when we turned, I saw a pair of orange eyes approaching quickly.

Greyson let go of my hand and crouched, then leapt as the revenant drew close. He knocked the thing to the ground and—gripping its shoulders—slammed its head onto the pavement.

But the thing was strong, and it flipped Greyson over onto his back, then jumped on top of him, teeth bared.

This caught Greyson by surprise, but just for a moment, and he knocked the thing off him and jumped to his feet. He partially shifted and swiped the revenant with his claws, catching its face, but that didn’t even slow the thing down. The revenant, without skipping a beat, continued lunging for Greyson.

With a growl that made my ears ring, Greyson fully shifted, then lunged at the revenant, ripping off its arm.

The revenant didn’t even seem to notice, just used its other arm to grab at Greyson’s neck. Greyson twisted in the thing’s grip and opened his jaws, ripping off the revenant’s leg with a terrible snarl. It skidded down the road as he tossed it away.

The revenant was unbalanced but hopped toward Greyson, its orange eyes blazing, its teeth bared. Was *nothing* going to stop this thing?

*Is there anything in the pack we can use to make a fire? Matches? A lighter?* Greyson’s voice was tense in my head.

I yanked the pack off my back and fumbled with the zipper. The contents spilled across the road, and I pawed through them in the dark. I couldn’t see anything—and I couldn’t find matches or a lighter.

*I can’t find anything*,I said.

*Fuck. Then we need to run.*

I knew what that meant, so I scooped what I could back into the pack, and when Greyson got close enough, I slung myself onto his back and he took off, sprinting, the revenant dragging itself behind us quicker than I’d think possible.

There was a low stone building ahead of us, and Greyson veered toward it. I understood what he was doing and jumped from his back as we drew near. But when I pulled at the door, it wouldn’t budge.

“It’s locked,” I said desperately.

Greyson shifted back to human, then yanked the door open with a jerk and the screech of objecting hinges. He pushed me inside and slammed the door behind us. Then he grabbed a stone pedestal from next to the door and dragged it over, barricading us inside.

Chest heaving with fright, I pulled open the backpack with shaking hands and found the flashlight. But when I turned it on, it only flickered weakly a few times—illuminating some kind of stone mausoleum—before it died completely.

“Dammit,” I breathed, banging it against my palm. “It must have broken when I dumped everything on the ground.”

I stared down at the flashlight, angry with myself. It was freezing in this stone room, and the wind blew through it, but it was fear that was making me shiver. And now we couldn’t see anything, either. The windows were covered, so even the weak moonlight couldn’t penetrate.

Outside, I could hear the revenant shuffling around the building. It was testing the door, the windows, trying to find a way in. This thing was completely feral now, unlike what we’d seen before.

Suddenly, in the dark, Greyson’s arms were around me, stilling my shivers. He was so warm, and I burrowed gratefully into him. As my adrenaline began to ebb, I realized I wasn’t just shivering, I was shaking with terror.

“It’s okay,” he whispered. “We’ll be safe in here.”

He pressed a kiss to the top of my head, and I felt a stirring deep in my belly—a rush of heat. I lifted my face to his, and he pressed his lips to mine.

I needed him so much in that moment—needed his strong arms and his warmth—but mostly I needed the comfort of his love. His skin always seemed slightly electrified after shifting, and his naked body nearly tingled as he pressed it against me. I gasped against his lips when slid his hand beneath my coat and up my spine, and he used the opportunity to deepen the kiss and push his tongue deeper into my mouth. He was hungry for me, and he was just slipping his hands into my jeans when I pulled away.

I stood for a moment, panting, looking up at him, not sure what to say. So much had happened between us in such a short time. I’d been about to call everything off between us, then the vote for Alpha had happened, then he’d asked me to run away with him, and now this…

Suddenly, Greyson looked around, his senses on high alert. It took me a moment, but I realized what he was hearing. Or, rather, what he *wasn’t* hearing. There were no sounds outside. The revenant had gone quiet. Maybe he’d left.

Greyson reached for the pack and pulled out the clothes Rishika had packed. He pulled them on, tugged the stone pedestal from in front of the door, and opened it.

As we stepped into the moonlight, I saw that there were other small buildings around us—other mausoleums or tombs, and their doors had all been ripped off or smashed open.

I stared around, opened-mouthed. “What the hell happened here?”

“I don’t know,” Greyson answered, his tone grim.

I looked up at him. His eyes weren’t on the buildings closest to us—he was looking around, surveying the whole area.

And that was when I realized two things. First, without realizing it, we’d run into a large cemetery, and the mausoleum where we’d taken shelter was just one of many in the place. And second, every mausoleum, tomb, and grave had been opened, and now stood completely, bone-chillingly empty.

**Episode 1763**

CHARLIE

“I said, get your hands off her,” I growled, stepping forward and pulling Zachery’s hand off Violet. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Get the hell out of here, Charlie,” Zachery snapped, not meeting my eyes. “This is none of your business.”

“Like hell it isn’t,” I shot back, my anger rising as I watched Violet massage her wrist where Zachery had been holding her. “I already told you what happened, Zachery. It was nothing. It was the adrenaline after we were chased by those revenant vampires we found.”

“And how’d you end up naked?” Zachery demanded hotly.

I gritted my teeth. “I told you. We slipped down the slope and fell into the river. We had to pull off our clothes or else we were going to get hypothermia.”

“And making out?” Zachery asked bitterly. “Was that to ward off hypothermia, too?”

“Hey, you try surviving that kind of fall and see what you do,” I said, still working to keep my temper in check. “I told you, you’re overreacting, man—”

“I don’t care about your story, Charlie!” he burst out. “I don’t care about all the reasoning. I want to hear Daisy’s side of things—”

“Oh yeah?” I asked, taking a step toward Zachery. “That’s not what it looked like. It didn’t look like a conversation to get her side of the story. It looked like she told you to let her go and you wouldn’t listen. It looked like you were trying to push her around, and I’m not going to stand for that.”

When Zachery finally looked up at me, it was with narrowed eyes. “Oh, so you’re admitting that you do feel something for her, then?” His jaw worked—he was clearly angry as hell.

I shot a look at Violet. Maybe it was time to just come clean about all this. It was getting hard to keep up with it all. The names and identities and who was supposed to know what. There were too many secrets stacking up against each other. New secrets to hide the old ones until I forgot what was true and what was made up.

I turned to Zachery. “Yeah, I admit it. I’m in love with Daisy. And I have been for a while.”

Whatever Zachery had been expecting me to say, it clearly wasn’t this. He looked stunned. “What? You’ve only known her a few days. That can’t be true!”

*What are you doing?* Violet demanded.

*Just trust me.*

*I… do.*

“I just… How… But when…” Zachery was spluttering, still shocked.

I almost felt bad for a minute. He looked like he’d been flattened by a train. Had I been too harsh with the guy? He was just so clueless, sometimes.

“All right, what’s going on here? Break it up, break it up.”

We all looked over to see Romilly heading our way, waving her hands, shooing us away.

“Get back to your rooms,” she commanded. When we all stood in tense silence for a moment, she added, “Now.”

Zachery sighed and walked away, but Romilly grabbed me and Violet by the arms and whispered, “I’ve been looking for you two. We need to debrief. Let’s go.”

She didn’t need to tell me twice. I was relieved to get out of this awkward situation, and more than that, desperate to get Violet as far from Zachery as I could manage. I followed after Romilly, Violet close behind.

Back in Romilly’s office, she sat behind her desk, folded her hands, and looked Violet and me over carefully. “I thought I told you to come see me as soon as you got back to camp.”

“Oh, yeah, well, we had to…” I started, but trailed off into silence. “We accidentally ran into some people, and we couldn’t …”

“Things got a little complicated,” Violet offered.

Romilly raised her eyebrows. “Yes, I heard you had quite the little adventure out there. Tell me what you saw.”

“Well, we found the vampire trailer park, right where you said it would be, but it was weird,” I began. “It was all abandoned. And then when we finally did find the vampires, we realized they’d all become revenants. It got pretty hairy, actually. We both had to shift and run, and we ended up closer to camp than we intended, and we ran into a couple of campers. That’s why we didn’t come see you right away. We were trying to act natural.” I shrugged. “As much as we could.”

Romilly took this in, her expression grim. “This isn’t good,” she said, shaking her head. “Not good at all.” She thought for a moment. “I’m going to need to tell Sergeant Pepperdine what you saw. We need to seriously consider evacuating the camp.”

I was shocked. “Evacuate? Really? Can that happen?”

Romilly nodded darkly. “It might have to.”

“Has it ever happened before?” I asked.

“These campers aren’t fully trained yet,” she explained. “Most of them haven’t seen a real vampire before, never mind a revenant vampire. They’re not like you two. They don’t have the power to shift, or the strength that comes with it. They rely on training, and they haven’t had enough of it yet.” She shook her head. “No, with those revenants so close by, it’s not safe.”

I thought about this. She was right, and it might be what was best, even though it would mean everyone would be sent home. Though, that would mean that Violet and I wouldn’t have to keep up our lies about who we were any longer. And without any hunter camp to attend, maybe I could even convince my parents to let me go back to Oregon with minimal fuss. One could hope.

No more Chad, no more Zachery. I’d miss Sophie, who was turning out to be a good friend, but that was even more reason to want to close the camp. I wanted her to be safe.

The more I thought about it, the more it made sense. Closing the camp would be for the best.

“Do you need anything else from us?” I asked, because Romilly looked lost in thought and hadn’t spoken for a moment.

She looked up, surprised, like she hadn’t noticed we were still there. “What? No, no, you can go on back to your dorms. Get to bed. I’ve got to go tell Sergeant Pepperdine about the situation with the vampire revenants. He’s going to be pleased as punch to hear about this,” she finished wryly, herding us out of her office.

We took our time getting back to our cabins, and I lingered for a moment with Violet in front of her door. Spending the evening together had been amazing, and getting her away from Zachery had filled me with a protective fire, and I just didn’t want to let her go.

“I want to say close to you,” I said quietly. “I always feel like that, I guess, but now more than ever.”

She smiled. “I know. I feel the same.”

I wrapped my arms around her, pulling her in close. “I’m sorry I didn’t deal with the Zachery situation better. I didn’t know he was going to go off like that.”

She shook her head. “It’s okay. His reaction wasn’t your fault.”

I looked down at her. “What do you mean by that?”

She glanced away, shrugging one shoulder.

“Violet,” I pressed. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” she finally said, “that maybe Zachery isn’t as nice as we think he is.”

I frowned. “I mean… I guess I was surprised to see him getting so aggressive with you.” I thought for a moment. I never would have guessed that the sweet, unassuming, slightly bumbling guy I’d met the first day of camp would get violent with a girl the way I’d seen Zachery do with Violet. But he had, and I couldn’t pretend that away. The thought made my stomach turn. I shook my head. “At least this whole hunter act is almost over. They’re going to close the camp, and then we can go home and just get back to being ourselves again.”

Violet sighed with obvious relief. “I am really looking forward to that.”

“Me, too,” I said, and leaned down to kiss her. But before I could, the camp sirens began to scream. I looked up, my heart beating hard, thinking wildly that Violet and I had finally been caught.

But that was absurd. That wasn’t what was happening, though no one seemed to know what exactly *was* happening, either. Cabin doors were opening, and campers were pouring out in their pajamas, sleepy and confused, looking around.

“What’s going on?”

“What are the sirens for?”

“Is there an attack?”

“No way, this is just another dumbass drill. Wake me up when it’s over.”

But—knowing what was beyond the boundary walls—something told me this wasn’t a drill. This was confirmed when I saw my mom sprinting across campus toward me.

“Mom,” I said, surprised to see her. “What’s going on?”

“Charlie,” she panted, “we’ve got a problem.”

My stomach dropped. “The revenant vampires.” It wasn’t a question.

She didn’t even ask how I knew. She just nodded. “They’ve got the whole camp surrounded. There’s no way out.”

**Episode 1764**

GREYSON

“Greyson.” Cali’s voice was tight was fear. “What happened out here? It looks like someone… *stole* all the dead bodies.”

“It sure does,” I said grimly. “Either that or the corpses walked out of here on their own.”

Cali shuddered, then gasped. “Oh god, you don’t mean…” She looked up at me, her dark eyes wide.

I nodded. “Yeah.” The reality of it was settling in. “I think they’re all new revenants. I can smell them in the air.”

And I could. The air was thick with the cloying, sick scent of rotting flesh. It was enough to make me sick, but I pushed down the revulsion. I didn’t have time for that now.

Even in the moonlight, I could see that Cali’s face was bloodless, but she took a deep breath. “We have to get hold of the pack house and warn the others. But first we have to get the fuck out of here. *Right now*.”

“Do you have your phone?” When Cali handed it over, I saw that her hands were shaking. I dialed Xavier, but the call didn’t connect. It just made a strange sound—a buzz, like a busy signal. I tried Rishika, then Sabine, but it was the same with each of them. “Dammit.”

Cali looked up quickly. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. It must be the dome. It might be affecting their reception.”

She bit her lip nervously. “So what should we do now? Where should we go next? Big Mac said we couldn’t get back in, even if we wanted to. We have to keep looking for Artemis.”

I shook my head. “I lost her scent, Cali. There are too many revenants around, stinking everything up.”

She looked frustrated. “Greyson—”

“I’m not saying we’re going to give up. We’re going to find her,” I said quickly, recognizing that dangerous glint in her eye. “Let’s try this way,” I said, pointing toward what I thought was the light of the town beyond the cemetery.

“Are you sure?” Cali asked.

“Well,” I reasoned, “Artemis’s scent was nearby. Maybe the town will have some clues. It’s all we have to go on right now.”

She thought about this for a minute. “Okay. Let’s do it.”

But as soon as I took the first step, my vision wavered. I shook my head, trying to shake it off. When I blinked, it had cleared, and Cali and I made our way carefully through the cemetery. I kept my eyes open for any movement, but everything was still. It was dark and quiet and just eerie as hell. It didn’t help matters that a low fog had started to creep in. It spread along the ground, tendrils reaching like a growing vine. It covered the ground, obscuring the fresh holes and broken coffins the revenants had left behind, and I had to be careful where I walked. I took the lead, guiding Cali between the open holes, making sure she didn’t fall into a grave.

I looked up as the wind whipped around me. It whistled loudly through the trees. Maybe being inside the dome had made me more sensitive to the sound or something, but it seemed loud as fuck. The fog seemed to be growing thicker, too, and the sound of the wind was growing more and more shrill. My pulse started to race, and I reached behind me for Cali. I wanted to pull her up beside me, but when I reached for her hand, she wasn’t there.

“Cali? Cali!” I spun around. I squinted through the fog, but it was crowding in, higher and higher, getting so thick I couldn’t see two inches in front of my face. “Where are you, Cali? Say something!”

When a cold hand grabbed mine, I almost sobbed in relief. “You nearly gave me a heart attack. Where where you?”

“I was right here, Dad.”

The voice that spoke was *not* Cali’s.

I blinked and looked down to see Shaine—as a little boy—step closer.

His small hand was still in mine, gripping hard. “I’m here to show you the truth, Dad.”

“No,” I said, shaking my head and trying to pull my hand free. “No. Leave me alone.”

But the kid was freakishly strong and wasn’t letting go. He pulled me through the cemetery, expertly avoiding the open graves without even looking where he was stepping. He walked for a long time, then stopped in front of a statue of a towering angel.

“What are you showing me?” I demanded, still trying to twist free of the boy.

Shaine looked up at me. “I’m showing you that you need to let go of your distractions. That you need to accept the truth.”

I didn’t have any idea what the hell the kid was talking about, but before I could form another question, the fog cleared. Suddenly, I could see the name etched into the base of the angel.

*Caliana Hart, Beloved Daughter and Friend*

I’d seen this before, and it had made me sick then, just as it did now. I closed my eyes. *Not again. Not now. No.* My knees felt weak. I couldn’t accept it. But when I opened my eyes, the name was still there. It *felt* real.

The howl ripped through me before I could stop it, and I dropped to my knees. My vision blurred again, but this time it was with tears. This couldn’t be. This couldn’t be happening. I was just with Cali. Moments ago. I’d just kissed her. She’d just kissed me back. She couldn’t be dead. This wasn’t real.

“You must let her go,” Shaine said, his voice cold as ice. “This is inevitable, Dad.”

Anger surged up, hot as a raging fire. I was furious, and I partially shifted and spun, taking a vicious swipe at the boy, aiming to maim. Aiming to kill.

But he was gone. Vanished.

The fog was back, as if it had never disappeared.

I tipped my head back and howled.

“Greyson? *Greyson!*”

It felt like my heart had stopped. I stumbled to my feet and ran blindly forward, toward the voice. As I rounded a shattered monument, an orange-eyed revenant appeared and lunged for me. On instinct, I shifted and met the thing as it slammed into me. As we dropped to the ground, I felt the fog begin to lift. The revenant was wild, but over its stink of death, I caught Cali’s scent on the wind, and it filled me with hope. She was out there somewhere.

Shaine was nothing but an illusion, another of Silas’s cruel tricks. No—not Silas. Letifer. Silas had to be a trick, too.

With a powerful kick of my back legs, I launched the revenant a dozen feet in the air and sent it slamming into one of the cemetery’s low stone walls. When it crumpled to the ground, motionless, I took off, following Cali’s scent.

But I veered off when I saw a knot of revenants. There were half a dozen in the cemetery now. One was approaching me, coming up from behind. I tried to turn, but before I could, another wolf appeared, jumping onto the revenant and biting, ripping out its throat.

It was Mace. I spun on the spot, trying to take in what I was seeing. The other Alpha had appeared just in time to save my ass, and two of his Blue Blood wolves were running into the knot of revenants, charging through them, making them scatter like bowling pins. I dropped my head and sprinted after them. We were outnumbered, but that wasn’t going to matter.

The revenants were relentless as always, but they didn’t strategize. They just kept coming, but they weren’t impossible to beat—not if you understood they were always going to choose the most direct attack. The one coming after me was tireless. No matter how many times I threw the thing off, beat the shit out of it, and ripped the rotting flesh from its bones, it just kept coming.

It almost got me, too. When I was distracted by Mace being tossed like a ragdoll into a crumbling stone monument, the revenant wrapped its freezing hands around my neck and pressed hard against my throat, almost crushing my windpipe. It took all I had, but I kicked the thing off me, and—when it stumbled back—I pressed my advantage and ripped its head clean off.

The body dropped, finally still. I turned to the next revenant, just in time to see one of the Blue Blood wolves impaled on a jagged piece of stone. The wolf went down fighting—snapping and tearing at the revenant—but he was dead before he hit the dirt.

My stomach turned, but as I snapped at the revenant charging at me, I caught Cali’s scent on the breeze again, and it filled me with fight. I was doing this for her, and I wasn’t ever going to stop.

“*Greyson!*”

I ripped the revenant’s head from its rotting body, flung it away, and looked up, desperate to find the source of the voice calling my name.

*Cali!*

She was there, a hundred yards away, being carried away by two revenants.

**Episode 1765**

The revenants’ hold on me was powerful as steel and cold as ice. The smell of their rotting flesh was almost overwhelming, but I was fighting back as hard as I could. Not that it was doing a bit of good—they dragged me, screaming, past row after row of broken graves. I tried to lift my hand to use my Fae powers against them, but the one pinning my arms to my side was holding them so tightly it hurt. Completely panicked, I kicked, flailed, scratched, screamed, bit—anything to get free—but nothing worked.

My mind was flailing, too, reaching out for anything that could possibly help, but all I could think was that I wished I’d spent more time training with Rishika and Artemis—maybe then I’d be more prepared. But then again, maybe it wouldn’t have made any difference. Getting kidnapped by revenants wasn’t exactly on our training agenda.

*I’m coming, Cali.*

Tears sprang to my eyes as I heard Greyson’s voice echo in my head, and I let out a gasping sob. “Greyson!”

*You just have to hang on. I won’t let anything happen to you. Believe me. Just hang on, love.*

The sound of his voice made it possible to breathe again, and it gave me a surge of something hot and powerful, like a shot of extra-strength adrenaline right into my bloodstream. I only had one thought in my head—I had to get to Greyson.

I twisted in the revenants’ grasp. There was barely any give, but it was enough to crane around and bite down hard on the thing’s putrid shoulder. *Don’t gag, Cali, don’t gag…* I didn’t know if I hurt it, but I surprised it enough that it shifted a little and I was able to get my hand free enough to aim a shot of Fae energy right at its heart—or, where its heart *should* have been. My aim was better than I planned, and my shot ricocheted, taking down both of the revenants that were holding me. They were blasted back, and I dropped to the ground, smacking my head hard against a headstone in the process.

I sat up quickly, though my head was spinning from the impact, and my ears were ringing. I was confused, but there was one clear thought in my head: I had to get my ass up. I had to move. I had to start running. Revenants didn’t stay down, and I couldn’t let them take me. I had no idea what their plans were for me, and I didn’t want to wait around to find out. I had to find Greyson.

I lurched through the dark graveyard, trying to move as quickly as I could without stumbling into an empty grave. My head was still spinning, and it was black as pitch, and it took all my concentration to keep putting my feet down on even ground, so when a revenant jumped out in front of me, it surprised the hell out of me. On instinct I put out my hands to blast it, but my vision was still wavering, and I couldn’t aim for shit.

My heart beat frantically. This was it.

Then, with a furious snarl, Greyson leapt out, meeting the revenant as it came at me. He slammed it to the uneven ground, tearing at it furiously as I fought for my bearings. My vision cleared as another revenant appeared, and this time I was ready. I leapt to the side as it lunged, and it slammed into the headstone that had been right behind me, then slid to the ground.

Mace surged out of the darkness, locked in battle with yet another revenant. He was a bloody mess, but as I watched, he pinned the revenant to the ground and tore the thing’s head from its body.

I didn’t even realize I was shaking until Greyson put his arms around me and pulled me close.

“It’s okay,” he whispered, his voice soothing. “It’s okay. We’re safe. You’re safe, love. I’d never let anything happen to you.”

Mute with shock and fear, I nodded against his chest.

He pressed a kiss to the top of my head. “I’m so sorry for what happened, love, but I’ve got you now.” His arms tightened around me. “And I’m so proud of you. You did so good, Cali.” He kissed my hair again, then my cheeks, my eyes, my lips.

I didn’t even realize I was crying until I tasted my tears on Greyson’s lips. I hugged him closer, trying to stop, but I couldn’t. “I’m sorry. I’m such a wreck.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” he said quietly.

I let him hold me for a long moment, letting the tears flow freely down my face. Then, when I was all cried out, I looked up. “So, what now?”

Mace—still in his wolf form—snorted, and Greyson looked over.

He paused for a moment, as though listening, and then nodded. “Mace and his packmate will stay wolves in case there’s another attack on the way back to the house. We have to get back and warn the others about the revenants.” His eyes swept over the graveyard. “It’s a lot more than we bargained for. We’ll need to plan for that.”

I watched Greyson in awe. He wasn’t the official Alpha of the Redwood pack at the moment, but it was clear that he didn’t need the title to be the leader—in this moment, he was nothing less than a true Alpha.

He looked down at me. “Are you okay? Can you walk?”

I put my weight gingerly on each foot in turn, testing them out. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

He raised his eyebrows. “You sure? That was a bad fall.”

I rolled my eyes. “Greyson.”

“Okay, I believe you, but we’re going to have to hurry. We need to get back to the pack house as soon as we can.”

“But Big Mac said—”

He shook his head. “Even if we can’t get in, the closer we are, the better.”

I looked around the cemetery. It was quiet now, but littered with the ravaged bodies of the revenants. I bit my lip nervously. “Are you sure we should move? Won’t that make us vulnerable?’

“The Blue Bloods will stay with us, for extra protection. More eyes keeping a lookout. Do you feel strong enough to ride on my back if I shift?”

I hesitated, then shook my head. “I just need a second.”

Walking was one thing, but my heart was still racing a million miles a minute, and I needed to collect myself before I did anything that required any concentration.

Greyson bent and pressed a gentle kiss to my temple. “You were amazing, Cali. I’m in awe.”

I looked up with a shaky smile. “Thank you.”

I took his offered hand, and we made our way back down the path toward the road where we’d come in. The path was rocky and uneven, and I kept my eyes down, trying not to stumble. But it was easier to see. I looked up and found that the sky was starting to get lighter. The horizon was turning the dark grey of pre-dawn.

Morning was coming. That meant the dome would come down soon. My stomach tightened with tension and fear. We had to hurry. We had to beat the revenant army back to the house.

When we reached the road, I looked north, toward the town, thinking about Artemis. That was where Greyson had tracked her, before we’d been interrupted. I was so worried about her, and I hated that we hadn’t been able to find her. But if I knew one thing, it was that Artemis was strong. She would be able to hold out until we found her. So, we turned in the direction of the house, hiking back up the road toward the pack house property. We walked without incident until I hit something and was pushed forcefully back.

The dome. I looked up. Thank god it was still in place. I reached out to feel it again, but my heart skipped a beat when the light outline of the thing flickered at my touch. I was no Big Mac, but even I could feel that it had grown weak. It felt delicate as wet paper beneath my fingers. One blast from my Fae powers, and it would give way. Not that I was planning on testing my theory.

I looked up, fear coursing through me, but spun around when I heard a rustling in the trees on the opposite side of the road. Next to me, Greyson did the same.

Silas stepped out onto the road. His hollow eyes were on Greyson, and when he spoke, his icy cold voice chilled me to the bone. “You’d better hurry, son.”

**Episode 1766**

MARTA

I stood at the windows in my room, looking out at the coming morning. The sky had been lightening, turning from dark grey to light, and now the sun had just started to rise over the horizon. My stomach tightened with fear, but I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself. It was almost time. We were going to try Didi’s spell.

Didi had told me that I didn’t have to do much, except be present to lend my power to the witches as a bridge as she tried to blast Letifer back. That made me feel a little better, but still, I was worried. There was so much that could go wrong.

But, if *I* was worried, it was nothing compared to what Lilac was feeling. He was pacing the floor behind me, scowling. He was probably trying to think of an argument he hadn’t already tried. He’d spent most of the night trying to convince me that I didn’t need to do this—that there had to be another way—but I was pretty sure we both knew that wasn’t true.

There was no one else here—or maybe anywhere—who could do what I could do. And if Didi and the rest of the pack needed my specific abilities, then I would be there.

With a deep breath, I turned and looked at Lilac. “Listen,” I said, holding out a hand to stop his pacing, “I appreciate that you’re worried about me, but I’m going to be fine. I’m stronger than I was when we first met. I can do this now.”

Lilac looked at me for a moment, his expression conflicted. And then it softened, and he stepped forward, resting his hand against my cheek. It felt like a cool wind stirring against my skin. “You *are* strong,” he said quietly. “I know that. But it’s hard for me, not being able to do anything to help you. It makes me feel so useless.”

“You’re not useless. Even just having you near me helps; that’s about as far from useless as you can get,” I told him, and smiled. “It makes me feel braver.”

I rose up on my tiptoes and pressed a kiss to his soft, cool lips. I felt his form solidifying beneath me as he became corporeal.

“Shit,” I muttered, opening my eyes. “I didn’t mean to do that.” I must have inadvertently transferred some of my power to him, which I’d been trying to save for the spell.

Lilac looked down at himself and laughed. Then he shrugged.

“Well, since I’m already here…” he said, then slipped his hand around my cheek, threading his fingers into my hair, and kissed me, thoroughly.

I held myself stiff for just a moment, but the sweetness of his kiss was like a drug, and I felt myself melting into him, the tension in my shoulders draining away. I shouldn’t have used my power to do it, but he *was* already there, so I let my hands slide over his skin, feeling the smooth lines of his muscled arms and shoulders. I’d had so much running through my brain, and this was a nice distraction from it. For a moment, I forgot how scared I really was.

But I pulled away when I heard a knock at the door. “Who is it?”

“It’s Kira,” she called. “It’s time, Marta. We’re all gathering outside.”

My heart beat unevenly, and I looked up at Lilac. “Okay. This is it.”

To Lilac’s credit, he didn’t ask me if I was sure, though I was certain he was holding himself back. He just nodded. “Let’s go.”

I let Kira lead me outside to where Xavier was mustering the whole pack on the wide lawns. I looked around, blinking in the dull light of early dawn. There were a lot of wolves pawing at the ground. It had to be the Blue Bloods as well as the Redwoods.

Glancing over at Xavier, I saw that he was watching the long drive that led to the house from the road. In an instant, I understood: he was waiting for Cali to come back. His jaw worked with tension as he watched, and his eyes kept shooting to the horizon, where the sun was steadily climbing.

When I saw him let out a sigh of relief, I looked over to the edge of the dome. There was a small group walking toward us from the other side. It was Cali and Greyson, flanked by two wolves, both of whom were snarling angrily.

Xavier moved toward them but stopped suddenly as another figure appeared from the dark woods.

“It’s Silas,” Lilac murmured.

My pulse raced with fear, and I reached for Lilac’s hand. He laced his fingers through mine, holding tightly.

Cali, Greyson, and the wolves reached the edge of the dome.

Xavier rounded on Big Mac. “Let them in,” he growled. When she hesitated, he took a threatening step toward her. “I don’t care if you have to take the whole thing down. Let her back in!”

Big Mac looked pale as a ghost. “I can’t just open a rip again, Xavier. If I let them in, I’ll bring down the whole dome. I’ll let Silas—Letifer—in,” she corrected herself, shaking her head. “I’ll let them all in.”

“I don’t give a fuck. Just do it,” Xavier snarled.

Greyson pressed against the dome. “Do something,” he commanded. “And fast.” He pressed against the dome again, and it shimmered blue for a moment, then turned a sickly shade of yellow.

“Dammit,” Big Mac muttered, stepping closer to the dome. She spoke quickly and quietly under her breath.

As she spoke, Greyson’s arm broke through. He reached inside and—pulling Cali with him—tumbled through the barrier. But as they fell through, the dome began to break apart and crumble. Large cracks ran upward, racing each other to the curved top.

Greyson and Cali leapt to their feet and—along with Mace and the other wolf—went to join the rest of the pack.

I looked out beyond the cracking dome and was surprised to see Silas still standing at the forest’s edge. He was still, not approaching, even though the dome was almost completely down.

“Are you okay?” Xavier asked Greyson and Cali. “Where were you? Did you find Artemis?”

Greyson shook his head. “We tracked her as far as the cemetery a few miles up the road, but then we had to stop. The cemetery was pillaged, and there’s a whole new batch of revenants that that bastard”—he jutted his chin toward Silas—“just made. So, we’d better brace ourselves.”

“Where’s Didi?” Cali asked breathlessly, looking around. “Why haven’t you started the spell?”

I looked around as well. Where *was* Didi?

“I’ll go get her,” Kira offered, sprinting back into the house.

“Are you ready?” Big Mac asked, turning to me.

My stomach flipped, but I nodded, feeling resolute. “I’m ready.” I was going to do what I had to do to protect my friends.

The pack house door banged open, and Torin came rushing out. “Orla! Orla!”

“What is it?” Orla asked, striding to meet the healer as he sprinted down the lawn. “Is it Astrid?”  
 Torin nodded, sucking down air. “She just woke up screaming, and I can’t calm her down. She keeps saying ‘they’re here for me.’ She’s repeating that old Fae phrase she’s been muttering, and she’s started shaking.” Torin looked up at Orla, clearly desperate.

“Is it the revenant bite that’s making this happen?” I asked. “Maybe it’s because Letifer’s presence is so close to the house?” I wondered out loud, casting a glance at Silas. “Maybe she’s just reacting to that.”

Cali frowned. “That’s a possibility, but that old Fae phrase is a strange thing for her to say, if she’s responding to Letifer’s power.”

“What phrase?” Big Mac asked.

“She’s been speaking in old Fae,” Cali explained. “The same sentence, over and over. *It cannot be defeated without my power.*”

I raised my eyebrows, alarm bells going off in my head. “What does this all mean?”

Big Mac must have been experiencing a similar level of alarm, because she looked deeply shaken. “*Nothing* is a coincidence here. If Astrid had started saying that, then it must be relevant to Letifer and the revenants.”

“So… what?” Cali asked, looking at Big Mac, clearly confused. “We need Astrid to beat them?”

“Astrid can’t come down here!” Torin objected. “She can’t fight! She’s too weak!”

Big Mac looked grim. “She might have to.”

“Big Mac!” Cali looked horrified. “That’s barbaric—"

An idea occurred to me, and I raised my hand to interrupt.

Big Mac looked over, bemused. “Do you have something to add, Marta?”

“Well,” I started slowly, “maybe it doesn’t have to be Astrid. Maybe this just means we need Fae magic.”

Big Mac’s eyes had started to widen before I’d finished speaking. “That’s it!” she shouted. “The spell needs Fae magic to work!” She looked around wildly. “We have to reconfigure the spell. Right now!”

“But wait,” I said quickly, my heart thudding hard. “Is there even time?” I shot a terrified glance into the trees, where Silas stood. His army was coming, and we didn’t have much time.

But before Big Mac could answer, Kira sprinted out of the house, her face white with terror.

“Looks like we’ve got bigger problems,” Big Mac said ruefully, watching Kira’s approach. “What is it?”

When she reached us, Kira shook her head, gasping for air. “It’s Didi. I can’t find her anywhere.”

**Episode 1767**

*Could things get in any worse?* No, I shouldn’t even be tempting fate by thinking that. But right now, losing Didi felt about as bad as things could get.

I looked around at the assembled wolves and the crumbling dome and the specter of Silas standing beyond it. Would we be able to fight him without her?

But there wasn’t time to think about that. The revenants were here. I could see them, gathering behind Silas in the trees. There were so many of them. Debating whether or not we could fight them wasn’t a luxury we could afford.

Most of the pack were already in their wolf forms, but those who weren’t shifted now and joined the rest. They formed a solid, snarling wall between the house and Silas and his revenant army. Greyson and Xavier were the last ones still in their human forms.

The silence of the dome had been oppressive, but it was nothing compared to the silence that overtook the air as Silas made his way forward. The eerie quiet pressed on my ears. I wanted to scream to break the thundering silence, but I found I couldn’t even move.

When he had drawn close enough that we could see him clearly, but he was still outside the now-fallen dome, Silas stopped again and looked at his sons, his eyes flat and expressionless.

Xavier stepped forward, his eyes narrowed, radiating anger. “This is our home,” he barked. “And we will do what we have to in order to protect it and our family.”

Silas didn’t respond. For a moment, he didn’t even move. Then he stepped forward—right up to where the dome had just stood—and walked across the line. His expression twisted into an ugly smirk, every line of his face taunting us.

I watched him, confused. What was he doing? This didn’t look like an assault. It felt more like he was just fucking with us.

Xavier shifted and crouched low, ready to attack.

Beside me, Greyson shifted too. He stepped in front of me, clearly prepared to act as my shield.

Another moment passed, nearly excruciating in its tension. It felt as though nothing would ever happen, and we would be stuck in this agonizing purgatory forever.

Then, with a snarl, Xavier raced forward and lunged at Silas—claws extended, teeth bared. But instead of flattening Silas, Xavier sailed straight through him. Silas was nothing but smoke and air.

Xavier landed hard and pulled himself up short, but when he turned around, the illusion had disappeared.

There was a sound like the snapping of bones—it was a cackling laugh, and it echoed from the woods. The revenants who had been watching from the edge of the trees sank away, fading into the shadows.

I squinted after them. “What the hell? Where are they going?”

Xavier pivoted and stalked toward the trees, his hackles raised, as though he was going to go after the revenants single-handedly.

“Xavier!” I called desperately after him. “Stop! Come back! Xavier! Please!”

He stopped at the sound of my voice. He hesitated for a moment, his gaze shifting between the trees where the revenants had disappeared, then back to me. After a moment, he jogged back toward the pack.

*Don’t lower your guard*, Xavier said, and given the way the rest of the wolves were looking at him, I knew he was speaking to the whole pack through the Alpha mind link.

“What’s happening?” my mom asked, sounding panicked.

“I’m not sure, but Xavier’s telling the rest of the pack not to lower their guard,” I said, translating for my mom and everyone else who wasn’t part of the mind link—namely Torin, Big Mac, Kira, and Marta.

Greyson squinted into the woods. *This has to be some kind of trick.*

*We can’t let our guard down*, Xavier repeated. *This is a siege, not an immediate attack. They’re trying to psych us out, get us to make the wrong move. They’re trying to lure us out, so that we attack in desperation.* He shook his shaggy head. *I want all the Redwoods to pair off and do a tight perimeter run of the grounds.*

The wolves nodded and moved to do as he’d ordered. Xavier, Greyson, and Mace stayed behind.

“Maybe we should regroup,” I said, biting my lip nervously. “We have to find Didi. We need her for when Silas comes back.”

*We don’t have time for that*, Xavier said shortly. *We have to figure out where Silas is.*

*We can do both*, Greyson insisted, his grey eyes on Xavier.

A low growl started in Xavier’s throat, but I stepped forward. “I agree with Greyson.”

Xavier stared at me for a moment, then shifted back to his human form. His flashing eyes were still on me. “You two should remember that for now, I’m still the Alpha of this pack.”

And without waiting for an answer, he turned and stormed away, into the house.

I glanced at Greyson, who was looking steadily at me, then hurried after Xavier. I found him upstairs in his room, pulling on jeans.

“Hey,” I said, closing the door behind me. “Xavier, I hope you know I didn’t mean to undermine you as Alpha out there. I would have said what I said no matter who was Alpha.”

Xavier shook his head. “I don’t want to talk about it, Cali.” He yanked on a T-shirt. “What happened when you went to look for Artemis? You caught her scent?”

I could tell that wouldn’t be the end of it, but I accepted the change of subject. “Yeah. We were following it when we were attacked. Then we ran into the cemetery. And when we tried to leave, there were even more of them—”

“Wait,” Xavier spun around to look at me. “You tried to *fight* them?”

“Well, yeah. It was the only choice. We were surrounded. We couldn’t run,” I explained.

“Dammit, Cali,” Xavier said, running a hand through his disheveled hair. “You should never have tried to fight so many. You’re lucky you weren’t hurt.”

I folded my arms, feeling a little attacked. “I wasn’t hurt—I fought back. Greyson saw it. He thinks I’m strong. He told me so at the graveyard.”

Xavier’s face flushed with anger. “Well, if you like Greyson so much, then why don’t you just make it official and choose him?”

My stomach clenched. “You know why I can’t do that, Xavier,” I said quietly. “I’m trying to keep you all alive.” I narrowed my eyes. “And if you weren’t being such as ass about it, you’d know that I’m also doing this because I love you—”

Just as I was building up to what promised to be an epic fight, I stopped when I heard my name. I turned toward the door—it was my mom calling me, and she sounded terrified.

I yanked open the door and hurried down the stairs.

My mom was stumbling through the front door, supporting a lurching Artemis. Her face was streaked with dirt, and her hair was littered with sticks and dried leaves.

“Oh my god, what happened?” I gasped out, running toward them. “Artemis, are you okay? We’ve been looking everywhere for you! We thought you’d been kidnapped! Where *were* you?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. I don’t remember.”

“*What?*”

“I woke up in the forest and ran back here as fast as I could,” she said, her speech slightly slurred. She looked scared and confused, and like she was about to cry.

“Oh, Artemis.” I threw my arms around her, hugging her tight. I was so relieved that she was back, it felt like a weight had been lifted off my chest.

Then my dad stepped up and gave her a quick hug, which she surprisingly returned. “You gave us quite the scare,” he said in a relieved, not scolding, tone. My heart warmed seeing my family all together.

“Cali and Tom, take Artemis upstairs while Torin and I gather supplies. She’s got some cuts and scrapes that need attention,” my mom said, patting my back.

I nodded, and, slipping my shoulder beneath Artemis’s arm, my dad doing the same on her other side, we helped her up the stairs. I was shocked at how limp she felt against me, and when I looked down, I could see that there was blood soaking into her jeans—she must have gotten a pretty bad gash.

I slipped my arm around her waist and squeezed. “I’m so glad you’re safe, Artemis. And Rishika will be, too. She was so worried.”

Artemis nodded, apparently too exhausted to speak.

We helped her into her bedroom and lowered her carefully onto the bed. She looked so pale and fragile against the white sheets.

“Are you thirsty?” I asked. I grabbed an empty glass from the nightstand. “I’ll bet you are. You need to hydrate.”

“I’ll go get a few more blankets,” my dad said, slipping out of the room.

I walked into the bathroom, shaking with fear and relief. But my sister was back, and that was what I needed to focus on. I turned on the water and let it run cold, then filled the glass.

Behind me, I heard the bathroom door open.

“Artemis, you should have stayed in bed. You need to rest.”

I turned the water off, but before I could turn around, pain exploded in my head like hellish fireworks. The glass fell from my hand, shattering against the tile floor, and an instant later, everything went black.

**Episode 1768**

I came back to the world to the scent of dirt.

My eyelids were heavy, almost too heavy to lift. I struggled to keep them open long enough to get a feel for my surroundings. When they finally peeled open, I got exactly one look at the dark night sky before they snapped shut and my head began to pulse in punishment for all my efforts.

I let out a pained groan. What the heck had just happened?

For a moment, I lay there, breathing in that earthy scent and allowing my body to fully come to. The air was brisk against my skin, but not unbearably cold. Even though I was outside, and I could hear leaves and pine needles shifting in the trees nearby, I couldn’t feel the wind on my face.

Everything around me was quiet, though, save for the gentle rustling of the breeze. It honestly felt… peaceful? Like I could’ve just stayed there and drifted back off…

An owl hooted nearby, and my eyes snapped open. Wait, why could I see the sky? Why did everything smell like dirt? Where the hell was I?

The last thing I remembered was being in my sister’s room…

The thought made my blood run cold. *Oh, god! Artemis!*

I lurched upright, and the world spun on its side for a few disorienting seconds. *Seriously, what the heck is wrong with me? Did I get roofied or something?*

When the world finally stopped spinning, my eyes focused on my surroundings—and I let out a scream. I was surrounded by earth on all sides, each wall reaching about five feet down into the ground, if I were to hazard a guess. The reason the air smelled like dirt and the sky was nothing but a long, narrow rectangle above me?

I was lying in a grave.

The last thing I remembered was being with Artemis in her bedroom, and now I was waking up in a dug-up grave with nothing but a terrible headache to give me even the slightest clue about what had happened.

I scrambled to my feet, and then swayed as another head rush made the world spin. I leaned heavily against the earthen side of the grave.

“Stop… spinning,” I muttered, taking deep breaths until the world righted itself.

This had to be some kind of nightmare, right? If I could just get myself to wake up…

I pinched myself. Hard.

“Ow ow ow,” I whined as a bright bolt of pain shot up my arm.

On my feet now, I could just barely see over the edge of the grave, and another little frisson of horror slipped down my spine when I realized that I knew exactly where I was.

I’d woken up in that creepy cemetery that Greyson and I had stumbled onto. Suddenly, a visceral need to GET THE FUCK OUT OF THIS GRAVEYARD had me scrambling over the edge of the grave, my fingernails scraping against the hard-packed dirt as I hoisted myself out.

Artemis and Rishika had both made fun of my limited upper body strength more than once (they liked to say that I had none), so as I lay on the ground amidst the headstones, lungs heaving with exertion, I realized that nothing short of pure animal adrenaline could have allowed me to climb out of that grave on my own. Which meant that, unfortunately, this wasn’t just a very terrible nightmare.

This was real. I didn’t know *how* it was real, but there was no denying the ache in my head, the shakiness of my arms and legs, the stinging pain from where a couple of my fingernails had broken in my mad scramble for freedom, or the ever-present scent of dirt.

One thing was certain: I would never look at a graveyard the same way again.

Slowly, my muscles barking in complaint, I clambered to my feet and took in my surroundings. All the hairs on the back of my neck stood upright. It couldn’t be a coincidence that Greyson and I had only just stumbled across this place, and now I was back here already.

I just wished I knew how it had happened. The dull and ever-present ache in the back of my skull told me that I’d hit my head, or that someone had hit me in the head. But who would do that? And why the hell would they carry me out here and dump me in an open grave?

A low cloud of fog rolled through the graveyard—because of freaking *course*. I turned slowly in a circle, scanning my surroundings. I didn’t remember the way out.

Making a random choice, I followed the fog through the cemetery, and goosebumps rose on my skin with every step I took. I needed to get home, get back to the pack, and get the hell away from this nightmare fuel of a cemetery.

It was utterly silent now—too silent, despite the fog creeping across the ground. Shouldn’t I be hearing leaves rustling, owls hooting, maybe even some nocturnal insects? I had to be very deep in the woods, right?

So why were even the wind and the animals avoiding this place?

I bit my lip. “H-Hello?” I called out. “Is anyone else here?”

There was no response, and my stomach tightened with anxiety. I couldn’t shake the feeling that someone—something—was watching me. That I was somewhere I wasn’t supposed to be. I mean, it wasn’t like I’d ever *choose* to kick it graveyard style. Especially not alone, in the middle of the night, where nobody could hear me scream—

*Okay, Cali. That’s enough. Chill the fuck out before you hurt yourself, mm-kay?*

I took a deep breath and tried to think clearly. No matter how I’d ended up here, it couldn’t mean anything good.

I thought back to my last pre-graveyard memory. Watching over Artemis in her bedroom. She had that nasty gash, probably left by a revenant, and—

A new thought brought me up cold.

*Oh my god. The grave I woke up in—did it hold a freshly-risen revenant before I ended up inside it?*

My fingernails bit little crescent moons into my palms. I really needed to get the hell out of here. How long had I been gone? Were there pack members looking for me? I hoped not. I didn’t want anyone putting themselves at risk while Silas and his army of revenants were stalking the forest.

Finally, I spotted a familiar gate.

“Oh thank god,” I breathed in relief. I knew how to get back to the pack house from here. I broke into a jog. I just needed to follow the path I remembered, and soon I’d be back safe with my friends and family.

Easy.

I threw open the gate and sprinted into the woods.

I only made it about a hundred yards before I lost track of the way back. Or, at least, what I’d thought was the way back. My heart skipped up into a new rhythm. Was I lost in the dark, scary woods now?

“No, I can’t be lost,” I breathed. “How? No, no, no.”

I closed my eyes and drew in a deep breath.

“Calm down, Cali. Stop panicking and think. You know these woods, and you’ve been here before. You can find your way back.”

When I opened my eyes again, the woods around me suddenly seemed a tiny bit more friendly. I noticed a grouping of pines up off to the left. I remembered those trees from before. I let out a breathy laugh and headed toward them.

As I rushed through the woods, the sky turned from black to an ever-paling shade of purple-grey. Dawn was coming, soon. And I still wasn’t back at the pack house.

*Oh god. I really hope the revenants aren’t waiting till daybreak to attack us.*

I picked up my pace. Was this what had happened to Artemis? Had she also been taken by someone and brought out to this creepy cemetery? It made a lot of sense, actually, when I remembered how shaken Artemis had seemed. Plus, it would explain the nasty gash. She must have run into something bigger and meaner than herself, which really didn’t bode well for me.

I sped up even more, glancing around the woods to make sure I wasn’t being followed. Or stalked.

There were a few terrifying moments when I thought I caught something moving out of the corner of my eye, but when I turned to look, the forest was still and silent as ever. Still, I couldn’t shake that feeling that I was being watched, and I started moving even faster.

How long had it taken Greyson and me to get back to the pack house from the cemetery? It certainly hadn’t felt like this long.

I was practically sprinting, now. The faster I ran, the closer I had to be. Suddenly, I broke through the dense tree line, then stopped short in horror.

I hadn’t made it back to the pack house.

I was standing right in front of the cemetery gate where I’d just been moments earlier. *Shit.*

**Episode 1769**

GREYSON

I paced the lawn, keeping a sharp eye on the perimeter. Everything was quiet outside the pack house—too quiet. It felt like the calm before the storm, the silent tension bubbling up and leaving me itchy. There was nothing I could do right now, and that helplessness only magnified the unease churning in my belly.

Suddenly I could understand Xavier’s frustration, his desire to just yank the Band-Aid off, to get the battle started, come what may. At least that would’ve felt like doing *something*. At least it would’ve been a known entity, one that came with some semblance of control.

Waiting around to be attacked was nearly unbearable.

But rushing headfirst into a battle against my father and his army of revenants? If we didn’t play this right, that decision could have catastrophic consequences. It was never a good idea to run blindly into a battle without knowing what you were getting into first. That just made it all the easier for the other side to pick you off.

I hoped Xavier could see that for himself and wouldn’t put the pack at risk.

*My brother might be a good fighter, but is he a good leader?* Sometimes being a good leader meant avoiding the fight altogether—no matter how much you were dying to just take on the world and rip out some throats.

I glanced back at the pack house. A few lights were on inside, but most were off. The house was just as oppressively quiet as the yard outside it. It was impossible to not think of all the people inside who I cared about so deeply. Even if I wasn’t the Alpha right now—which still grated—I was still determined to protect them all.

And if Xavier couldn’t pull his head out of his ass long enough to do his job as Alpha, then maybe I would have to step up and do what I could to save the pack. Because the alternative just wasn’t fucking acceptable.

The front door creaked open, and footsteps sounded on the porch outside. I turned to see Ravi approaching. He joined me on the lawn, staring up and down the perimeter. Then he turned to me.

“Any sign of the revenants or your asshole dad?” he asked bluntly.

Despite the shitshow we’d found ourselves in, I cracked a smile and let out an amused huff. I shook my head. “They haven’t made any kind of reappearance. But I don’t exactly find that comforting.”

“Why’s that?”

I shrugged. “Better the devil you know.”

Neither of us spoke for a moment, and the eerie silence of the forest, the pack house… Suddenly it was deafening.

*What the hell are they waiting for?* I couldn’t help wondering how much I’d miss this silence when the revenants and my father finally did return.

“I meant it when I voted, you know,” Ravi said suddenly, breaking the silence. “I still believe you’re the best Alpha for this pack.”

I blinked, and something in my chest cracked at the validation. It… It meant more than I’d ever thought it would to hear this, and from Ravi of all people. After Joss had been killed, I’d expected Ravi to turn on me, and I honestly wouldn’t have blamed him if he had.

But instead, here he was, standing with me in the yard and staring at me with nothing but solemn sincerity. He truly did believe in my leadership.

*I’m glad* someone *does…*

I hadn’t realized just how much I’d needed that kind of support right now.

I cleared my throat. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

A rueful chuckle slipped out of my chest. “I sure wish I’d been able to convince the rest of the pack to see the light.”

“I’m sure once this immediate threat is over, you’ll be able to formally prove that you’re their Alpha. I know it’s the right thing for the pack, and I’m sure the others will realize it too.”

*Formally prove that I’m Alpha?* My smile dimmed, but before I could question Ravi further, another set of footsteps sounded on the porch. Xavier.

My brother’s face was grim as he approached, and I prepared myself for a fight. Was he here to tell me he was gathering the pack to fight Silas? That we were going to war? But before he could speak, Orla came flying out the door toward us.

Fear and worry were etched into the lines of her face, and I knew without her needing to tell me that something was terribly, terribly wrong.

*Cali*.I knew it with dreadful certainty, and I instinctively glanced up at the pack house to her bedroom window. *Where’s Cali? Is she all right?*

Xavier and I met Orla in the middle of the lawn.

“What’s going on?” I asked. “Is it—”

“Have either of you seen Cali anywhere?” she blurted out.

I thought back. I hadn’t seen Cali for about an hour or so… In fact, the last time I’d seen her had been when she was agreeing with me against Xavier. A little smugness warmed my chest, but then it evaporated as I grasped the implications of Orla’s worry.

“Why?” I demanded. “What’s going on?”

“I left Cali to look after Artemis while Tom and I went to get supplies for Artemis’s wound, but when I came back to the room, Cali was nowhere to be seen.” Her wide eyes, the same shade as Cali’s, looked from Xavier to me, pleading. “At first I thought Cali must be with one of you, but now I’ve looked all over the pack house and there’s no sign of her. I’ve been asking everyone, and no one else has seen her either.” Her voice broke, and she cleared her throat. “And I just… I *know* that Cali wouldn’t leave Artemis’s side. Not in the condition Artemis was in.”

That sense of dread pooled deeper in my stomach. “What did Artemis say about it?”

Orla shook her head. “By the time I got back to Artemis’s room, she was fast asleep. I couldn’t bear to wake her. She’s clearly been through an ordeal and needs to rest.”

Xavier started. “Wait, so Cali’s been missing for an *hour*?”

My heart skipped up into a new rhythm as cold dread began to spread through my body. It was a primal reaction—my mate could be in danger, and as long as I didn’t know for myself that she was safe and sound, I wasn’t going to rest.

And neither would anyone else.

I started toward the door, Orla and Xavier hot on my heels. “I don’t care if Artemis needs rest. It’s more important to find out if she saw anything. She can get all the rest she wants when we know Cali’s safe.”

Xavier nodded. We seemed to be on the exact same page, thankfully. We raced into the house and upstairs, then burst into Artemis’s room. Everything was as Orla described it: no Cali, and Artemis tucked in bed, fast asleep.

I sat down on the edge of the mattress and gently shook her shoulder. “Artemis. Artemis.”

“Be careful,” Orla whispered from behind me. “She’s still healing.”

I ignored her. Artemis was Fae, and Orla knew as well I did that she was one of the toughest creatures in this room. I kept calling her name and gently shaking her until her eyes finally fluttered open.

She slowly blinked, looking from my face to her mother’s. A crease appeared between her eyebrows. “What’s going on?”

Orla walked around the bed and took a seat on the opposite side of the mattress. She gently squeezed Artemis’s hand. “We’re looking for Cali,” she said softly. “She’s missing. She was here in the room with you before you fell asleep, wasn’t she? Did you see anything? Did she say anything?”

With a deep wince, Artemis slowly sat up. She rubbed her face, then looked at her mother, frowning with concern. She still looked pretty out of it, to be honest, so my hope that she could shed some light on this situation was dim.

“I was… so tired,” she mumbled. “I couldn’t keep my eyes open. But just before I fell asleep, I thought I heard Cali saying something about Deidamia…”

Artemis trailed off, looking dead on her feet. If she hadn’t been sitting upright, I had a feeling she would’ve already fallen back to sleep. I gently grasped her shoulders. “Artemis, what did Cali say about Deidamia?”

“That… That she had to be the one to find her.”

I shared a panicked glance with Orla.

“You don’t think she went to find Didi, did you?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know.”

I’d seen how shaken up Cali had been earlier after being snatched by the revenants, and I struggled to picture her rushing to put herself back into that situation. But I knew she always wanted to help, that she always tried to be heroic. She hadn’t been in a good headspace earlier, but if she thought she could be the one to bring Deidamia back safely…

I looked at Xavier, and the grim look on his face told me that he was thinking the same thing.

“We need to find her,” I said.

His eyes narrowed. “If you’re thinking of going after her, you’re not going without me.”

**Episode 1770**

CHARLIE

I stared at my mother in shock. “What do you mean there’s no way out?”

My mother frowned. “The camp is completely surrounded by revenant vampires, Charlie. I thought I made that clear.” She said it in the same way she’d chided me as a child for not remembering to scrape my dishes before putting them in the sink.

I gritted my teeth. Even in a life-or-death situation, my mom still had a knack for making me feel like a child. I wasn’t, not anymore. “I get that, believe me. But you said there’s no way out. Does that mean we have to fight our way out or something?”

I considered the other campers here. They were all still in training. Even the more advanced ones weren’t exactly equipped to take down the monsters at our door. So who did that leave, then? The instructors, me and Violet, and…

Shit. That was it. There was a horde of vampire revenants just outside our door, and we only had a handful of people skilled enough to fight them. It was a death sentence, wasn’t it? The odds weren’t just bad—they were insurmountable.

And if we wanted even a snowball’s chance in hell of truly taking these monsters down, Violet and I would need to shift.

Which would be a death sentence all on its own.

I looked over and met my mate’s wide, frightened eyes, and panic spilled into my gut so fast it cramped. I never should have asked Violet to visit. She wasn’t safe here, and I was so far outmatched that I couldn’t even protect myself, much less the person who meant the most to me in the entire world.

I knew the pack house was facing its own revenant problem, but at least there she would’ve been surrounded by people who could keep her safe. She’d have had some semblance of backup. Here, she didn’t stand a chance.

Violet seemed to sense the increasingly depressing trajectory my thoughts were taking, either through our mate bond or maybe just her own intuition, because she reached out and gave my hand a quick, reassuring squeeze. And for a split second, I didn’t even worry that she was showing even the slightest bit of PDA in front of my mom. I needed Violet. I would never apologize for that.

For one brief, glorious second, all I cared about was Violet, and the love she conveyed through that simple touch.

And that touch gave me the strength to not completely fall to pieces.

I drew myself up to my full height and cleared my throat. “If we’re going to fight an army of vampire revenants, we’d better put together a battle plan now. The other hunters are going to need instructions. Most of them haven’t seen any real action.”

My mom’s expression, which had flattened out when she noticed me taking Violet’s hand, shifted into something warm and surprised. If I hadn’t known better, I would have said she looked proud of me.

Then she shook her head. “Fortunately, it shouldn’t come to that.”

I blinked. “What?”

“The camp has precautions in place for this kind of thing, of course. Any supernatural school worth its salt makes plans for an attack.”

Violet and I both leaned in a bit, intrigued and—at least on my part—desperate for what felt like a sudden lifeline.

“The camp has a system of underground tunnels that will lead us far beneath the ring of vampires that are currently surrounding us,” my mother explained. “Following the tunnel, we’ll be able to surface safely on the other side and make a complete and safe evacuation.”

I let out a sigh of deep relief. Maybe we could get out of this. “Then everything’s going to be fine! You should have led with that!”

“Well, hold on a second. We still aren’t quite sure what we’re dealing with, here. These vampires are like nothing any of us have ever faced before. They’re fast and reckless and much heartier than your run of the mill vampire. We cannot underestimate them under any circumstances.”

My shoulders slumped. Trust my mom to deliver amazing news with her trademark knack for being a buzzkill. “Okay, so what do we need to do?”

Before she could reply, Romilly and Sergeant Pepperdine rushed over, wearing matching grave expressions.

“What is it?” my mother asked.

“The camp is still just waking up,” Pepperdine reported, “but we’re going to need to work quickly to get everyone into the tunnels without wasting time or causing a panic.”

I blinked. Somehow, despite Violet and me staying out all night, I didn’t feel tired at all. Anxious, yes. Ready to get the hell away from this vampire-revenant-infested camp, double yes. Sleep could wait.

“I’ve told everyone to gather in the indoor gymnasium,” Pepperdine continued. “They should all be waiting there now. We need to get moving.”

My mom nodded, and she, Pepperdine, and Romilly headed toward the gymnasium with Violet and me trailing slightly behind. Close enough that my mom wouldn’t turn around and snap at me to come with her, but far enough away to allow me some small, modicum of privacy with my mate.

I turned to glance back into the woods as we headed inside. I couldn’t see anything, even with my enhanced werewolf vision, but I felt a chill run down my spine at the thought of those creepy vampires just standing silently in the woods, watching us, waiting for… what?

I tried to shake off the thought as we headed into the gym. Once we were inside, heated air rushed in around me, and I took in the faces of my fellow campers. They were all gathered around, many of them still in their pajamas, chatting. Though they had to be curious about just what was going on, I didn’t get the sense that any of them were prepared for the terrifying news we were about to deliver.

Pepperdine took his place at the front of the group and held up his hands. Everyone immediately fell silent, and the mixture of mild curiosity and amusement slipped off each face, one by one. Half of being a good hunter was observing your surroundings, and with my mother, Pepperdine, and Romilly all looking like someone had just died, it didn’t require any level of genius for the rest of the camp to figure out that something was terribly wrong.

“I’m sure you’re wondering why we’ve collected you all here this morning,” Pepperdine began. “Time is of the essence now, so I’ll keep this short. The camp is under attack.”

His words sent a ripple of panic and horror through the room.

“Who attacks a camp full of dangerous hunters?” I heard one of the campers whisper, and I resisted the urge to laugh. These kids were probably the least dangerous group of people I’d encountered since leaving college. And if our training sessions were any indication, they were a bigger risk to themselves than they’d be against a vampire revenant. But then, as I scanned the crowd, I caught Sophie’s eye. Maybe they weren’t *all* totally hopeless.

Pepperdine hushed the crowd. “We don’t have time for questions, and we certainly don’t have time to coddle everyone. Here’s what you need to know: the camp has been surrounded by revenant vampires, and we need to evacuate. If you do encounter one of these monsters, you’ll need to kill and burn it.” He paused, letting that part sink in. Good. “Hopefully none of you will need to use that knowledge, but it’s far better to have it and not need it than the other way around. We’ll be evacuating through a series of tunnels beneath the camp—there’s an entrance to said tunnels here in the gym. To keep this evacuation safe and orderly, we’re going to be splitting everyone up into groups.” He leveled the campers with a look. “Each and every person in the group is responsible for each and every other member of said group. No campers left behind. Got it?”

“Sir, yes sir!” the campers responded.

“Good.” He nodded. “If all goes to plan, it won’t come to any fighting, and we’ll all regroup once we’ve made it to the other end of the tunnel. Please stand by for your group assignments.”

Pepperdine started calling out camper names and directing the individuals to group up. My mind wandered as he did so, and I couldn’t help wondering what lay on the other end of the tunnel. I looked out into the sea of faces and was impressed to see how calm and determined everyone looked. Nobody seemed to be panicking.

*Maybe they’re tougher than I give them credit for.*

I tuned back in just in time to hear Pepperdine calling out, “And finally: Sophie, Charlie, Daisy, and Zachery!”

*What? Oh no…* Grimacing, I turned to Zachery, who was glaring directly at me, clutching a sharpened stake.

**Episode 1771**

XAVIER

“There’s no way in hell you’re coming with me,” Greyson growled.

I pulled Greyson into the hallway before he could try—and fail—to insist on going after Cali alone. Orla was starting to get that Mama Bear look in her eyes, and I didn’t feel like getting my ass handed to me by an overprotective Fae.

“Yes, I am,” I stated.

My brother glared at me, shaking his head. “Absolutely not. I’m going to find her alone.”

“Fuck that. She’s my mate too, and we’re *both* going to bring her home.”

“Xavier, you have to stay here. I’ll go, and I’ll—”

“No, we both—”

“—You’re the Alpha!” Greyson snapped. “You made a huge deal about me not being fit to lead, about how you were going to step up and take care of things—well, congratulations. You’re the Alpha now. And that means putting your personal whims aside to do what’s best for the pack. And what’s best for the pack right now is definitely not both of us running after Cali—even you must know that.”

*Fuck.* He was right, but I wasn’t about to tell him that. That recognition did jack shit for the fury burning in my chest. It flared up anytime my brother was around, but seeing as how he was now willfully standing between me and my mate, it was taking everything I had to not deck him where he stood. My fingers clenched into fists. Greyson was definitely getting a little kick out of throwing all of this back in my face.

Not going after Cali? Impossible.

“It makes the most sense for me to go find Cali,” he explained. “And hopefully Deidamia, too. You have responsibilities here. I don’t. I can be the one to bring them back safely, and you can take care of the pack in the meantime, in case Silas makes his move. It’s the best option, Xavier. You can’t pretend that it’s not.”

I growled. I wasn’t pretending anything. I wanted to go find Cali, and the mere thought of my brother leaving *alone* to find our mate had the primal part of me roaring for dominance. I wanted nothing more than to argue that there was no way I was gonna let my brother run off to save *my* mate without me coming too, but…

But he *was* right. And I fucking hated it. There was no way that both of us could go after her right now. Doing so would leave the pack defenseless and without leadership when they’d never been more vulnerable. We had no idea what Silas or Letifer or whoever the hell was calling the shots had planned, and if I forced my hand and went with Greyson, I would be choosing Cali over the pack.

If I did that, I wouldn’t deserve to be Alpha. I knew this, deep in my gut. I always had, even before Greyson had oh-so-cheerily spelled it out for me. But it didn’t mean I had to like it. I fucking hated it. Cali deserved everything in this whole fucked up world.

And I knew what Cali would want me to do if she were here. Protect the others. Protect the pack.

*Fuck.*

Greyson’s eyes trailed over my face. “We good now?”

I nodded. Once.

He turned to head to the staircase. “Keep the pack safe. I’m leaving now. If she’s only been gone an hour, then she can’t have gotten much of a head start, but we both know that Cali has a unique ability to get herself into trouble.” He glanced back at me. “But don’t worry. I’ll bring her back safe.”

I followed Greyson to the porch and watched with burning frustration as he set off across the lawn and disappeared into the forest.

*That prick is definitely enjoying throwing me being Alpha back in my face.*

And I would’ve been lying if I said, in this moment, that I wasn’t regretting pushing to become Alpha. I felt sick to my stomach imagining Cai alone out there in the woods, facing god only knew what. Was she hurt? Had she been captured by the revenants?

*I swear to god, if any of those undead motherfuckers harms a single hair on her head, I’m gonna make them wish they’d never crawled out of their graves.*

I stared out into the silent woods. Desperately, ignoring the odds, I sent out a mind link to Cali. Maybe, just maybe, she’d be close enough to hear me.

*Cali, where are you? Can you hear me?*

I waited a long beat as the silence that was wrapped around me grew heavier and heavier. She wasn’t answering. Either she wasn’t within range, or—

My stomach twisted so tight it cramped. How the hell was I going to be able to just sit here, twiddling my thumbs and babysitting the pack while I waited for Greyson to save the day? It was *impossible*. Sure, I wanted to be Alpha. I knew I was the best choice, but I hadn’t signed up for this. I hadn’t decided that becoming Alpha would mean setting Cali aside.

With a jolt of horror, I flashed back to that moment when I’d seen Greyson in the woods, his bright orange eyes shining at me. Realization dawned.

If I didn’t trust Greyson to lead the pack, then what the hell was I doing trusting the most important person in my world to his care? The pack was important, sure, but Cali? Cali was *everything*.

No, I couldn’t think about that. Greyson would never hurt her. She was safe with him. Besides, she couldn’t have gotten very far. It had only been an hour or so since I’d last seen her…

Since I’d left her with those horrible parting words.

*If you like Greyson so much, then why don’t you just make it official and choose him?*

“Fuck,” I muttered. The last thing I’d said to her before she’d gone missing had been something jealous and nasty. Regret nearly knocked me off my feet. If anything happened to her, and that was the last thing I ever got to say to her…

Greyson’s orange eyes flashed through my mind again, set against the backdrop of my own nasty words echoing, and images of Cali wandering the woods alone, so vulnerable it made me want to scream. The fear and regret and anxiety building inside me reached a peak—and sent me flying off into deep despair.

As I stared at the trees, I realized that I couldn’t just sit here waiting for Cali. Alpha or not, I was most needed out there in the woods. My *mate* needed me, and nothing could ever eclipse that. I had to go find her and bring her back. I had to.

Before I could second-guess myself, I shifted and raced off the porch and into the woods. Distantly, I was aware of Rishika calling out to me, demanding to know where I was going, but I didn’t stop. Couldn’t stop. All I could focus on right now was Cali—finding her and making sure she was okay.

It wasn’t hard to pick up her scent—nor was it difficult to pick up Greyson’s. He must have found her trail, too. I put on a burst of speed. I needed to catch up to him, not only so *I* could be the one to find Cali first, but also so I could protect her in case being near Silas and the revenants made Greyson change. I still wasn’t sure what to call it. His… injury? His curse? But either way, I didn’t trust him around our mate. Especially not out here, where dark magic abounded.

If Greyson had never been bitten, I would have trusted him around Cali. I wouldn’t have loved the thought of them together, and it still would’ve been a thorn in my side to watch him run off to be her white knight, but I would have trusted him. But now, all I could hope was that I found her first.

If being an Alpha was protecting the pack, Greyson was part of it. And even if I hated it, I knew he’d hate himself more if he ever hurt her. I had to get to her first.

As I raced through the trees, I scanned the forest for any sign of the revenants or Silas. I was half-expecting them to lunge out at me from around every corner, and I was convinced I felt them watching me from the woods.

But there was no actual sign of them anywhere.

Somehow, that didn’t comfort me. If anything, it only made me feel even more uneasy. What the hell were they waiting for?

*At least I know I’m not leaving the pack in any kind of immediate danger. There’s the silver lining. Ha.*

The anxious twist in my belly told me my gut didn’t quite believe the attempt at self-justification, but it was worth a shot. Besides, I was sure to come across Cali soon, and when I did, I’d just grab her and bring her home and this nightmare would be over.

I picked up speed as I leapt over a low hill, sure that I would find Cali on the other side.

Instead, I skidded to a stop and came face to face with Silas.

**Episode 1772**

MARTA

The waiting was driving me crazy.

I paced back and forth in the living room while Big Mac and Kira sat on the couch, cool as cucumbers even though things were pretty much awful. I hated this—the not knowing, the not being able to do anything. I’d already felt useless enough when all they’d needed from me was to stand around and be a bridge, but now that Didi was missing, it seemed like I wasn’t going to be able to do anything even remotely useful.

Silas—or Letifer, or whoever the heck was haunting the woods and had tried to kill me—and his army of revenants were out there, waiting and watching, ready to hunt us down. One of our strongest allies and the linchpin in our current plan—Didi—was nowhere to be found. We didn’t know if she’d left voluntarily, or if she’d been kidnapped, somehow. And we had no idea where to even begin to search for her. Not that searching the woods for her was a particularly valid idea with the revenants out and about, ready to eat the next unfortunate person to cross their path.

And I was standing here, doing *nothing*.

Lilac leaned against the wall, well within the bonds of our tether, but he seemed to realize I needed space and wasn’t hanging over me—something I was endlessly grateful for.

I stopped pacing and sighed. “Where do you think Didi could have gone?”

The witches didn’t answer. Probably because this was about the hundredth time I’d asked that question. I was going insane from helplessness, and the two witches were taking the stoic road. I wished I could be that calm when everything was going to hell, but I just didn’t have it in me.

It started pacing again, the silence grating on me as each second slogged into the next, as each step I took up and down the living room grew more clipped.

I stopped suddenly and turned back to the witches. “Cali’s missing too,” I reminded them. Her mom had looked absolutely terrified when she’d asked us when we last saw her daughter. Orla had been so kind to me, and I’d hated to tell her that I didn’t know where Cali was. As far as I knew, she still hadn’t been found. “That’s *three* people now who’ve just disappeared out of the pack house with no explanation. It’s spooky! Maybe there’s some connection there. Maybe… Maybe if we try to find Cali, we’ll find Didi.”

Kira’s brow furrowed. “Who’s the third person, again?”

I frowned. “Artemis.”

“Artemis came back,” Lilac piped up, pushing off of the wall to approach me. “She’s sleeping upstairs.”

I felt a small measure of relief at that reminder. He was right. Artemis *had* come back. Maybe Cali and Didi would, too… Except it was impossible to forget the deep gash in Artemis’s side.

“She came back even more wounded,” I said. “She was really hurt.”

I didn’t even want to think about what might be happening to Cali or Didi, wherever they were.

Big Mac and Kira exchanged confused looks, and I added, “Lilac was just reminding me that Artemis came back after she disappeared. So maybe Didi and Cali will too? I hope they’re okay.”

Big Mac’s eyes narrowed. “What do you mean, Artemis ‘came back even more wounded’? Was she wounded *before* she went missing?”

My shoulders slumped, and I waved off the question. I knew exactly where this was going, and I wasn’t in the mood for any more of Lilac’s conspiracy theories. “Yeah, something happened to her side.”

Lilac scoffed. “Um, yeah, in the exact spot where I bit whoever tried to kill you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Can you please stop being such a conspiracy theorist? There’s plenty of genuinely crazy and scary stuff happening here without you making up new stories.”

He huffed. “I’m not—”

But whatever he was about to say next was cut off by Big Mac. “What are you two talking about? We can only hear one side of this, so please, explain.”

“Yeah, Marta,” Lilac pressed. “Explain. Tell the witches about the bite. I’m sure they’ll be very intrigued to learn that the injury I left on Letifer is a perfect match for the one on Artemis.”

I squeezed my eyes shut and then turned to face Big Mac and Kira. Having Lilac talk to me while I was trying to carry on a conversation with living people always made my brain hot. I opened my eyes and sighed. “When Lilac saved me from the ghost pond, he—his wolf—bit someone who was there with us in the side, but he couldn’t tell who it was. He seems to think that somehow he bit Artemis—that she was there with us. But that’s insane, right?”

I expected them to laugh and brush it off. Because there was no way Artemis could have been at that pond, right? First of all, I was pretty sure that between the two of us, we would have recognized her. And secondly—and more importantly—Artemis was one of the good guys. Sure, things had been a little touch and go when she’d been possessed by the Orb, but we’d fixed that, and now she was fine! This was Cali’s sister, Orla’s other daughter, Rishika’s girlfriend. Artemis was loved and respected by lots of people in the pack—she couldn’t be on the side of the revenants.

Right?

But neither Kira nor Big Mac laughed. Nobody rushed to tell me why that was a stupid idea. And dread began to pool in my stomach.

*Oh no…*

Big Mac’s expression was grave. “Actually, I don’t think that’s insane at all.” She lowered her voice and looked around to make sure nobody was listening in. “I’ve had my eyes on that Fae for a while now. She’s been acting suspiciously ever since she ‘got rid’ of the Orb at Haystack Rock. And… I don’t have any proof, but I wouldn’t be at all surprised to hear that Artemis was somehow mixed up in all of this.”

My jaw dropped. “You seriously think that a pack member is involved in dark magic? What does that mean?”

Big Mac shook her head. “I’m not sure. But we have to be careful about making accusations before we have more concrete proof—Cali is, of course, protective of her sister, and we all know how Greyson and Xavier feel about Cali. They call most of the shots around here, and they won’t be happy with us making a scene unless we can back it up.”

I sat down hard in the nearby armchair. Now that Big Mac had as good as confirmed Lilac’s suspicions, my head was spinning with the implications. Could Artemis have been the person at the pond? Had she tried to kill me? All this time, had I been living in the same house as someone who wanted me dead?

“Marta, are you okay?” Lilac asked.

I ignored him and lifted my gaze to meet Big Mac’s. “How do you intend to find proof?”

She clicked her tongue. “We’ve got one way to find out, now. Follow me.”

Legs shaking, I followed the two witches up the stairs and into Artemis’s room. Orla was sitting on the bed, leaning over a sleeping Artemis, her face creased with worry. She looked up, hope flashing in her eyes when she saw the three of us lingering in the doorway.

“Did you hear anything about Cali?” she asked.

The hope in her eyes was like a bucket of ice-cold water poured over my senses.

Oh my god. This *was* insane. Here we were, casting aspersions on Artemis, not lifting a finger to help find Cali, and all the while Orla was sitting here worrying herself to death. She had no notion of the traitorous thoughts we were considering.

*Artemis has a loving family, a stable romantic relationship. Why would she want to get mixed up with dark magic when she’s got such a good thing going here? It doesn’t make any sense.*

And considering how long I’d wanted and gone without those things, I couldn’t imagine anyone just throwing them away.

Big Mac shook her head. “I’m afraid not. We’re here because I need to get a look at Artemis’s wound.”

“Oh. Um, okay.” This request didn’t seem to alarm Orla at all. Probably because she had no clue what Big Mac truly thought about her daughter. “I dressed the cut on her thigh. It looked nastier than it was. I think Artemis is going to be fine.”

“I mean the wound on her side,” Big Mac said.

Orla frowned. “I didn’t realize Artemis *had* a wound on her side. She never told me anything about it.”

Big Mac shot me a meaningful look, then turned back to Orla. “I just want to get a look at it. Make sure it isn’t infected.”

Orla nodded and, her eyes on her daughter’s sleeping face, gently pulled up her shirt to expose the wound.

We all gasped when we saw it.

Embedded in her skin was the clear outline of a bite mark.

**Episode 1773**

My mouth opened and closed, and I blinked to clear my vision, thinking that maybe this was some kind of hallucination, but when my eyes focused again, they settled on the exact same horrifying sight.

I was back at the gate of the cemetery. Despite how far and fast I’d run, despite my sense that I was successfully navigating my way back to the pack house, somehow I’d ended up back here.

*How the hell did I get so turned around that I circled back to this hell hole? Is this even possible?*

I drew in a sharp, panicky breath, then another. Still, my lungs itched for more oxygen, my breath hitching and my vision threatening to tunnel. The fog rolling into the cemetery was even heavier now, and I suddenly felt claustrophobic, like I was trapped in an invisible maze that I just couldn’t seem to escape.

*Take a breath, Cali. Calm down, and try again.*

I clung to that small shred of logic, of calm, with everything I had.

*Yes*. Yes, I could try again. I’d already made it out of the cemetery. Even now, I was standing outside the gate, more in the forest than anything else. I’d just gotten turned around. There was no need to panic. It wasn’t like I’d ever had much of a sense of direction, anyway. And I’d been so freaked out after waking up in the grave…

No, I wasn’t trapped. I was fine. I was okay. And if I could just keep a cool head, there was no reason why I couldn’t try to find my way back home again. And with sunrise not far off, it would be much easier to navigate the forest a second time.

I took a deep breath. *You can do this, Cali.*

I turned around, ready to try once more to find my way home, when suddenly there was a loud crashing through the bushes and Greyson burst out of the forest in his wolf form. He didn’t miss a beat, shifting back to human as he raced toward me and pulling me into a tight hug.

“Oh my god,” he breathed into my hair. “I was so scared. What the hell are you doing out here?”

I couldn’t even try to speak. Shock and relief slammed into me, and I threw my arms around his neck, breathing in his scent. He smelled like sweat and forest and Greyson, and the realization that my mate was here, that I wasn’t alone in this scary forest anymore, brought tears to my eyes. Emotion clogged my throat, and my lower lip began to tremble.

He pulled back, his hand on my face, my shoulders, my arms, as his wide eyes scanned over my body. “Are you okay, love? Have you been hurt?”

Sniffling, I shook my head and cleared my throat. “I’m fine. Or as fine as you can be when you black out and wake up in the middle of a cemetery.”

His brow furrowed, and for the first time since bursting through the forest, Greyson looked beyond me and focused on our surroundings. When his gaze landed on the cemetery, he flinched.

“Cali… this cemetery…” His eyes shifted back to mine, looking horrified.

I nodded. “I know. We were just here. I don’t know how I got here. One second I was at the pack house, then the next everything went black. And I was here…”

“Wait…” He blinked fast, still apparently coming to terms with my story. “Did you just say you blacked out and woke up here?” He looked utterly lost, and more than a little worried.

I didn’t blame him. I felt the exact same way. “Yeah, I have no idea what happened. One minute I was in Artemis’s bedroom, and the next….” I swallowed roughly. “I was here, waking up in an open grave.”

His face paled a bit, and he rubbed his face with a curse. “So, you didn’t leave to try and find Deidamia?”

I frowned. “What are you talking about? I mean, I wanted to find Didi, obviously. I’m really worried about her,” I said. “But I know how stressed you and Xavier are already. I wouldn’t have just run off without telling you. I mean, god, there are revenants out here!”

Rather than comforting Greyson, my words only seemed to make him even more confused. Was it really so impossible to imagine that I hadn’t rushed out here without considering the consequences and how it would affect everyone around me? Did he truly think I was *that* impulsive? *That* selfish?

“Greyson, why did you assume—”

Suddenly, another wolf burst out of the woods, racing toward us. It was Xavier. My eyes widened. Why wasn’t he with the pack?

He shifted immediately and rushed over.

Greyson scowled at his brother. “What the hell are you doing out here? Did you seriously leave the pack without an Alpha so you could come out here and look for Cali?”

Xavier ignored him and caught me up in a tight embrace, almost identical to Greyson’s. It was almost funny, how alike they were. Especially when it came to their feelings for me.

*Almost*.

“I’m glad you’re okay, tiger,” he whispered in my ear. Then he backed up. “We all need to get back to the pack house, right now. I just ran into Silas in the woods.”

My jaw dropped. “What? Is he close? Did he say anything? Did he hurt you?”

Xavier shook his head. “He just stood there looking at me and then laughed and faded away. It’s not safe out here. We need to get back.”

The unspoken worry in his words was easy to pick up. We needed to get back before something bad happened to us, but we also needed to get back because the pack was without an Alpha, and if something bad happened to them while both Greyson and Xavier were out here with me, then none of us would ever forgive ourselves.

*They should be protecting the pack, not out here trying to rescue me*, I thought with a stab of guilt. And then I shook it off.

I didn’t have anything to feel guilty about. It wasn’t like I’d chosen to come out here. And I’d been trying to find my way home from the moment I’d woken up in that grave. Someone had done this to me, and we needed to find out who, and why.

I was about to tell them I was more than ready to get the hell away from this cemetery and back to the pack house, but then suddenly the air itself seemed to echo with horrible, cruel laughter. All three of us froze in place, looking around with wide eyes. The hair rose on my arms and the back of my neck, and movement behind my mates tore a gasp from my throat.

I pointed wordlessly, a shriek caught in my throat. Several feet away, closer to the tree line, the ghostly figure of Letifer in Silas’s body floated up from the ground in fast, jerky movements. And he was *laughing*.

Why the hell did Letifer keep appearing as Silas? Was it just some kind of mind fuck? An attempt to mess with everyone’s heads because up until now, Silas had been the worst thing any of us had ever faced?

“Silas” met my eyes and let out another cruel laugh that made me flinch. There was something in his tone—the pure malice of it, perhaps—that had my teeth gritting together and every muscle in my body coiling tight.

Then, in a flash of movement, Silas appeared right behind Greyson and reached out to place a hand on his shoulder.

“Greyson—behind you!” I squeaked.

As he whipped around to face Letifer, the ghost vanished and the laughter came to an abrupt stop.

Once again, that eerie silence washed over me, even as Letifer’s laughter rang in my ears.

I let out a shaky breath, on the verge of tears, and we stared at each other in horror before Xavier broke the spell. “We need to get out of here—now.”

He shifted, and Greyson followed suit. They both mind linked and told me to hop on.

There was exactly zero time for another battle of my mates’ egos, so I shot Greyson an apologetic look and hopped on Xavier’s back.

I didn’t want to hurt him, but I still wasn’t convinced that his wounded leg was healed completely, and I didn’t want to put any strain on it.

Xavier didn’t miss a beat before sprinting off through the woods. All I could do was hold on tight as he carried me away from the cemetery.

Further away from the cemetery, the fog dissipated, and I felt some of that bone-deep fear begin to ease. It felt like I was back in the real world after being trapped in some kind of purgatory.

With a jolt that nearly sent me flying, Xavier skidded to a stop. Would it have killed him to warn a gal?

Then my eyes landed on the reason for his abrupt halt.

We’d found Didi.

She was lying on the trail in front of us, pale and lifeless, limbs akimbo, her unseeing eyes wide open.

**Episode 1774**

VIOLET

*Well, this isn’t good.*

I looked back and forth between Charlie and Zachery. Zachery looked like he wanted to test out his stake on my mate. If he did, he had another thing coming.

The way things were going now, I didn’t think it would’ve been possible for Pepperdine to assign us to a worse evacuation group. I’d almost rather have taken Chad and all his bullshit at this point. It would’ve been annoying, but the tension and awkwardness of being grouped with Zachery and Charlie together was almost physically painful.

Zachery was clearly still stewing over everything, and from the way he was looking at Charlie, I had a feeling that we were in just as much danger from within our group as we were from the revenants. God, I really didn’t like the way he was staring down my mate while he held onto that stake.

But we didn’t have time to worry about tensions bubbling over. Already, Pepperdine was barking orders. “Campers, move out! Operation Skedaddle is a go! Everyone move, move, move, move, move!”

Except, none of the groups moved. Because we didn’t know where to go. Where was this alleged tunnel entrance, anyway?

“Why aren’t you moving?” he demanded, his face coloring.

Sophie spoke up. “Sir, you haven’t told us where to find the tunnel.”

“Oh. Fair point.” He pointed at the locker room doors. “You’ll find the tunnel entrance inside the men’s locker rooms, and from there we’ll have you all safe and sound in no time. And stick together—remember, each and every one of you is responsible for the safe passage of your group!”

As we followed the other groups into the locker room, I couldn’t help but notice just how much smellier the men’s locker room was than the women’s.

Sophie waved a hand in front of her face, eyeing Charlie and Zachery. “You guys kind of stink.”

“Sorry we don’t smell like sunshine and rainbows like the ladies do,” Zachery mumbled. Yep, it looked like he was committing to the whole belligerent schtick.

The various pods began to fill the locker room. It was a tight space not meant for so many bodies at once, but since there was no clear sign reading, “*Emergency tunnel here!*”none of us really knew what to do next.

“What are we supposed to do now?” another camper called out.

Romilly gestured for a group of campers to step aside, then she stepped up to a locker and typed a combination into the lock. The entire room let out a gasp as a row of lockers swung up and to the side to reveal a large, dark tunnel. It could have been an endless pit for all we knew—there was no clear way to make out where we were going.

“Okay, that’s really cool,” I admitted.

I’d known the camp had some pretty neat tech up their sleeves, but I hadn’t been expecting anything close to this caliber. The pack house had some catching up to do.

“Don’t go into the tunnel yet!” Pepperdine called as he wove through the groups with a cardboard box filled to the brim with flashlights. “Iris, Romilly, and I will be leading the way, making sure the passageway is safe, and then each group will follow behind us. Don’t forget your flashlights!”

I noticed Romilly giving Pepperdine a pointed look, and he quickly added, “And the group with Charlie, Zachery, Sophie, and Daisy will be bringing up the rear.”

*Oh. That’s… deliberate?*

Romilly looked over and met both Charlie’s and my eyes, and then I realized our place in the evacuation line had been decided thoughtfully. We were bringing up the rear so we could protect the group in case anyone tried to follow us.

It was a big job, protecting all these campers from the monsters they were supposed to be learning how to hunt. And the whole thing kind of chafed, honestly. These campers and adults would run me through with silver and not bat an eye if they knew the truth about who and what I truly was, yet I was expected to use my hidden strength to protect them.

Charlie must have read my thoughts, because he squeezed my hand.

As Pepperdine continued passing out flashlights, Romilly skirted the edges of the groups and approached us. “Since you four will be bringing up the rear, we’ll need you to close the tunnel behind us. There’s a code box just inside the tunnel. Once everyone is in, including yourselves, press 1234 and the lockers will seal the tunnel shut.”

“1234?” Charlie’s brows lifted. “You come up with that password all on your own?”

She frowned. “You can lecture me on security later. Right now, we need to focus on making sure that every single camper gets out of this nightmare alive.”

“Okay,” he said, clearly chagrined.

Romilly gave us a curt nod and headed back to the front of the group.

“Stay alert, and stay together,” Pepperdine called, and then he, Iris, and Romilly headed into the tunnel. The rest of the campers immediately followed, flashlights held aloft.

Finally, our little evacuation group was the only one left. Before we stepped inside, Charlie turned to Zachery. “Hey, I just wanted to say I hope there’s no hard feelings and we can all just focus on getting to safety—”

Zachery cut him off. “You guys should get moving. I’ll seal up the tunnel and catch up.”

I fought to control my face, and Charlie and I exchanged an uncomfortable look. At least we’d tried, right?

We led the way into the tunnel with Sophie close on our heels. I couldn’t help the shiver that ran down my spine as we were completely encased inside the dank tunnel. It was cold, smelly, and musty. It clearly hadn’t been used in a while.

*I really, really hope all the tunnels are still in working order.*

Up ahead, we could see the flashlights of the groups bobbing up and down in the darkness, and could hear low murmuring, but overall our exodus from the camp was quiet. Too quiet. And tense as hell.

We were still following the bobbing lights when the tunnel took an abrupt turn. For a split second, it looked like the rest of the evacuees had disappeared entirely. We kept pace and followed.

Not wanting to break the near-silence, I mind linked with Charlie. *Do you have any idea where this tunnel is going to lead us?*

*I’m not sure*, he responded. *But I hope it’s a relatively short journey. I don’t love the idea of being stuck in a dark tunnel with a pissed-off Zachery for too long.*

A chill went down my spine at the thought. It was crazy to me that he and Charlie had once been fairly close. Now, it seemed like the guy was a hair away from losing his shit on my mate.

*I can’t say I disagree*, I responded.

I was about to make a bad joke about how being trapped down here with Zachery was only marginally better than just fighting the revenant vampires when all of a sudden I heard footsteps behind me. I’d been waiting for Zachery to catch up to us, so the footsteps themselves weren’t surprising to me.

But the number of footsteps echoing in the tunnel definitely was. Because if Zachery was catching up to us, he wasn’t alone.

I turned to look over my shoulder, and horror rooted me in place when I saw a pair of orange eyes glowing in the darkness behind us.

“*Zachery?*” I turned my flashlight back toward the entrance and caught sight of Zachery running ahead of a group of revenant vampires—too many for me to make out the number clearly. And before I could even open my mouth to warn anyone, the vampires were on us.

Sophie and Charlie turned to look behind us when I did, and we immediately scrambled into battle mode. Well, as much of a battle mode as one could manage in the dark. We grappled with the vampires, avoiding their snapping teeth and trying to land a few blows of our own.

I dropped my flashlight, dimly aware that some of the others in the group were moving back toward us to help, when suddenly a hand gripped my arm. I looked up and could just barely make out Zachery’s face in the dim light. He was hugging tight to the wall and tugging me away from the fighting vampires and hunters, back toward the tunnel entrance.

“Zachery, let go.” I tried to tug my arm out of his grip, but he was too strong while I was still in my human form. What was he doing? I’d thought he was there to help, but now it seemed like he was trying to avoid the fight altogether, even though that meant leaving the other campers at the revenant vampires’ mercy.

And he was taking me with him.

He pulled me farther away, and I desperately reached out through the mind link. *Charlie!*

**Episode 1775**

GREYSON

I was so pissed off about the smugness radiating from Xavier—Cali had chosen *him* to ride back with, so he was probably having a fucking field day with it—that I noticed him skidding to a stop a moment too late.

My own feet bit into the ground, my joints and muscles barking as I slid to a stop just behind them, only inches away from colliding with Xavier and Cali, who looked like she’d nearly been knocked off his back.

What the fuck was his problem? Cali could have been really hurt.

A growl rose up my throat, but then I noticed Cali’s stricken expression and the horror rolling off Xavier in waves. And then I saw the body, and the shock and horror on Cali’s and Xavier’s faces took its turn with me.

Deidamia.

We’d found her too late.

Cali leapt off of Xavier’s back and rushed over to the body. As she leaned over it to inspect it, Cali’s already pale face went ashen. “Oh my god.” Her voice cracked, and she looked up at us, devastation written into the lines of her face. “I think she’s dead!”

Immediately, I followed her over to inspect the body for myself. Might as well put my enhanced senses to good use. Xavier remained stock still, standing a ways back from Deidamia’s prone form.

I snuffled at her body. She didn’t smell dead, exactly, but there was a lingering undertone of decay that told me she wasn’t long for this world. She certainly looked dead. She was shockingly pale, her eyes were wide open and unmoving. Her chest wasn’t rising and falling.

But she didn’t appear to have any injuries. Not so much as a bruise, despite the way her body had fallen to the ground, her limbs akimbo in a way that would have bordered on painful if she were conscious.

“Is she dead?” Cali asked, a few rogue tears slipping down her cheeks. “She really, really doesn’t look good.”

I leaned in and listened… There. I could just make out the faintest heartbeat.

*She’s not gone yet*, I told her. Then to Xavier I said the same, but added, *I don’t think it’ll be long.*

I looked around the clearing. How convenient was it that we’d found Deidamia’s body out here, on the very trail that would take us back to the pack house? Her body definitely hadn’t been there earlier.

*Cali, step away from her body*,I instructed. *This might be some kind of trick.*

I mind linked with Xavier. *Be on alert. We don’t know who or what caused this—or if it’s even real.*

He huffed out a breath. *Believe me, I know exactly what kind of fuckery Letifer is capable of. We need to get out of here, get back to the pack house, and regroup.*

Cali didn’t budge from her spot next to the body. “We can’t just leave her out here like this.”

My heart ached for her. I knew how upsetting this had to be to Cali. She liked Deidamia, but she’d confessed to me that she’d chosen to stay at the pack house instead of going out to the woods to look for her. I could only imagine the mix of horror and grief and misplaced guilt she had to be feeling right now.

Xavier cut in. *We can’t afford to be slowed down right now. The revenants and Letifer are out here. We’re already putting ourselves at a huge risk just by having this conversation.*

*Okay, so you’re voting to leave her, then?* I asked. *She’s not dead yet.*

*You said it yourself: she’s dying. We can’t help her. We don’t even know what did this to her. Besides, if we move her, we could just be speeding her death along, for all we know.*

Tears slipped down Cali’s cheeks in a hot rush. “I’m not leaving her here.”

“I don’t care about the revenants!” she said. Xavier must have said something about them. “I’m not leaving her here to die alone in the woods like nobody cares about her! She deserves better than that.”

I gritted my teeth. I knew better by now than to try to convince Cali to leave Deidamia’s body here. My mate’s capacity for empathy was unlike anything I’d seen before. She wasn’t going to budge on this.

*Go back to the pack house with Xavier*,I finally told her. *I’ll bring her back myself.*

I slowly approached Deidamia’s body and shifted her so she was draped across my back. The mark on my leg started to burn.

Cali looked unsure as she got on Xavier’s back again, but we weren’t going to come up with a better option at this point.

Xavier mind linked with me again. *We need to move fast. I have a bad feeling about all of this. The sooner we get back to the pack, the better.*

*Couldn’t agree more*, I gritted out, trying to ignore the steady burn of my witch mark. *Take Cali back.*

I just barely resisted the urge to point out that Xavier wouldn’t have needed to worry about the pack in the first place if he hadn’t left to follow me. I was still furious about that. I’d thought Xavier wanted to be Alpha. He’d put on this big show about how he was better suited to the job, how he could be more committed than I could right now. And he’d still bailed at the first opportunity to go chase after Cali.

Of course, my advice was probably the last thing in the entire world that Xavier wanted. But the truth was, if he wanted the role—really wanted to be Alpha for the long term—then he needed to step up. Alpha was more than just a title.

Xavier said nothing before taking off with Cali on his back. I followed behind at a sprint with Deidamia’s body bouncing slightly on my back. Since she couldn’t exactly hold on, I needed to be careful to make sure she didn’t fall off.

As we ran, I couldn’t help but ruminate on Xavier butting in and leaving the pack without a leader. Clearly my brother hadn’t trusted that I’d be able to rescue Cali without him. Or maybe he was just being a petty bitch and didn’t want me to get all the glory.

To be fair, if our roles had been reversed, I probably would have done the exact same thing. Cali was too important to not put every possible effort into securing her safety. But didn’t Xavier realize that by leaving them defenseless, all he was doing was proving he wasn’t fit to lead the pack?

Something like guilt curdled in my stomach as I recalled the times I’d done the very same thing. But it wasn’t the same. When I’d left the pack in Xavier’s hands, we hadn’t been on the brink of war with a faction of supernaturals who could wipe us out without even really trying. What I’d done still wasn’t great, but it paled in comparison to how reckless Xavier was being with the pack he’d insisted he was fit to lead.

Xavier was tough, but he had a lot to learn, and more than ever I was convinced that when all of this was over, I’d be the Redwood Alpha again. Cali and I wouldn’t have to run away. No, she’d be by my side. My Luna. My mate.

And, one day, my wife.

But first, we needed to make it back to the pack house in one piece.

I glanced ahead, and the sight of Cali on Xavier’s back didn’t do anything to lessen my irritation, but now wasn’t the time to be petty. I could focus on sorting out all our personal business once the pack was out of danger.

We ran past a steep embankment I remembered passing on my way to find Cali. There was a sheer cliff and a deep drop off—some kind of fallout from a landslide or something.

Without being consciously aware of it, I suddenly veered off and headed straight toward the edge of the cliff. My vision whited out, and the striking image of throwing Deidamia off my back and straight down the steep cliff flashed through my mind. It was so vivid, so detailed, I could picture her body tumbling down the rocky slope, and each jolt that would break her even more.

The image sent a bolt of malicious pleasure through my body, and that, more than anything else, brought me up short.

I skidded to a stop.

*What? Where is this coming from?*

I would never hurt someone like Deidamia—especially not when they were unconscious. I tried to shake off whatever evil urge had taken over, but then my vision whited out again and my body veered back toward that cliff.

Something was forcing me to play out that vision in real life.

I reached the edge of the cliff, ready to shake the unconscious witch off of my back, but then I caught myself.

*Wait! What the hell am I doing?*

**Episode 1776**

I held onto Xavier’s powerful neck as we raced back toward the pack house. Trees, boulders, and bushes blurred past, and I buried my face in his neck. He was running harder than I’d ever seen him run, so fast that the wind whipping past my face brought tears to my eyes.

Well, brought *more* tears.

I’d been quietly weeping into Xavier’s fur since I’d climbed onto his back and we’d resumed our journey back to the pack house. I couldn’t believe Didi was dying. Sure, I knew something bad might have happened to cause her to go missing, but never in a million years had I imagined things would end up this way. With me finding her nearly lifeless body discarded in the woods.

A fresh wave of tears rushed down my cheeks, and I held Xavier tighter as my chest hitched with a sob.

She’d just been *left* there. What would have happened if we hadn’t stumbled across her? Would she have just died alone? Maybe become food for animals in the forest? Who could do that to someone?

*Letifer might.*

My grief went beyond my shattered hope for our survival in the fight against Letifer and the revenants. Sure, our plan to defeat Letifer relied pretty heavily upon Didi, but more importantly, I had really come to like her, to feel for her. She’d never asked to be brought back to life, or for the love of her life to turn into an evil monster after her death.

It had to have hurt deeply to see what Letifer had become, and to side against him in this war. But still, she’d been willing to do it. She’d been willing to help us, for no other reason than because we needed her.

And now she was dead.

I sniffled. The whole thing was just so *tragic*.

First, Didi had come back only to find out her true love had turned into an evil demon, and now this? Now she was just going to die?

I bit my lip hard to muffle a sob.

Xavier’s voice slipped into my mind, soothing and gentle. *Are you all right? I know that must have been hard for you to see.*

I paused, not entirely sure how to answer that. Honestly, I wasn’t okay. I was pretty damn far from okay. Not only had I just stumbled across the dead body of someone I considered a friend, but that had come after I’d been abducted from my sister’s bedroom, hit over the head, and woken up in an open grave in a creepy-ass, probably very much haunted, graveyard.

If I were okay after all that, it would mean something was terribly wrong with me.

Xavier must have misinterpreted my silence, because he added, *I need you to know that I’m sorry for what I said earlier.*

I blinked. What he said? For a long string of seconds, I wasn’t even sure what he was talking about. So much had happened in just the last couple of hours… And then I remembered how my last conversation with Xavier had gone.

*If you like Greyson so much*, he’d said, *then why don’t you just make it official and choose him?*

Oh… that. Honestly, after everything that happened, everything that was *currently* happening, our argument seemed so inconsequential. While we’d been arguing, Didi might have been fighting for her life. What did a lover’s spat matter compared to life and death?

*I didn’t mean it*, Xavier continued. *I’m just under a lot of pressure right now, and I took it out on you. I shouldn’t have ever done that. I know that the arrangement you have with me and Greyson is hard on you, and I’m sorry that I forgot that. I’m sorry I spoke to you like that.*

His words cut through the thick veil of grief that was wrapped around my heart. I could tell he meant every word. Was that why he’d insisted on following Greyson to come find me? Because he felt guilty about our fight?

I’d been wondering what had compelled him to leave the pack behind, and this answer made a lot of sense.

*It’s fine*, I responded. *You don’t need to worry about me right now. You have bigger problems to focus on.*

Hopefully he’d be able to do right by the pack if he worried about me a little less.

Silence set in between us as Xavier continued to race through the trees. Both of us were so lost in our own thoughts that the time passed quickly, and sooner than I expected, Xavier burst through the tree line and into the yard behind the pack house.

Rishika was standing on the porch, keeping vigil, while Ravi paced on the lawn. He stopped short when we approached, and I let out a sigh of relief. Not only was I finally, *finally* back home, but it was clear that things had remained calm while Xavier and Greyson were gone. I’d been so worried that Silas would strike while the pack was distracted… Thank god it hadn’t come to that.

Greyson followed through the trees soon after, Didi still on his back. Rishika and Ravi rushed over to him, crowding around Didi in concern as Greyson gently eased her onto the grass.

“What’s going on?” Ravi demanded.

“What happened to her?” Rishika asked, kneeling down next to the witch and brushing her tousled hair away from her face.

More pack members rushed out of the house to crowd around Didi and Greyson, who had shifted back to human. I watched their interactions for a moment, saw Rishika checking Deidamia’s pulse and frowning, heard Greyson explaining how we’d found her in the woods.

I was standing only a few feet away, next to Xavier’s wolf, but miles could have separated us for how connected I felt to all the people milling around.

*Is this what shock feels like?*

I tried to shake off the feeling and turned away from the group, heading toward the pack house instead of toward the commotion. There were more than enough people there to help Didi—even though I suspected she was beyond help at this point—and besides, I needed to check on Artemis. If I’d woken up in a cemetery, then who knew what had happened to her while I’d been unconscious. There were still so many unanswered questions about blacking out in her room—questions I hoped I’d find the answers to when I reassured myself that my sister was all right.

I was distantly aware of someone behind me calling my name, but I ignored them and trudged into the house and up the stairs. Whoever they were, whatever they wanted, they could wait until I knew Artemis was safe.

I made it to the hallway outside of her bedroom before a warm, firm hand closed around my elbow and gently spun me around.

Xavier. His expression was pinched, worried as he scanned my face. “Please can we talk, Cali?”

I knew he probably thought I was ignoring him because I was angry or something, which wasn’t all that far off the mark, now that I thought about it. So yeah, we probably did need to talk, but Artemis came first.

I blew out a breath. “Just let me make sure my sister’s okay first.”

The door opened, and my mom came out. When she saw me, her eyes went wide and she pulled me into a huge hug. “Cali, you’re okay.”

“Mostly in one piece.” I hugged her back tightly. “Is Artemis okay?”

Mom pulled back and nodded. “She’s just resting. She was badly hurt, but Torin’s healed her now.”

“Oh thank god,” I said. My heart felt like it could unclench a bit.

Mom glanced between me and Xavier. “Why don’t you let your sister sleep? I’ll make sure you see her soon, okay?”

I bit my lip and nodded. Mom cupped my face in her hands and kissed my forehead before heading back into Artemis’s room. I took a deep breath. Artemis was okay. That’s what mattered.

Xavier reached and brushed his fingers against my arm. “Can we talk? Please?”

“Okay,” I conceded. “Let’s talk.”

Offering me a small smile, he pulled me into his bedroom, closing the door behind us. Then he turned to face me—and pulled me into a tight hug. His arms shook around me as he whispered, “I was so worried about you.”

I stepped back. “I’m fine. You shouldn’t worry so much about me, and you definitely shouldn’t have left the pack alone to go find me—”

“I know,” he said brokenly. “And I knew it when I left, but I did it anyway. Cali, I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if anything happened to you.”

Oh. Well, that shut me right up.

“All I could think about when I realized you were missing was that if something happened, then the last words you heard from me would have been cruel.” His voice broke, and his throat bobbed. He shook his head wordlessly. He looked seconds away from completely falling apart.

“Xavier.” I pulled him into a tight hug. “You’re never going to lose me. I promise.”

When I pulled back, I was frozen in place by the intense look in his eyes. Love and lust and desperation and affection, all swirling together. It was heartbreaking and swoony and intoxicating all at once. It was everything I needed to see in that moment, a reminder of just how much I meant to the man in front of me.

He leaned forward, and I met him in the middle for a deep kiss.

**Episode 1777**

XAVIER

If I died right now, kissing the mate I loved more than I’d ever thought possible, I would die a happy man. I cupped Cali’s face, tilting her head so I could deepen the kiss, and lost myself in her. In the taste of her mouth, the sweet sighs she made as she pressed her body against mine, the feel of her soft, warm skin beneath my hands.

This was what I needed, even if I hadn’t known it when I’d pulled her aside to talk. This quiet string of seconds where I had tangible proof that Cali was safe, and that I hadn’t driven her away when my jealousy had—once again—turned me into a complete asshat.

Cali’s palms slid over my chest, and she kissed me back with everything she had as she pressed her body against mine. She was enjoying this just as much as I was, and nothing got me off like seeing her all pink-cheeked and breathless.

I pull away just long enough to get a glimpse of her like that, her lips swollen, her hair and clothes mussed. She was so fucking perfect.

Her wide eyes were inquisitive. “What is it?” she asked, her voice just this side of breathless.

“I just… I want to remember this. Every part of this.”

Her cheeks went a bright shade of red, and her eyes darkened. I tipped my head down and captured her lips with my own again, soft at first, and then hungrier, consuming her with my lips, teeth, and tongue.

Those moments when I’d been convinced that I’d made a mistake by pushing to become Alpha—that in doing so, I’d made myself unavailable to the most important person in my world—had been a horrifying wakeup call. I could be Alpha—a damn good one, too. Better than Greyson could be. But I *couldn’t* compartmentalize when Cali needed me. And if that left the pack without leadership, then so be it. This was Cali, my mate, my future Luna.

My future, period.

And nothing would stand in the way of my being there when she needed me ever again. And as terrified as I had been that something had happened to her, having her here in my arms right now, present and sweet and safe and so fucking sexy… It made everything all right. I felt like I could do anything. Cali gave me the strength to achieve things I never used to think were possible for myself.

I pulled back just long enough to look into her eyes as I mind linked with her. *No matter what happens, Cali, I’ll always be here for you. I’ll always protect you. Always.*

Then I broke my mouth away from hers, peppering her face with little kisses. Cali groaned at the loss of contact, then giggled, then pulled back suddenly, her face flushed.

“I should probably get back to the pack,” I said, a touch of regret slipping into my tone. “I’m the Alpha now, and they need me.”

Her face colored deeper, and she shook her head. “You’re right. I’m sorry. We shouldn’t have done that. Not right now.”

I cupped her face, tilting my head down. “You never need to feel sorry for anything like this. Not with me. Not ever. I knew what I was doing, and I know exactly who I want, and the fact that we’re on the brink of a battle with a bunch of undead psychopaths is literally the only thing pulling me downstairs right now. Nothing else could tear me away.”

A smile tugged at her lips. “How very specific.”

I waggled my eyebrows at her and kissed the tip of her nose. “You are the most important person to me. Ever.”

That smile became wistful. “I know.”

I dropped one more kiss onto those luscious lips of hers and then backed away so she could move to the mirror on my dresser to fix her mussed hair and clothes. Then she glanced out the window and turned back to me. All the pleasure was gone from her face, replaced by worry. “They’re all still down there on the lawn with Didi. We should get downstairs.”

I gave her a long, lingering look. Nothing sounded worse right now than leaving this room and heading downstairs to insert myself into that shitshow outside.

*This is everything I wanted, isn’t it? I have Cali. I’m Alpha…*

And yet, something didn’t seem quite right. Some piece of the puzzle wasn’t snapping into place the way I’d always thought it would.

I shook myself and pulled some clothes on. “You’re right.”

I glanced through the window to see the pack clustered outside. The entire pack. Everyone except me and Cali.

*Fuck. She was definitely right. The pack needs their Alpha right now, and I need to step up if we’re all gonna get through this in one piece.*

I kissed her forehead. “You coming with?”

“Give me a few minutes. I’m gonna check if my mom needs help, and then I’ll be down to see about Didi.”

I hurried down the stairs and out the back door of the pack house to where everyone was gathered on the lawn.

Greyson looked up at me as I approached, finger combing my mussed hair into something resembling order.

He scowled. “Oh, Xavier. It’s so nice to have our Alpha join us out here.”

I ignored my brother and looked at Torin, who was leaning over Deidamia, his hands glowing blue as they moved over her body. Someone must have grabbed him to work his healing magic on her. I was skeptical about it, honestly. She’d seemed like she had both feet in the grave when we’d found her, but if anyone could bring the witch back from the brink of death, it was Torin.

I eyed Deidamia. She looked even more dead now than she had out in the woods.

“Is she dead?” I asked Torin.

He looked up at me, his face uncharacteristically grave. “Yes. I tried to save her, but she was too far gone.”

Shit. Cali was going to be devastated. I’d hoped—for her sake *and* Deidamia’s, frankly—that the witch could have been saved. Cali hadn’t been lying when she’d said Deidamia deserved better than to be killed and dumped in the woods.

And… double shit. What were we supposed to do now? Deidamia was going to create an orb to trap Letifer using ancient magic, and now she was gone. We’d put all our eggs in that basket. We didn’t have any other tricks up our sleeve to stop him. What the hell were we going to do?

The rest of the pack must have come to this conclusion long before I’d made my way downstairs, and they all looked at me, worried, but waiting for their Alpha to address the complete collapse of our plans.

I blew out a breath. I knew I needed to say something reassuring, that right now everyone needed comfort instead of my special brand of blunt reality. Not exactly my strong suit, but I could pull something together. Something about how the night was always darkest before the dawn. How we’d beaten the odds before. How we needed to fight even harder so that Deidamia’s loss wouldn’t be in vain, or something to that effect.

But before I could so much as string a sentence together, a hand wrapped tight around my arm and tugged me to the side, away from the center of the pack. I half-expected it to be Greyson offering unsolicited notes on how badly I was fucking things up.

But the person who’d grabbed me was Rishika. And she looked pissed.

Her nostrils flared as she stared me down. “What the hell do you think you and Greyson were doing, running off to who knows where to go after Cali without telling anyone?”

My brows lifted. “I don’t have to explain myself to you. I’m the Alpha here, and I didn’t think the pack was in any imminent danger. But if Cali, on the other hand, had run into Letifer, she would have needed an Alpha. And I don’t know if you’ve forgotten this, but we needed Deidamia for the spell.” I blew out a breath. “And now at least we know we need a new plan. We’re lucky that Cali was unharmed…”

Rishika’s eyes widened, and she stared at me like I’d grown a second head. “*You didn’t* *think* *the pack was in any imminent danger?* Are you shitting me, Xavier?”

I really didn’t have time for this. We could be attacked by those revenants at any moment, our last hope against Letifer was currently lying dead on my lawn, and I didn’t give a fuck what Rishika thought of my decisions.

I stepped forward so that I was looming over her. “You wanted me to be Alpha, so back the fuck off.”

But she wasn’t backing down. Not one bit. She glared at me, her voice promising violence. “Yes, but you wouldn’t like it if I changed my vote, would you?”

**Episode 1778**

CHARLIE

It was complete and utter chaos in the tunnel, and I couldn’t get a handle on what was happening. Unsteady flashlight beams bounced all around me, messing with my wolf vision and adding to the confusion. The revenant vampires were relentless and coming from every direction, hissing and spitting, their eyes flashing bright orange as they leapt toward me in a constant stream of savage attacks. I had to use every skill at my disposal just to stay one step ahead, jetting out of the way of their strikes and their claws, knowing that if I didn’t, I’d be a goner. It wasn’t easy. They were fast as lightning and tore at my clothes in their attempts to get close enough to take a bite out of me, their claws lashing out with amazing speed.

The air was filled with shouts and screams as everyone joined in on the deadly fight. I could make out the flash of fists flying and stakes stabbing through the air. The vampires were strong, like the one that had taken Pepperdine down, and I was using every ounce of strength I had to keep myself from catching a pair of fangs in the throat.

*Charlie!* Violet’s mind link crackled to life in my head, and I whipped around. Where was she?It was too crazy for me to even begin to pick her out in the jumble of bodies careening around me. I needed to get clear of this so I could find her.

I took a step back, ducking out of the way of a few swings that would’ve taken me out for sure if they’d connected. I pressed my back against the curved wall of the tunnel and took a deep breath as I shone my flashlight around, hoping to catch sight of Violet nearby. I concentrated, trying to refocus my eyes and get a good read on the situation. Weird. Now that I was able to get a good look, I realized that there weren’t as many vampires as I’d first thought. There were about five or six max, and from the looks of things, the hunters had things under control. It was quite a sight to behold, and again, I was impressed by how well-trained the hunters were.

I realized that if they ever did turn on Violet and me, we’d have a real fight on our hands. Even in the short time that I stood there, vampires were hitting the ground, rolling around in pain as hunters fell upon them, stabbing their stakes into their hearts. Of course, they weren’t turning to ash since they were revenants, but they were out of commission and unable to attack any longer, which was all that mattered. I swung my flashlight around frantically, searching for Violet in the bedlam, but I didn’t see her anywhere.

*Violet, where are you?* I mind linked back to her, hoping and praying that she could hear me.

*It’s Zachery! He grabbed me and he’s dragging me back to the front of the tunnel!* she replied, her voice laced with frustration.

Without another thought, I took off toward the tunnel entrance. What the hell was Zachery up to? I ran as fast as I could until I’d finally left the fight behind and I could just make out Zachery dragging Violet away toward the entrance as she struggled to twist out of his grip. When Zachery saw me, he started moving faster, his arm linked tightly around Violet’s waist. The sight of it sent a spike of anger ripping through me, and I picked up speed.

“Let her go!” I shouted as I caught up to them. I gave Zachery a savage shove, sending him off balance and slamming into the wall. At the same moment, Violet tore herself out of Zachery’s hold. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?” I growled. Without giving Zachery a chance to answer, I turned to Violet. “Are you okay? Did he hurt you?” I took her by the shoulders and looked her over carefully, knowing that if I saw even a scratch on her, I wouldn’t be able to stop myself from tearing Zachery to shreds.

“I’m fine, Charlie, really!” Violet said. She was still breathing hard, but I could tell that she was okay. My heart warmed as I looked at her. I didn’t know what I would’ve done if something had happened to her, but I should’ve known she’d be fine—she was a badass, after all. She turned to look at Zachery. “But yeah, what the hell were YOU doing? There are vampire revenants in there!” Violet said, thrusting a hand at the entrance.

Zachery just stood there, not saying a word. It was really pissing me off. I grabbed Violet’s hand and moved her a little bit behind me, wanting to create a barrier between her and Zachery. I didn’t know what he was capable of anymore, and there was no way he was going to get his hands on her ever again. We both glared at him as he looked back and forth between us, clearly irritated by our closeness.

“Look man, I was just trying to get her to safety! You saw how chaotic it was back there; I didn’t want you to get hurt!” Zachery said, his eyes on Violet. My wolf vision was back in full effect, and I could see the dumb expression on his face in the darkness. I couldn’t believe I’d actually kind of liked this guy! I should’ve known better than to trust a hunter of all people, even one who seemed harmless and good-natured.

“I don’t need you to take care of me!” Violet spat. “I’m more than capable of taking care of myself. You should know that by now. I was the one who actually killed that vampire you were so proud of taking down in the first place!”

Zachery wilted with embarrassment but remained silent, his eyes riveted to his feet.

I took a step toward him, doing my best to keep my cool. “And even if she did need protecting, she wouldn’t need it from you!”

Zachery flushed and shook his head. “I was doing what I thought was best to protect one of my evacuation group members.” His voice was shaky, and it seemed like even he didn’t believe what he was saying.

I snorted in disbelief. “Yeah, right. I’m sure it had nothing to do with the fact that you’re obsessed with Daisy even though she doesn’t want you!”

I didn’t understand where all this was coming from. The venom in my tone even surprised me a little, but if Zachery wanted to play this game, then I planned to win it. Zachery and I stood locked in a tense stare-off for a long moment. I wasn’t backing down, not when it came to Violet, not ever.

Violet jerked in surprise beside me. “Guys, listen!”

The sound of fighting had suddenly died down.

“The hunters must have won,” I said. “There weren’t all that many vampires, few enough that we should’ve been able to take care of them.”

*These hunters really know how to hold their own*, Violet said.

*Yeah, let’s hope we’re never forced to go up against them*,I replied as I thought about the secret that Violet and I were keeping. I shuddered at the thought but pushed it out of my head.

Soon, we heard the sound of footsteps and worried murmurs rounding the bend, and then the entire group of hunters, led by Sophie, was right in front of us. Sophie looked beyond relieved to see us.

“I’m so glad you all are okay! I thought I’d lost my evacuation group!” she said.

The rest of the group rushed up to us, Romilly and Pepperdine shoving to the front.

“What are you three doing all the way back here?” Pepperdine asked. Despite his injuries from before, he looked strong and capable, though he was still a bit out of breath from the latest fight. Romilly was right beside him, a look of relief on her face as she watched us closely.

“Well, I saw that things were getting intense, so I was trying… to get them to safety!” Zachery piped up.

He was an awful liar, and I just wished that he would shut up. I rolled my eyes and happened to glance up ahead of us where the entrance to the tunnel was clearly still open. What the hell? I turned back to Zachery in disbelief.

“What were you planning to do, exactly?” I asked him.

“What?” Zachery’s brow was knitted in confusion. “I don’t understand what happened—I did exactly what Romilly told me to do. I have no idea how the vampires got in!”

I stood there in shock as a horrible sneaking suspicion began to dawn on me. I rounded on Zachery as the hunters looked on in astonishment and confusion.

“That’s not true, its it?” I looked to Violet, my heart lurching in my chest before I trained my gaze back on Zachery, who was all but cowering in front of me. “You left the tunnel open because you wanted us to be attacked!”

**Episode 1779**

LOLA

I was downstairs in the makeshift lab with Emmett, Jay, and Jacqueline. We were all watching with interest as Emmett buzzed around the place, testing and mixing and heating things up on a Bunsen burner. I was still impressed by how fast Emmett had gotten the place together so that the setup looked nearly identical to his lab back at Tottenville. Of course, he didn’t have all his supplies, but he’d brought a hell of a lot with him and had definitely made himself at home.

Emmett looked every bit the mad scientist as he moved about making adjustments. There were bottles of serum everywhere, and he’d been working overtime to perfect the formula. He was sporting large bags under his eyes and looked like he hadn’t showered or slept a wink since he’d arrived. Irma’s body was lying on the table in front of us, which was still a strange sight to see, made even weirder by the reality that Emmett and Jacqueline were here in the pack house with us.

I still couldn’t really believe it. Back at Tottenville, I never would have imagined that things would end up this way.

I was relieved that Cali had made it back safe. Orla had rushed down to tell me that she was okay, and I couldn’t wait to give Cali a hard time about it when we spoke next, but right now, I was focused on Emmett. His face was a mask of concentration as he fiddled with the materials on his work tray and stood over Irma’s silent form, lying on the table. I swallowed roughly. *Well, here goes nothing, I suppose.*

“Do you really think this is a good idea?” Jay leaned over and whispered in my ear. “If the serum hasn’t been tested before, Irma could die.”

Emmett looked up at us. “You do realize that I can hear you?”

I spoke up. “I know that it hasn’t been tested in gas form before, but the serum has been effective otherwise. We saw it work with Jacqueline, and with Winifred, and now with Xavier and Greyson, too. We need this to work, and hopefully it will.” I looked down at Irma. “Besides, it’s not like we have a lot of options for her that aren’t experimental. This is all kind of uncharted territory, here.”

It was actually kind of invigorating. We were a part of something big, something that would help protect the pack house while also making sure that we would never have anything to fear from the revenants ever again. If Emmett could pull this off, everything would change.

“If this does actually work on Irma,” I added, “we’ll be able to disperse it out among the revenants and neutralize them before there’s even any kind of battle. To me, that’s worth it.”

“You’re right,” Jay agreed, but he still didn’t look completely convinced. I understood his skepticism, but I was trying my best to be positive. We were running out of options, truth be told, and I knew that getting this serum to work was our best hope to make sure that the pack came out of this unscathed.

A few more minutes stretched by as Emmett finalized his last bit of preparations, then he let out a deep sigh and looked up at us. “I’m ready if you are.”

Jay and I exchanged a look and nodded slowly. “We’re ready.”

Jay and I clasped hands and held our breath as Emmett carefully attached the reverse engineered gas mask to Irma’s prone form. Everyone was quiet, and the atmosphere in the room was tense until Jay broke the silence by loudly whispering, “I feel like I’m in some kind of cheesy sci-fi flick from the eighties or something.”

Emmett glared at him. “This is serious science!”

“Sure, sure, I get it,” Jay said, holding up his hands.

Emmett trained his attention back on Irma and opened a valve on the mask that allowed the gas to flow inside. A loud hissing sound filled the room, and Emmett stepped back as we all watched with bated breath. For a long moment, nothing happened. The mask on Irma’s face had clouded with the gas, and we couldn’t see anything. Irma’s body was stock still on the examining table. Then I saw it.

“Her finger is moving!” I called out.

Suddenly, Irma’s hands flew up and clawed at the mask. It looked like she was suffocating.

“Emmett, get it off her! She wants it off!” I screamed.

Emmett launched into action. He ripped the mask from Irma’s face and tossed it over to Jacqueline, who tossed it onto the table beside her like it was a hot potato. Irma sat up with a gasp, her chest heaving as she tried to catch her breath. We all took a step back, trying to give her some space. Slowly, she started to calm and her breathing slowed to normal. She opened her eyes slowly and gasped again. Other than the shocked expression on her face, she looked totally normal—no orange eyes, and she wasn’t trying to kill us. I took that as a good sign.

“Where am I?” Irma asked, casting a confused look around the room.

I followed her gaze as she eyed her new surroundings. I could imagine that the makeshift lab looked super spooky to someone who’d just woken up with no idea how they’d gotten there.

“Irma, you’re fine. You’re safe,” I assured her. I shot an excited glance at Emmett. I was thrilled! “Oh my god, does this mean it worked?” I was all but hopping up and down with glee. “Jay, Emmett, you two stay with Irma—I have to go tell the others about this. It could change everything!”

I raced upstairs and took a quick look around the house, finally spotting Xavier alone out on the porch. I made a beeline for him and burst through the door, trying to catch my breath. “Emmett did it! He came up with a possible cure for the revenants!”

“What? What do you need?” Xavier asked, as tense and curt as ever as he took a moment to focus on me.

*Talk about a buzzkill.* I didn’t care, though—I was still excited, and Xavier would be, too, once he realized the breakthrough that Emmett had just made.

“Emmett, he figured out a way to distill the serum into a gas, and it possibly cured Irma! If we can disperse the gas out over the revenants in the woods, they would revert back to their original state! Then they probably won’t attack us anymore! Isn’t that great?”

Xavier was still playing it cool, but that was no surprise. “Are you sure?” he asked, standing up and giving me an appraising look. He was definitely a question first, react later type of guy.

I gave him the most vigorous nod I could manage, hoping even a shred of my excitement would transfer over to him. Didn’t he realize how big this was? “I’m sure, I saw it with my own eyes. We put the mask on Irma, filled it with Emmett’s gas, and she sat up and looked totally normal. No orange eyes, she wasn’t hell-bent on trying to kill any of us, it was great!”

Xavier still didn’t look convinced. “Yeah, but that doesn’t really mean anything’s cured.”

“I agree, we probably still need to observe her for a bit, but it’s worth a shot! This is amazing! Don’t you realize how good this is? I’m sure this is going to save us all, and not a moment too soon!”

Xavier shrugged. “It’s better than nothing, I guess. I doubt it’ll be enough to take out that fucking Silas-Letifer hybrid we’re dealing with, but if he didn’t have an army of revenants behind him, he’d be far easier to deal with.”

I nodded, a little calmer this time. Okay, so it was clear that Xavier wasn’t going to reach my level of excitement about this, but at least he was starting to see what a boon this would be during our battle with Letifer. We needed any advantage that we could get.

Suddenly, there was a loud commotion from inside the pack house—the sound of a door slamming open from somewhere inside, followed by a flurry of loud footsteps. Xavier and I turned just in time to see Irma come bursting through the door, Emmett and Jay trailing desperately behind her. To my horror, Irma looked worse than ever. He eyes were open wide and glowing bright orange, and she was foaming at the mouth and hissing ferociously.

In that moment, I realized that Irma looked like what I imagined a super-revenant would look like. She looked completely inhuman, foam dripping and flying out of her mouth as she all but growled at us. Fear rippled through me, and I looked around the room at the others. We were all speechless as Irma rose.

Her glowing orange eyes stared into mine as she reached right for me.

**Episode 1780**

I was in the hallway right outside Artemis’s door, leaning up against the wall and trying to orient myself. I knew I should listen to Mom and just let Artemis rest, but there was so much going on that my head was spinning. I pressed a finger to my lips as my mind reeled. I couldn’t believe that I’d just made out with Xavier only a few seconds ago. I could still feel the sensation of his lips on mine. What the hell had I been thinking?

*Shit.* Now wasn’t the time to dwell on it. It had happened, and I couldn’t lie and say that I hadn’t enjoyed it. I always did. Xavier did something to me, and despite all the complications that existed between the three of us, he was still my mate and it was hard to stay away from him. I wouldn’t beat myself up over it, not right now. I shook my head. I had to get it together and stay focused.

Still, it was a little strange that Xavier was the Alpha now. So much had changed in such a small amount of time, it was like we were in some kind of alternate universe. It was all just so different, a taste of how things could have been.

I rapped lightly on Artemis’s door and waited a beat before entering to find Artemis sitting up in bed, wide awake.

Her eyes lit up when she saw me. “Cali! I’m so happy that you’re safe. Orla told me what happened. I was worried about you.”

I smiled, happy to be with my sister right now, when everything was so out of sorts. I thought back to how strangely she’d acted right after our initial face-off with Letifer. I was happy to see that she seemed back to normal and was recovering. “I’m sorry for worrying you, Artemis. I know you need to focus on getting better. How are you feeling?”

Artemis waved it away. “I’m fine.” She smiled and patted a spot beside her on the bed.

I sat down beside her, still feeling a bit confused about what exactly had happened to me.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” I said. “I’m okay too, I guess, but I still don’t get it, really. One minute I was here with you in the bedroom, and the next, I was out in the woods,” I finished lamely, not wanting to get into everything that had happened in the cemetery and freak Artemis out. She’d already been through enough, and I was really worried about her. “I know that you were pretty out of it, but did you happen to see what happened to me?”

I was trying to take it in stride, the fact that I didn’t remember a thing about how I’d gotten to the cemetery. It wasn’t a good feeling to realize that I’d lost so much time. Who knew what had happened in those dark moments that I couldn’t recall?

Artemis paused, then frowned a little. “I was falling asleep… But I remember hearing you say something about going to look for Didi, about needing to bring her back to the pack house.”

I shook my head, struck by that bit of news. “What? I don’t remember saying that!” An uneasy feeling came over me. *Am I losing my marbles?*

Before I could ask Artemis to tell me more, a chorus of alarmed shouts rose up from downstairs.

I shot to my feet. “Oh god! Are Letifer and the revenants finally attacking?”

I knew that we were on borrowed time—I’d only hoped that we’d manage to figure things out before Letifer came at us again.

I raced downstairs, Artemis following slowly behind me.

I stopped short when I saw everyone huddled around something on the ground. As I took in the scene, I realized that nearly everyone in the pack house was there. I walked closer, almost afraid to see what we were dealing with, but I could tell by the looks on their faces that whatever it was they were looking at on the floor, it wasn’t good.

“What’s going on?” I asked, out of breath and nervous. “Are we under attack?”

They all turned to look at me, and I was struck by how pale and upset Lola looked. They all broke the circle to reveal Irma’s limp body, sprawled out on the floor. She was dead, there was no mistaking it.

I gasped and took a few steps back. “What happened?”

Jay was the first to speak. “Emmett’s experiment,” he began, his tone grim. “We thought that the new gas he created could cure the revenants, so we tested it on Irma. It seemed to work, for a moment—until it made things way worse. It turned her into something we hadn’t seen before—like a super-revenant.” Jay shuddered and shook his head.

“She… She was out of control. She tried to attack Lola, so I was forced to kill her,” Emmett added quietly.

“Cali, I feel horrible,” Lola said. “I never meant to hurt Irma, I just wanted to help the pack.” She covered her face with her hands and began to cry.

There was a sharp pang in my heart. I really felt for Lola. I reached out and took her hand as Xavier tried to console her.

“Lola, we had no way of knowing that this would happen. There was nothing that we could have done. Irma was strong, far stronger than any of the other revenants we’ve dealt with. It’s clear now that the gas isn’t going to work—at least on vampire revenants, that is.” Xavier turned to address the entire pack. “We’re going to need to find another way to defeat the revenants, and more pressingly, Letifer.”

The thought of stopping Letifer brought me up short. I had no clue how we were going to do it. The serum had seemed like our best course of action, the one thing that could save the pack from suffering any bloodshed, and now that option had been taken away. I took a quick glance down at Irma and then looked away. Everything was going to shit, and time was ticking away. Letifer wouldn’t wait out there forever. There had to be a way*.* Then I remembered.

“Wait, how is Didi? Is there any way we can revive her?” I asked anxiously, hoping that with a house full of witches, Fae, and everything in between, we’d be able to do something about Didi’s state.

“I don’t think so, Cali,” Torin said, his voice startling me as he came up from behind me, a grave expression on his face. “She’s dead. There’s nothing we can do.”

“But… But…” I was grasping at straws. This couldn’t be it. We’d brought her back from the dead once, why couldn’t we just do it again? “But Greyson said that maybe it was a trick, that it wasn’t really her or something…” I trailed off as everyone flashed sympathetic looks my way. Was she really gone? Just like that?

“I don’t think so, Cali,” Big Mac said in a soft voice.

I knew that if Big Mac thought there was a way to bring Didi back, she would do everything in her power to make it happen. So there was nothing we could do. Tears sprang into my eyes as I came to terms with the reality that Didi was gone for good. I felt so bad for her. She’d deserved so much more than to be brought back only to see that the love of her life had turned into a monster. I just couldn’t shake the fact that we’d brought her back only for her to die again.

A really bad feeling circled in my chest, and for a second it felt like I was choking. I felt responsible. It had all been my idea, after all. I’d put a helpless person in danger. This was all so unfair to Didi. She hadn’t asked to be called here, and all it had gotten her in the end was tragedy.

Perhaps sensing that I wasn’t taking the news well, Greyson came close and took my hand in his, giving it a squeeze. I could feel Xavier’s eyes on us, and I saw the pulse of his jaw that meant he was gritting his teeth, but surprisingly, he didn’t comment. Instead, he turned to address the group—as the Alpha should.

“Didi’s death is a tragedy, of course, but it leads us to a bigger problem. We were counting on Didi to help us take down Letifer. We know from experience that there’s no way to just take him out with physical force. We need a magical solution, something that he won’t see coming. Unfortunately, without Didi, we no longer have the means to create an orb to trap him.”

Suddenly, a faint voice piped up from the corner—it was Astrid, pale and gaunt, bracing herself against the wall. She cleared her throat. “Maybe we do.”

**Episode 1781**

Astrid looked worse than I’d ever seen her. She was as pale as a ghost, and she could barely hold up her own weight. Torin and I rushed to her side to support her.

“You should be in bed, Astrid!” Torin said gently, wrapping his arms around her as we made to guide her back to her room.

Astrid pulled away from us, waving Torin off as she eased herself down onto the couch.

“I’m okay, really,” she said. She leaned back into the couch cushions and took a deep, labored breath.

Greyson and Xavier knelt in front of her. I could tell that they wanted to be sensitive to her state, but that they also wanted to know what she’d meant, exactly. Did she really know another way to get Letifer into an orb?

“What do you mean, Astrid? Are you saying that there might still be a way to use an orb to defeat him?” Xavier asked.

“I think we might still be able to make an orb. It will require a lot of energy, but I know that I can do it,” Astrid said, her voice clear and laced with more conviction than before.

“What are you saying? That we should still try to go through with making the orb without Didi?” Big Mac asked, her eyebrows arched as she moved closer to Astrid. “I don’t know if you noticed, but we’re down to two witches.”

Astrid shook her head weakly. “It might not be as strong as if Didi were able to do it herself, but my Fae magic should be able to strengthen a witch-made orb long enough to capture what’s left of the magic in Didi’s body.”

I frowned down at Astrid. “If it requires a lot of energy—*your* Fae magic—for it to work, then you’re the absolute last person who should be volunteering to do this.” I glanced around the room. “Astrid isn’t the only Fae here.” I stepped forward. “If Fae magic can help strengthen an orb made by the witches, then I volunteer to lend my magic to the cause.”

Astrid shook her head no. “It’s precisely because it willrequire so much Fae *blood* that I need to be the one to do it.”

Torin shook his head, a slight frown on his face. “No, that doesn’t make any sense.”

Astrid looked up at Torin tenderly, then reached out and took his hand. “I can tell that my time is coming to an end.”

“No, don’t say that!” Torin and I said in unison.

I dropped down to the floor beside Greyson and Xavier and took Astrid’s hand. “Why are you saying that, Astrid?” I asked this even though I knew the answer, but I didn’t want to believe that things had become this dire. “I know you’re offering to give up your life to save the pack, but I can’t let you do that.”

“*We* won’t let you!” Torin chimed in.

“No, not when you’ve been here for us every step of the way,” I said.

The rest of the group had gathered in close around us. Marta pushed to the front to stand beside Kira and Big Mac, who were hovering over Astrid, their expressions marred by worry and sadness.

Out of habit, I looked to Greyson. He couldn’t let Astrid do this. Then I winced as I realized my mistake. This wasn’t up to him anymore. He was no longer the Redwood Alpha. It wasn’t his call to make any longer.

I looked to Xavier. “Please, she’s our friend! There has to be another way.”

I didn’t think I could take losing anyone else. We’d already lost enough people that we cared about, and others had already been hurt. There was no way we could willingly lose Astrid now, too. I wouldn’t allow it!

Before Xavier could reply, Astrid pulled her hands out of our grasp, looked from Xavier to Greyson, and smiled. “You can let me do this, and you have to,” she said softly. “I know now that this is my purpose here—I don’t want my death to be meaningless, and I know that if we do this, I can save you all.”

Torin burst into tears, and I wasn’t far behind. I couldn’t believe that it had come to this. Everything was just so fucked up.

“No, Astrid. You don’t have to do this!” I cried. “Whatever’s wrong with you, Torin can fix it! We’ll find another way to save the pack!”

Greyson and Xavier exchanged a look, and it was clear that they were both thinking the same thing. I couldn’t help but wonder if Astrid had gotten it wrong. *Is she really dying?* The thought hit me hard, and my sobs intensified. She was hell-bent on doing this, on sacrificing herself for the pack, but there was no way we could all just stand by and let her make such a big decision without questioning it, without trying to stop it.

Astrid turned to Big Mac and Kira. “You know how volatile Fae magic can be.”

“I know,” Big Mac agreed.

Astrid nodded. “That’s why it has to be me. I’m not willing to let anyone else put themselves at risk when I’m more than willing to do it. I want to help. Let me help! This pack has been more of a family to me than anything I’ve ever had before. If I’m going to die, then I want to die protecting you all. This is my choice to make.”

Torin and I dissolved into tears, and I turned away from Astrid and fell into his arms, distraught and in disbelief that this was actually happening. I could hear sniffles and sobs from the rest of the pack, too. No one spoke for a long while. We were all just trying our best to come to terms with what Astrid was saying, and I was certain that we were all hoping that some other way to get through this would present itself before Astrid had to make the ultimate sacrifice.

“I can’t let this happen,” I whimpered, pulling away from Torin and dropping down in front of Astrid. “If it’s Fae magic we need, Fae blood or whatever it is that will work, I can do it. You can use me. I’m strong, and I know I can handle it if you tell me what to do. There has to be another way.” I turned to Torin, who was now sobbing in my dad’s arms. “Right?”

Torin turned to look at me, tears streaming down his face. I didn’t like the look he was giving me. “No, I’m sorry, Cali. Astrid’s right. There’s not much more that we can do for her. Her lifeforce… It’s waning, and there’s nothing I can do about it. I tried!” Torin fell into another wave of sobs, and he leaned against my dad, who rubbed his shoulders briskly and held him close. “I’ve been doing everything I can to keep her comfortable, but I don’t think…” Torin’s words died in his throat as he tried again to hold off another wave of body-racking sobs. “I don’t think she’s going to get any better.”

I covered my face, the tears flowing freely and sadness blotting out my thoughts. After a few minutes, I managed to calm down and glanced down at Astrid. She hadn’t even shed one tear. She had a calm, peaceful look of acceptance on her face, and I wished it made me feel better to know that she’d made peace with her fate, but it didn’t.

“Believe me, this is hard for me, and I know it’s hard on all of you, too,” she said. “But this is the only way that we can make a new orb without Didi.”

“How?” I blurted out. “And how do you know it’ll work?”

Astrid shook her head. “I just… I can feel it. I know it to be true.”

Greyson moved closer to Big Mac as Torin and I both sat on either side of Astrid and wrapped our arms around her.

“Do you think she’s really onto something here?” Greyson asked Big Mac quietly.

Big Mac, usually the picture of composure in all situations, seemed a little shaken up as she answered. “I think she’s onto something, yes. There’s a possibility that it will work.”

I looked up at Greyson, so grateful for him in that moment. Despite everything, he was slipping back into Alpha mode.

“Fae magic *is* incredibly powerful,” Big Mac continued. “And Astrid’s sacrifice would only strengthen the magic if Kira and I create an orb of our own—like the one Didi was going to help us make. We can try to use what’s left of Didi’s magic to help create it, too. Magic tends to linger even after a witch dies.”

Xavier moved close to listen in on Big Mac’s plan as well. “It’s not like we have a lot of other alternatives,” he said.

I laid my head on Astrid’s shoulder, my heart breaking. Astrid was my friend. She had helped me through so much in the Fae world and the pack here… I couldn’t stop thinking that there had to be another way, that there was something, anything, that we could do other than this.

Astrid straightened, looking a little stronger than she had even moments ago. She had a determined look on her face, now that she had resolved herself to her purpose. She shrugged gently out of our embrace and looked up at the witches.

“We should do this as soon as possible,” she said. “I’m not sure how much longer I have. I’m ready. Are you?”

**Episode 1782**

MARTA

Once the shock of Astrid offering to give her life to save the pack had waned a little, everyone snapped into action. There was a hint of nervousness in the air as everyone set about putting the plan in motion, but there was some relief too. Everyone seemed relieved to finally have a concrete course of action to follow. No one spoke much as we made quick work of clearing most of the furniture out of the den in preparation.

For the most part, I lingered in the corner of the room, pitching in when I could snap out of the uneasiness that was nagging at the back of my mind. I couldn’t believe this was happening, and so fast at that. I kept looking over at Astrid, who was still sitting calmly on the couch with Cali and Torin at her side. They were completely distraught, in total contrast to Astrid, who looked like today was just any other day and not the day that she would give her life for us.

I was impressed by Astrid’s bravery, her resolve. I didn’t think I’d be willing to do what she was, sacrificing myself for the pack, and I was moved by her selflessness. It had to be scary to know that you were moments away from death, but Astrid was taking it in stride. I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that I wouldn’t be that strong if I were in the same situation. Even now, I was a nervous wreck in contemplation of the part I had to play.

Big Mac had pulled me aside right after everything had been decided so that she could explain what I’d have to do in my role as a bridge. Big Mac had done her best to calm my nerves and had thanked me for doing my part to save the pack. I was grateful for her encouragement, and I’d listened intently as she laid out how it would go. My role was simple enough—it was basically the same as the last version of the plan, in that all I had to do was stand there—but I was still hoping that I didn’t mess anything up. If Astrid ended up sacrificing herself for nothing because of a mistake I made… I shook my head, not wanting to let that thought run its course. I couldn’t handle even the *idea* of any more tragedy taking place today.

“I know this must be stressful for you,” Lilac said. He was standing close to me with that same concerned look on his face he always had whenever I was about to dive into something I wasn’t sure about—which seemed to be happening more and more lately. “Remember that this is a good thing. Well, maybe not for Astrid…”

I shot Lilac a withering look.

Lilac pressed his lips together. “I think that this has a good chance of working, and I’m proud of you—you’re playing a pivotal role in saving the pack.” Lilac grabbed my hand, sending a jolt of electricity through me.

I squeezed back, realizing how comforting his once annoying presence had grown to be. I couldn’t imagine going through this without him by my side.

Big Mac had rolled up one of the large Persian rugs and propped it up in a corner. In its place, she and Kira were busy drawing out complex symbols and shapes on the floor with white chalk. I watched them closely, curious yet frightened of what the symbols meant.

Lilac followed my gaze. “It’s like we’re in an episode of *Charmed*.”

“Huh? What’s *Charmed*?”

Lilac chuckled. “It’s a TV show about kick-ass witches. We’ll have to binge it once we’re all safe. They totally get a lot of details about supernatural shit wrong, but it’s still fun.”

A warm feeling flowed through me as I imagined Lilac and me, snuggled up on a couch, watching TV shows. I longed for that, a sense of normalcy, but I forced myself to focus on the present. The only way any of us would get a shred of normalcy was by defeating our enemies first.

Big Mac finished the last of the symbols with a flourish and then stood up and looked around the group. “We’re ready to begin.”

Everyone gathered in a little closer, arranging themselves in a large circle around the symbols.

Big Mac motioned to Greyson, who was standing by with Didi’s body cradled in his strong arms. “Lay her down in the middle of the Bismuth symbol.”

Greyson flashed her a look of confusion.

“The one that looks like a big filled-in circle with horns,” Big Mac supplied.

Greyson nodded and did as he was told. He took the utmost care as he laid Didi down on the floor, showing a tenderness and respect for her that really made me appreciate the fact that Greyson was here during this difficult moment. A lump formed in my throat as I looked down at Didi’s lifeless body, lying there on the floor. I hadn’t known Didi for long, of course, but seeing her like that was awful. In the small amount of interaction we’d had, she’d seemed to be a strong, capable, sweet woman. It was unbelievable that I’d helped to bring her back only to see her lying there dead such a short time later.

Astrid surveyed the symbols that Kira and Big Mac had drawn, and nodded with satisfaction. She sighed as she heaved herself up off of the couch. Torin and Cali rushed to her side in an attempt to support her weight, but she waved them away to stand tall on her own. Again, I was in awe of her bravery and strength at what had to be the hardest moment of her life.

“Astrid,” Big Mac said in a gentle tone. “You stand to the left of Didi, on the air symbol.”

Without hesitation, Astrid strode over to the symbol that looked like a triangle with a space between the pinnacle and the base and stood there, waiting. I couldn’t help but notice how beautiful she looked, almost as if in these last moments, all of the traces and effects of her injury were gone.

“Marta, go stand on the silver symbol.” Big Mac directed me to the symbol of a large moon, to the right of Astrid.

Lilac shot me an encouraging look as I made my way over to it. I felt a little awkward as I stood there, hoping that this would all be over quickly—which would give me less of an opportunity to screw up. It was surreal. I could feel the heaviness of expectation and grief in the room, and it was weighing on me more every passing second. It was like I could feel every single emotion that everyone in the room was feeling, and none of them were pleasant. I tried to ignore it so that I could fully focus on the matter at hand. There was no room for error.

Once we were all in our places, Big Mac looked around the room and brought a finger to her lips. “Now, everyone stay perfectly silent as we begin.”

Cali and Torin, who had been letting out little sobs, clapped their hands over their mouths. They sagged against each other, Cali burying her face in Torin’s shoulder.

Big Mac walked toward Astrid and pulled out a small knife. Astrid held out her hand, and the witch cut it deeply, the blood beginning to flow out. Big Mac reached out, taking her hand, visibly squeezing. Kira came over and joined hands with the other witch. After a short pause, Kira and Big Mac joined hands and started chanting. “Orb of light, orb of night, earth moon air, meld before our sight. Orb of light, orb of night, earth moon air, meld before our sight!”

They said it over and over again, until I couldn’t tell their voices apart. My eyes widened as the symbols on the floor started to glow. The air felt heavy and grew wavy before my eyes. I could see the shock and awe on the faces of the rest of the pack, but as directed, they remained silent as the witches continued to chant.

Astrid, watching Kira and Big Mac carefully, slowly raised her free hand and began to move it in a circular motion, chanting under her breath in time with the witches. I stared in complete wonderment as blue light flew from Astrid’s fingertips and wove itself together into a glowing, pulsating sphere. Suddenly, Astrid halted all movement as her breath caught in her throat. Her knees buckled, and as she started to fall Big Mac held onto her. The blue orb of light flickered and began to fade. Cali and Torin rushed forward and put out their hands to catch her, but Big Mac shook her head, silently ordering them to stay put.

We all stood there, barely moving, barely breathing, as Astrid took a deep breath and straightened again, the blue light growing stronger and finally forming into a solid orb. A collective gasp rose from the pack as Didi’s body floated up from the ground, her head lolling back as light shone up from her chest and zinged into the sphere that was levitating above Astrid’s hand.

Astrid smiled, then collapsed to the floor just as Didi’s body dropped down beside her.

And then I watched in absolute horror as the orb fell from Astrid’s fingers, flying toward the hard ground.

**Episode 1783**

VIOLET

The already strange energy in the tunnel grew tense as Zachery and Charlie circled each other. Everyone had gone silent after Charlie had accused Zachery of sabotaging our escape, and now they had their flashlight beams aimed straight at the two of them, waiting for the next shoe to drop.

Zachery simply gaped at Charlie, his eyes wide with shock as if he’d never heard anything more preposterous in his life. “*What?* Of course I didn’t want us to get attacked! Are you crazy?” He cast a quick look back at the door to the tunnel and shook his head in disbelief.

Charlie wasn’t backing down. “So, what? You just happened to leave the door wide open?” Charlie’s hands were balled into fists, and I got the sneaking suspicion that if Zachery made one wrong move or said anything that Charlie didn’t like, he was going to unleash hell on him.

Zachery shook his head vigorously, looking completely thrown. “I—I thought I closed it. I don’t understand what happened!”

Looking at Zachery, I actually felt a little bad for him. He did look genuinely upset. I closed my eyes and tried to think back to the fraught moments right before we’d filed into the tunnel, but everything had happened so fast that I couldn’t clearly recall what had happened.

Maybe Zachery *hadn’t* left the door to the tunnel open on purpose. Perhaps it had just been an honest mistake—though it was clear that Charlie wasn’t feeling nearly as sympathetic as I was. He was too worked up, ready to pounce at any second. I held my breath, hoping that it wouldn’t come to that.

Pepperdine stepped up. “We don’t have time for this right now, boys. The group of vampires that attacked us must have been some kind of search party. You’d better believe it wasn’t all of them. We need to get out of here, now!”

Pepperdine hustled over to the tunnel entrance and sealed it shut himself, pulling on it a few times to make sure it was shut tight.

“Now, we all have to get moving, double-time. There’s no telling when more vampires are going to realize that we escaped through the tunnels.” He waved a hand at us. “Follow me!”

We all fell into step after him, quickly increasing our pace to a brisk jog. Though I was relieved that Charlie and Zachery hadn’t come to blows, I still felt weird about everything, and I could tell that the others were feeling the same way. Some muttered amongst themselves, casting glances at Charlie and Zachery from time to time, clearly uncomfortable that their fight had been left unresolved. There was still an air of tension surrounding us, and no one had a clue about what had really happened. I was sure that Charlie’s outburst had placed a slight shred of doubt into some of the other’s minds about whether Zachery had left the door open on purpose, and in a group like this, trust was everything.

Charlie placed a protective hand on the small of my back, and I leaned into his touch, glad that I had him by my side—especially under these strange circumstances. A dark, damp tunnel fresh off a revenant vampire fight wasn’t quite my idea of quality time, but I was quickly learning that I had to take what I could get.

*I’m making sure Zachery is in front of us*, Charlie said through our mind link. *I don’t trust that snake behind my back.*

We slowed to a stop until the others had filtered ahead of us. I saw Romilly lingering out of the corner of my eye and realized that she was waiting, too.

She glanced at us and came over. “You all should go on ahead. I’m going to go back and burn the revenant vamp bodies. We need to make sure they’re officially down for the count.”

She was already rummaging around in her fanny pack, gathering the supplies that she would need to carry out the task.

I was relieved that Romilly was taking care of it, as I’d been thinking about it myself. The last thing we needed was more revenant vampires resurrecting and coming after us in the tunnel. They were so strong and ruthless, and I could tell that everyone was still a little fatigued and shaken up from fighting them. After seeing the hunters in action, I was sure that they would be able to hold their own again, but who wanted to test fate? I sure didn’t.

“Are you okay to take care of it, or do you need some help?” Charlie asked Romilly.

*How is he so hot* and *brave?!* I thought to myself. He was always so considerate and ready to lend a hand.

Romilly shook her head. “Thanks, but no, I got this,” she said.

Without another word, she ran off into the darkness, leaving Sophie, Zachery, Charlie, and me behind in an awkward silence.

Sophie gave Charlie and me a meaningful look and then linked her arm through Zachery’s. “C’mon Zachery, let’s get moving.”

I flashed Sophie a grateful glance, thinking that I owed her one for keeping an eye on Zachery. The best course of action right now was to keep Charlie and Zachery as far away from each other as possible, at least until we got back above ground.

Charlie and I lingered for a few beats before we set off, Charlie still glaring daggers at Zachery’s back. We were moving quickly, and I was happy for it—to say that the tunnel was a creepy place to be hanging out was an understatement.

I mind linked with Charlie. *I’m a little worried that your temper is going to get the best of you one of these days. Are you okay?*

Charlie sucked his teeth. *Of course I’m not okay*,he replied. *That asshole just tried to get us all killed because he’s deluded himself into thinking he has some kind of claim over you.*

I couldn’t help but find it cute how protective Charlie was of me, but I also thought he was overreacting just a little.

*I’m not so sure that he left the tunnel door open on purpose*,I replied, trying to defuse Charlie’s anger just a bit. *Honestly, he looked kind of embarrassed, like maybe he did just mess up. It’s not like he had experience sealing off the tunnel.*

Charlie stopped short and turned to look at me. “Are you seriously defending him right now?” He was clearly still fuming, and I knew that he wouldn’t be calming down for a while. I hadn’t seen him this upset really… ever. But something like this had never happened to us.

I sighed, getting a little frustrated with the entire thing myself. “No, of course not. I’m not saying he was right! What, do you think I enjoyed being dragged off? All I’m saying is that I don’t think he’s some sort of criminal mastermind.”

Zachery was annoying, corny, and extremely overzealous, but it wasn’t so far-fetched to assume that him trying to carry me off like a knight in shining armor had just been his awkward play at being valiant.

“Well either way, I’m not going to take my eyes off Zachery for a second, I’ll tell you that much,” Charlie huffed as we started up walking again, picking up our fast pace.

Charlie and I shared a tense silence as we made our way forward through the dank tunnel. We were moving much faster than before. Everyone was on edge. No one spoke, and you could’ve heard a pin drop.

We’d been walking for about an hour when I started to wonder just how long this damn tunnel was. Right as that thought crossed my mind, our group came to an abrupt stop and everyone bunched up together as Pepperdine’s voice rang out, echoing loudly off the tunnel walls. “We’ve made it. Everyone hold tight while we open the door!”

In an instant, bright light flooded into the tunnel. I squinted against it as my eyes adjusted—we’d been in the dark for so long, after all. I breathed a sigh of relief, pleased that this nightmare of an escape was almost over. Everyone started moving forward again, edging slowly toward the light. Charlie and I were shuffling along with the rest when Romilly caught up to us, giving us a grim nod as she moved forward to join the head of the group. I heaved a sigh of relief that she’d made it back in one piece. That was one less thing to worry about.

We kept moving, and I suddenly caught sight of Iris pushing back through the crowd and heading straight for us.

“Don’t freak out; stay calm,” she said anxiously, her eyes darting back and forth between me and Charlie.

“What?” I was confused, especially since I hadn’t really been anxious until she’d said that.

Before Iris could say another word, I followed the others out of the tunnel and into the light. I gasped in horror as I looked around. We were in a huge room with a blazing fireplace and thick, heavy rugs covering the floors—it looked like a real classy place. But that wasn’t what caught my eye. Mounted all over the walls were the decapitated heads of wolves.

No—*werewolves*.

**Episode 1784**

Astrid seemed to drift toward the ground in slow motion, the orb falling right along with her. Just before it hit the ground, Big Mac dove forward and grabbed it, cradling it protectively in her arms. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief but didn’t make a move, as if they were afraid that the slightest move might set off a chain of events that would send the orb into some new kind of peril. Once I was confident that the orb was safe, my gaze drifted back to Astrid’s still form on the floor. Her pale skin, all the blood… I couldn’t take my eyes off her as anguish tightened in my throat so that for a moment, it felt like I couldn’t breathe.

Xavier was the first to speak. “Did it work?”

“It did.” Big Mac held up the orb, and everyone stared at it in awe. The light that had shot out from Didi’s chest was swirling around inside the orb—it was quite a sight to behold. I couldn’t believe that what we were looking at was real. Didi’s magic had helped us, even after her death. It made me sad all over again, imagining what Didi could have achieved at our side if she’d lived.

Big Mac stepped out of the circular array of symbols as the wavy air slowly went back to normal. The spell was over, and Torin and I wasted no time rushing to Astrid’s body. Torin dropped to his knees and cradled Astrid’s head in his lap as tears streamed nonstop down his face. He looked up at me, and I knew from his expression that Astrid was gone.

I knelt at his side, my own tears flowing once again. Memories flooded my mind: meeting Astrid for the first time in the Fae world, how astonished she’d been as she and Torin had explored the human world for the first time. I was overcome by a wave of guilt.

“Torin,” I began, barely able to get the words out around my sobs. “If Astrid had never run into me in the Fae world, she’d be safe back at home where she belongs.”

Torin shook his head emphatically, his eyes flashing. “Don’t think like that, Cali. Astrid wouldn’t want you to.” Torin looked down at his friend, tears still rolling down his cheeks. “This was the adventure of a lifetime for us. Astrid always dreamed about living out a grand adventure like this—seeing and experiencing things that she never had before. She was always telling me how thankful she was for all of this. Because of you, we got to experience things that most Fae never do.”

I knew that Torin was trying to comfort me, but he was only making me cry even harder. I should have been comforting him. Astrid had become a fixture around the pack house, and having another Fae nearby made me feel connected to a world that I had only recently learned I was a part of.

“I just wish that I’d spent more time with Astrid while she was so sick,” I said.

I’d never imagined that Astrid would die. It hadn’t even crossed my mind—especially with how distracted I’d been with all the attacks and waking up in places without remembering how I’d gotten there… In a way, I’d taken Astrid for granted, and now I would never have the chance to let her know how much I valued her as a friend. It was enough to haunt me forever.

Torin shook his head again. “Astrid and I both understood that you were under a lot of pressure trying to protect everyone. You have to know that she never blamed you for anything.”

Torin squeezed my arm, and I leaned into his touch. I was happy that I still had him, and I made a vow to myself to never take Torin for granted. He would always know that I really loved him and appreciated his friendship.

A respectful silence fell over the pack as everyone took a few moments to process everything that had just happened. I looked back and forth between Astrid’s and Didi’s bodies, hoping that their sacrifices would be enough to save the pack from Letifer’s wrath. I knew that no matter what, we would never forget what they’d done for us.

Big Mac came over to join us. She’d stowed the orb away in a satchel strapped across her chest, and I could still see the blue light shining through the fabric.

“So it looks like the spell worked,” Big Mac said. “Astrid may well have saved us all.”

Big Mac seemed more subdued than normal, and there was a tinge of reverence in her voice as she said Astrid’s name. I couldn’t help but think that Astrid would be so pleased to see how much Big Mac respected and valued her, and how strong she’d been in the end.

My chest twisted as I thought to myself, *Astrid, you’re a hero.* I knew then that I had to do everything in my power to ensure that Astrid’s sacrifice wouldn’t be in vain. I looked over to see Marta stooped down at Didi’s side. It was clear that she was taking this hard. Like most of us, things had been rough for Marta lately. I made a mental note to let her know how much I appreciated her help today as well. Even though I knew she was scared a lot of the time, she always stepped up to help when she was needed.

As I looked around the room at the pack, I realized that everyone would do well to have some sort of closure to this unfortunate event, something that would honor Astrid’s and Didi’s memory. I looked up at Xavier and Greyson, who were speaking in hushed tones.

“They deserve a burial,” I said.

My mother, who had been standing off to the side with my father, came over to take my hand and gently pulled me away from Astrid’s body. She squeezed me into a warm, comforting hug and rubbed my back.

“Honey, I would be honored to put together a Fae Rite of Sepulture for Astrid, something that will tie her to the Fae world forever.”

I nodded, confident that my mother was the right person to handle this—I had never even heard of a Fae Rite of Sepulture. There was still so much that I didn’t know about the Fae world and its customs.

“That sounds like a good idea,” Artemis said, her tone somber. Torin gave a nod of agreement.

“Cali, I don’t think we’ve ever talked about this ceremony before, have we?” my mother asked.

I shook my head. Though she’d shared as much as she could, we hadn’t talked much about what my mother knew of the Fae world at all. Everything was always so hectic that we just hadn’t had the time.

“The Fae Rite of Sepulture is a funeral ceremony reserved for fallen heroes. I think that Astrid has more than earned that title.”

Torin wiped at his eyes. “I’d like to help, Orla, if I can?” His eyes were bloodshot from crying, and I knew that more than anyone else, this had to be tearing Torin apart. He’d known Astrid way longer than the rest of us, and they had a special bond that would undoubtedly leave a void behind in his life.

I took Torin’s hand. “I’ll help, too,” I offered.

“Of course—if you all want, I can start preparing right away,” my mother said. I could tell she was already building a checklist in her head, going over everything that she would need to honor Astrid properly.

“Do we really have time for that?” Rishika cut in.

I glared at her. How could she be so insensitive? If it weren’t for Astrid, we wouldn’t have the slightest idea how we were going to survive the Letifer attack, and now she wasn’t even willing to take time out for us to pay our respects?

“Clearly I agree that we need to bury them, but don’t we need to stay focused here?” Rishika added hastily. “We’ve already wasted enough time. We should definitely take the time to bury them—*after* everything with Letifer and the revenants is taken care of.”

“I get your point, Rishika, but it’s not like we can really do anything until Letifer and the revenants decide to attack again. I don’t want the pack running out to meet them in the woods—that would put us at a disadvantage. It’ll be safer if we defend ourselves from the pack house,” Xavier said.

Mace cursed under his breath as the entire pack murmured amongst themselves, clearly stressed by the idea of waiting like sitting ducks for Letifer to make his next move. It was obvious that everyone was starting to feel the pressure of just waiting around, not knowing what was going to happen from one moment to the next.

“So, what? We’re just going to sit here and *wait* for them to attack?” Ravi piped up.

Greyson spoke up. “Just because we’re waiting for them to attack, doesn’t mean we can’t set up a few surprises of our own in the meantime.”

**Episode 1785**

XAVIER

I took a deep breath, trying to calm the uneasiness in my stomach so that I could be strong for Cali. It was difficult for me to see her taking all of this so hard. First Didi’s death, and now Astrid’s. I could only imagine how hurt and defeated she was feeling. She lived to protect her friends, and now she’d lost two of them, one right after the other. Over time, I’d grown to know how much Astrid and Torin meant to her—they were like her Fae brother and sister. I absolutely hated seeing her so distressed.

Astrid had impressed me greatly. I’d never been the biggest fan of having Fae living in the pack house, and now one of them might have just saved the entire pack. It bothered me that I would never get to tell Astrid how much I appreciated her, how thankful I was for what she’d chosen to do for us. I completely understood why the others wanted to do a burial service—it made sense and was a wonderful way to honor Astrid, who’d given her life for us—but deep down, I agreed with Rishika. We couldn’t really afford to waste any more time right now. I knew that I had to handle the next few moments with care, but that was all part of being Alpha, and I was more than up for the challenge.

“Orla, Torin, Cali, Artemis—are you four okay to handle funeral preparations on your own?” I asked. They all nodded. “Okay, perfect. Everyone else, we need to start planning for Letifer’s return. There’s no doubt that they’ll be getting ready to close in at any moment. We’ve been lucky so far,” I said. “We should probably set up some booby traps around the house, things that will slow down the revenants.”

“Didn’t I just say that?” Greyson cut in, his eyes narrowed in annoyance.

“Okay, I’m going to split everyone up into groups,” I said, ignoring Greyson’s interruption. Now wasn’t the time for a pissing contest. We could do that later when it was time to really fight for the mantle of Alpha. “Ravi, Sage, Zainab—I want you to head out and dig a trench around the entire house. The revenants aren’t too bright, and some of them are sure to fall in, which will thin out their numbers.” I turned to Emmett, Jay, Jacqueline, and Lola. “I want you four to sharpen wooden spikes to put in the bottom of the trenches.”

Jacqueline blanched. “Pardon me? Sharpening *stakes*?” She put her hands on her hips. “This is gross, and I won’t do it.”

Emmett took a gulp. “I’d have to agree—there’s a chance that I might actually be allergic to fashioning stakes out of wood.”

*Right, they’re vampires, they probably hate stakes as much as I hate* them*.*

“Suck it up,” I said. “Wear gloves and watch for splinters.”

I watched them hustle off to get started, Jacqueline grumbling all the way. There were a lot of reasons to want this fight with Letifer to be over, not least of which was getting all these vampires out of my house. I was still coming to terms with the fact that they were staying under my roof. Sometimes I got whiffs of them as I moved through the house, even when they weren’t nearby. I shuddered.

I turned to Big Mac and Kira, who both looked a little weary from casting the spell they’d used to create the orb. They were strong, though, so I knew they were up to whatever I needed them to do next. I realized then how thankful I was to have a couple of powerful witches at my side. No matter how distrustful I’d been of each of them at one time or another, there was no doubt in my mind that I could count on them to come through for us all in the end.

“Can you two work out protective spells? Focus on the house so that Torin can be protected and safe inside, ready to work on any injured pack members that we bring in to safety?”

Kira and Big Mac nodded and headed off, already discussing how to tweak the spell that had created the dome outside to make something that was more tightly bound to the house.

“Okay, Mace. Take Rishika and your Blue Bloods out to run patrols. We need to know every step those assholes make before they make it. They’re unpredictable, and we already know how vicious they are. We don’t want to be caught unawares.”

Mace and Rishika exchanged a nod and left.

I stood back, admiring my quick thinking as everyone hustled off to action. I knew that things were rough right now, and that they were all happy to have something useful to do. I had to stop myself from patting my own back. Under the circumstances, it would be in bad taste. Still, I had to give myself mental props for coming through and being an Alpha who was quick on his feet. I should’ve taken over the reins from Greyson a long time ago.

I watched as Tom picked up Didi and carried her upstairs, followed by Torin, who had Astrid cradled gingerly in his arms. Orla and Artemis followed closely behind them, but Cali hung back and lingered at my side.

“I just wanted to thank you for making time to allow us to prepare the burial for Astrid,” she said, her beautiful eyes still moist with tears as she looked up at me.

My heart twinged for her, and the overwhelming need to protect her welled up inside my chest. I pulled her into a long hug, rubbing my hands up and down her back and inhaling the sweetness of her scent. I realized then that I needed her comfort, as well. We leaned into each other, allowing ourselves a quick moment of tenderness.

I felt Greyson’s eyes on us before he even made the little *harrumph* to announce his presence. I knew that he was irritated, but I also knew that he wouldn’t dare do anything to upset Cali while she was in the middle of mourning her friend. I gave Cali one final squeeze before releasing her. She shot a look between me and Greyson before she took off upstairs to go help with the burial preparations.

As I turned to face Greyson, he asked, “What about me? You gave everyone else instructions.”

“Uh, why don’t you go run patrols with Mace and Rishika and the others?” I said, slightly distracted.

Without waiting for his response, I headed off to find Big Mac as Greyson went out through the back door.

I found Big Mac and Kira in the kitchen, huddled over a spell book.

“Hey, Big Mac, give me the orb. I want to keep it somewhere safe until the time’s right to use it,” I said.

Big Mac clutched her satchel closely, the orb glowing inside. “Sorry, Xavier, but I can’t. It’s very fragile, and I’m sure you know that we can’t risk it.”

“I hear you loud and clear, but we can’t go into battle with our secret weapon on display.”

“Of course not. I have the perfect place for it,” she said. “Come with me.”

We went upstairs to Big Mac and Mrs. Smith’s room. She began to rummage around in her closet. I tapped my foot.

“This is your perfect place for it?” I asked. “Your room?”

She glared at me. “No.” She pulled a blanket down to reveal what looked like a safe.

“Seriously?”

“Turn around,” she said. “I don’t want you to know the combination.”

I resisted rolling my eyes and turned around. There was a small pop, and I heard Big Mac rustling around behind me. I let out a deep sigh. I felt so much better knowing that we had this secret weapon at our disposal.

For the first time since Letifer had appeared with this latest threat and his army of revenants, I felt like we’d be able to get rid of him once and for all. I took a moment to send another internal thanks to Astrid and Didi for their sacrifice. I would never forget them, and I felt pleased that we were organizing a burial to honor them, even if time wasn’t really on our side.

I took a quick glance out of the window and spotted Mace, Rishika, and the Blue Bloods heading out into the woods. They looked strong and capable, and I felt confident that they would be able to catch Letifer and the revenants before they caught us by surprise.

Then I frowned to myself. *Wait, didn’t I tell Greyson to go with them?*

I scanned the back yard again and spotted Greyson, heading toward the shed. *What is he doing?*

“We good here?” I asked Big Mac.

But I was out the door before she could respond. I went downstairs and ran outside, making a beeline for the shed. I was preparing myself for the fight I knew would ensue the moment I confronted Greyson about not following my orders. I should’ve known he wasn’t going to fall in line. But he’d agreed to follow me as Alpha for the battle, dammit!I lingered outside the shed for a few moments, trying to see if I could hear anything from inside. Nothing.

I pushed the door open just as Greyson turned to face me, his eyes glazed over, a machete in his hand.

**Episode 1786**

GREYSON

I stood there staring at Xavier while he stared right back at me, his eyes wider than I’d ever seen them.

*Where the hell am I?*

I took a look around. My head was a little cloudy, and I shook it slightly as I attempted to gather my thoughts.Then I realized what I had in my hand. A machete. And I was holding it up in the air, almost above my head.Now I was doubly confused. What the hell was going on?

Xavier had his hands up as if to defend himself as he took a cautious step forward. “Greyson, what the hell are you doing in here?” His voice was calm, but I could only imagine how he was reacting on the inside, walking in to see me brandishing a machete of all things.

I dropped my arm to my side, and the machete clattered to the ground. I took a step back, already shaking my head no. “I—I don’t know!”

Panic struck me hard in the chest as I tried, in vain, to make sense of what had happened in the last few seconds.

Xavier narrowed his eyes. “You don’t know? What’s going on here? If you’re trying to pull some last-minute coup—”

“No, no, that’s not it at all!”

I looked around, finally realizing that this was the garden shed. I had absolutely no memory of coming in here. One minute, I’d been listening to Xavier give his bullshit orders, and the next… I trained my attention back on Xavier, who couldn’t have looked more suspicious of me if he’d tried. I realized that this was only fueling Xavier’s fire about me not being fit to run the pack… and a small part of me was starting to think that he was right.

*What the hell is happening to me?*

I thought back to the weird thing that had happened when I’d been bringing Didi back to the house—the bizarre urge that I’d felt to hurl her off the cliff. In that moment, it had seemed like the right thing to do—what I’d *wanted* to do. I’d had the same strange, hazy feeling then as I’d had just a moment ago.

I jumped as my leg began to burn, and then I remembered the mark. The mere thought of it filled me with an overwhelming sense of horror. Despite the pain, I stopped myself from reaching down to touch it. I didn’t want to do anything else to alert Xavier to the fact that something was very wrong—nor did I want to make any sudden moves.

I had a feeling that Xavier would use any excuse he could to subdue me and put me out of commission until further notice. All the while, he was just staring at me like he didn’t trust me as far as he could throw me. “Greyson, what in the entire fuck?”

“Uh…” *Shit, come up with something, anything! Don’t let him see you sweat!* “I thought that Emmett and Lola and the others could use the machete to chop the wood—you know, for making stakes?” Not my best work, but it was all I could come up with at the moment, especially since I was still trying to get my head on straight.

Xavier frowned. “But I told you to go run patrols.”

He was clearly still suspicious, and he kept taking furtive glances at the machete lying on the ground at my feet. I was certain that he wasn’t fully buying my story, but at least he didn’t look like he wanted to tackle me to the ground anymore.

“Right, I’ll get right on that,” I said, making a move toward the door.

Xavier studied me closely as he stepped in front of me, blocking my path and getting right in my face. “I saw the look you had on your face. You didn’t know what was going on, did you?”

Frozen, I sifted through all the possible replies I could throw out. None of them seemed like the right one. One wrong move, and Xavier was going to snap. I knew him well enough to be sure of that.

“Was it another one of your blackouts?” Xavier pressed. I remained silent as he heaved a loud sigh. “Listen, if you’re still dealing with all that witchy shit, I need to know, for everyone’s safety. I can’t have you running around out here if you’re not in control of yourself.”

I wanted to lie. I wanted to tell him that I was fine and that he should mind his own fucking business for once, but if I lied to him and had another “episode” or whatever it was that was happening to me… I would never forgive myself if something happened to the pack because I wasn’t on the ball.

Taking my silence as confirmation, Xavier nodded. “Okay. You have to stay here where I can keep an eye on you.”

“Like hell I will,” I snapped. “I don’t need you watching me like I’m an unruly child.”

Anger flared up inside me. Just like I knew he would, he was going to use this as an excuse to be even more of a controlling asshole, if that were even possible.

“Oh, really? Because from where I’m standing—”

“Watch it!” I barked.

Everything in me wanted to sock him right in the mouth, but after my little machete moment, I knew I was on thin ice. Still, it wasn’t like I’d tried to hit him with it. I’d dropped it immediately, and that had to count for something.

“Fine,” I said. “If you don’t want me out running patrols, I’ll just go and see how Cali’s coping with everything.”

I gave Xavier a savage shove as I pushed past him out of the shed. I headed for the house, thinking that at any moment, Xavier was going to grab me and try to stop me. I didn’t dare turn to look back to see if he were following me. To my surprise, he didn’t follow, and I managed to make it back into the house unscathed. I raced upstairs, my mind focused on only one thing—I needed to see Cali. She’d been through a lot today, and I needed to check on her and make sure that she was okay. Aside from that, I felt unsettled and overcome by an almost visceral urge to see her face, which was the only thing that ever really grounded me.

I heard voices drifting out of Orla and Tom’s room, and I stopped there and knocked on the door. Cali opened it, her stunning face still streaked with tears and her eyes completely bloodshot. Just over her shoulder, I could make out Astrid and Didi laid out on Tom and Orla’s bed. Seeing them there sent a pang of sadness racing through my chest. Over to the side, Artemis and Torin were huddled together in the sitting area, discussing something in hushed tones.

I looked back at Cali, my heart aching at the anguish that was written all over her face. “Can we talk?”

“Sure,” Cali said miserably. “They don’t need me here, anyway. I don’t know the first thing about Fae funeral rites.”

She softly clicked the door shut behind her and followed me back to my room. She sat down on my bed. She seemed dejected and listless, as if grief had sapped all the strength from her body.

I sat down next to her and took her hand. “How are you holding up?”

Cali gave me a tortured look before bursting into tears. “I feel so responsible for Astrid dying!”

She was sobbing so hard that it was hard for her to catch her breath. I ran my hand up and down her back, doing my best to calm her down. I wrapped my arms around her and held her tight. She buried her face in my chest, and I let her cry it out as I stroked her hair and rocked back and forth slightly. After a long while, her sobs died down and she looked up at me.

“Do you really think the orb is going to work?” she asked. “What if it was all for nothing?”

I looked her in the eye, wishing that I knew for sure what the future held for us. All I wanted was to protect Cali—from danger, from sadness, from anything that interfered with her happiness. There was so much uncertainty right now, but I knew that I would do everything in my power to make things right—even if I wasn’t Alpha at the moment.

I took a deep breath. “Everything is going to work out, Cali. I’m sure of it.”

A hopeful look passed over her face before she laid her head against my shoulder again, taking a few deep breaths that threatened to morph into sobs at any moment.

I kept my arms around her and closed my eyes. For a minute, I actually believed what I’d said. Then a vision flashed through my mind: Cali’s gravestone.

**Episode 1787**

Time raced by, and before I knew it, hours had passed. Ravi, Sage, and Zainab had worked overtime digging the trenches while the others followed behind them, lining the trenches with wooden stakes (despite Jacqueline’s continued protests). Mrs. Smith had made a massive batch of white chocolate mocha that she delivered to everyone as they worked, offering words of encouragement as she did so. Kira and Big Mac had worked together to cast a multi-layered protective spell directly onto the pack house, and even now, I felt the power of it vibrating through the air.

Xavier had spent the time walking the grounds and checking in with the patrols. Once everything was done, he surveyed all of the preparations from top to bottom before finally granting his approval, pride shining in his eyes for what the pack had managed to achieve in such a short time. We were finally ready for the attack.

Everyone but Mace, Rishika, and the rest of the patrol group gathered together out on the lawn for the funeral. I’d managed to last a whole half hour without crying, but I knew that wouldn’t last long as I took in the sight of my mother and Torin standing shoulder to shoulder beside a gorgeous display of red roses, bright yellow daisies, and snow-white lilies, all in full bloom. I could see my mother’s touch on every inch of the arrangement.

I’d pitched in where I could, helping to carry things and finding whatever supplies she and Torin needed as they lost themselves in getting everything ready. It had been amazing to see my mother in action, putting the sacred ceremony together with the utmost care. Though it was hard to see the bright side at a time like this, I felt a little better knowing that we were honoring Didi and Astrid in the elegant, timeless fashion they deserved.

It was obvious that Torin was using all of his willpower to keep himself together as he cleared his throat and began to speak. “Thank you all for gathering here to celebrate the lives of Astrid Friel and Didi Wright.” He paused to let his gaze drag over the faces of the pack members, as if committing them all to memory.

I was standing between Xavier and Greyson, comforted by their closeness and doing my best to maintain my composure. I felt their eyes on me from time to time as they glanced down to make sure I was keeping it together. It was reassuring to know that they were right by my side to support me if things got too difficult during the ceremony.

“Now, let us please join hands,” Torin said softly.

A slight breeze drifted by, rustling the flowers and weaving through the pack as if binding us together. Despite the state of things right now, there was an unmistakable aura of peace in the air around us.

I took each of my mates’ hands, comforted by the reassuring squeezes they both gave at almost the exact same time.

“Now, let us all bow our heads in a moment of silence while we recognize the sacrifices these two amazing women have made for everyone standing here today.”

I closed my eyes tightly, but I could still feel the tears seeping through my eyelids and falling down my cheeks. I couldn’t stop picturing Astrid and the strength she’d shown before her death. Somehow, she’d held it together better than all of us. I knew that I would never forget the quiet force she’d displayed as she made such a hard decision, and I only hoped that I would be able to display a shred of her fearlessness when my own time came.

I was thankful that Xavier and Greyson were holding my hands, because at that moment I wanted nothing more than to sink down to my knees and cry. In the heavy silence that followed Torin’s words, all I could do was picture Astrid’s beautiful face, her smile, how her eyes lit up whenever she spoke. I’d always considered her to be a positive, steady, calm force, and I still couldn’t believe that I would never see or feel her amazing energy in the pack house ever again.

My mother’s amazing voice brought a welcome end to the silence as she began to sing a beautiful, haunting song that sounded unlike anything else I’d ever heard. Other than the strangeness of the melody, she was singing it in a language that I was unfamiliar with. I shivered a bit at the otherworldly sound, which only grew more haunting and poignant as Artemis and Torin joined in, their voices meshing with my mother’s to weave an intricate melody that I couldn’t quite believe my sister, mom, and friend were capable of creating.

I closed my eyes and let the song wash over me, and for a time, my tears stopped. I thought only of the good things that were bound to come out of such great tragedy, and I found a shred of joy in the realization that we would soon use the new orb to grant Astrid’s final wish. Before I knew it, the song had come to a close, and the pack opened their eyes. I looked around to see that everyone’s faces were a little damp with tears. The strange, beautiful song was the perfect tribute to Astrid and Didi, and it had moved us all.

After a short pause, both of my parents stepped to the side, revealing Didi’s and Astrid’s bodies on raised platforms. They were both dressed in simple white shifts, but their hair had been intricately braided and woven with flowers—more of my mother’s work.

Torin hovered over Astrid’s body, clearly fighting back a wave of sobs. “Astrid, you meant so much to me. You are—*were*—” His voice broke, “—my best friend. You were the one who was here for me when for so long no one was. You will never leave my side. I love you.”

He took a deep breath before continuing. “Your sacrifice has saved this werewolf pack, and we will always remember that you gave your life for us.” He kissed his fingers and pressed them to Astrid’s cheek before turning to Didi. “We didn’t have time to get to know you as well as we wished, but in the short time we were around you, we learned that you had a pure, brave heart. We are so grateful for everything you did for us, and we will never forget you.”

Tears streamed down Torin’s face as he took another long look at Astrid. Then he stepped aside and gave my mother a nod.

With a wave of her hand, my mother conjured a leafy stick out of thin air. She lit it on fire and then touched it first to Didi’s body, then to Astrid’s. My heart lurched as the bodies immediately caught fire. After a split second, it was clear that it was no ordinary fire, but a magical fire with flames that burned a brilliant blue. The pack linked hands once again and looked on in silence as the bodies were consumed by vibrant blue flames that sent glowing sparks and thick wisps of smoke into the sky. Then, just as suddenly as it had been lit, the fire was gone, and so were the bodies.

I wavered on my feet, feeling a little weak in the knees again. I couldn’t quite believe that Astrid was really gone, just like that. I bit my lip, doing my best to hold back another round of tears.

My mother was preparing to address the group again when Rishika’s wolf came bounding out of the woods, Mace and the rest of the Blue Blood patrol group on her heels. Everyone moved aside to give them center stage as Rishika shifted back, panting as she spoke.

“They’re coming!”

My stomach knotted with fear as the mood shifted from somber reflection to high alert.

“Everyone, back into the house to regroup, now!” Xavier shouted. He ran to the back door and flung it open, holding it ajar as the pack raced back into the safety of the house.

I paused for a moment to take one last look at the gorgeous floral funeral pyre before Greyson raced by and grabbed my hand. “Cali, hurry!”

Once we were all inside, Xavier bounded through the house, checking every room to make sure he hadn’t missed anyone before taking a moment to quickly usher Torin into the kitchen to set up his healing station. Then he came back into the living room, where we were all gathered and waiting for his next round of instructions.

I was proud of him. He was calm and clear as he spoke, and he made sure to look everyone in the eye, as if attempting to transfer his confidence over to them.

“Stay focused!” Xavier shouted. “There’s no telling how many revenants Letifer has gathered by now, but the trenches should make it harder for them. If we stick together and keep our cool, the revenants should be easy to take out. And,” he added, taking a deep breath as his gaze flickered quickly to me and Greyson before he trained his attention on the group at large, “if you see Letifer, steer clear. He’s mine.”

**Episode 1788**

XAVIER

Greyson, Mace, Jay, and Rishika lined up behind me at the door to the pack house. They were my main fighters, the most powerful ones. Ravi, Zainab, and more of the Redwood and Blue Blood packs were standing by as well, ready to pour out and fight.

I looked away from the crowd and at the living room, where Cali stood with her mother. Her gaze was vulnerable yet fierce at the same time. I wanted to run up to her and kiss her.

I knew that couldn’t happen, though.

I needed to focus.

This was my first big fight as Alpha. I needed to crush Letifer’s army and prove that everyone had chosen right. This was a matter of safety, honor, and dignity. It was a moment that could solidify my future in this pack.

“Let’s get moving,” I said, and pushed the door open. We headed outside, and I instantly noticed the glowing eyes by the tree line. The number had multiplied since the last time I’d looked out, only a couple of minutes ago. Silas’s—*Letifer’s*—army felt like a beast that kept growing heads, a Hydra that wouldn’t get the hell off my property.

I did not do well with strangers standing on my property.

“Rishika, Mace,” I said. “You and your people take the west side.” I turned to Jay and Greyson. “You two and your group take the east. Split up through the back to cover all bases.”

Rishika and Mace were already off, following directions. Jay did the same, wielding what looked to be an axe, but I could see Greyson hesitating, giving me a long, lingering look. Before I could tell him that this wasn’t a debate, he thankfully walked off, following Jay. The pack came first, and that was all there was to it, no matter our differences.

Scenting the air, I approached the trenches in the front of the yard. I could see the revenants looming closer, taking their time like this was a game. I hoped the traps we had set would help keep our defenses strong. Keep our land strong. We needed to protect what was ours. What was *mine*. My pack house, my pack.

A strong territorial feeling surged inside me, the desire to fight suddenly becoming so intense that I growled. What if the trenches didn’t do their job? What if these beasts managed to come closer? What if they won this war? Snarling, I made a move to charge forward, but then I felt a heavy hand on my shoulder, holding me back.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Greyson’s voice demanded.

I turned to face my brother, that same feeling of possessiveness increasing inside me. Who did this guy think he was? “You’re not going to tell me what to do. I’m the Alpha here.”

Greyson scoffed right in my face. “This whole posturing thing is getting old. You’re not supposed to let your wolf’s instincts send your common sense packing.”

“Watch the way you talk to me,” I snapped, yanking my arm away.

“You need to keep a level head,” he said. “You need to trust that we all know what we’re doing and that we won’t rush in just because we’re mad that someone wants to take our house.”

My wolf howled on the inside. But, *reasonably*, I knew that my brother was right.

All of a sudden, a garbled scream echoed across the yard. I whirled around to see the first revenants falling. They hit the wooden spikes within the trenches that we had dug along the perimeter of the house. They were pinned down, knocked out already, easily stumbling into the trap.

Greyson gave me an “I told you so” kind of look. “See? We might not even have to fight at all.”

I raised an eyebrow. “That’s way too optimistic, brother. Letifer has more power than anything we’ve ever seen. This won’t be an easy battle.”

Right on cue, I heard Rishika call for us. “More coming from the west!” She darted to the other side, where many more eyes were glowing.

There was a pause between my brother and me. And then, Greyson said, “Okay. Maybe we’ll have to fight.”

I stared at him. “Then we should fight together. Right here, the two of us, covering the front line.”

This was what was right. What Cali would want. We had to do everything we could to keep her and the pack safe, and this was above our differences. I held out my hand, hoping that he would see this as a sign of truce.

Greyson paused for a moment that felt way too long.

Was he gonna back off right now? Could he deny my alliance while there was death at our doorstep? When the pack and the woman we both loved were in danger? Could he really be so petty and fucking selfish? He called himself the bigger person, after all, the mature older brother. The one who always thought about others’ feelings, about Cali’s feelings, even about my fucking feelings. But I was starting to doubt that. I had been doubting that for a while now.

Before I could tell him something that I would regret, though, Greyson took a step closer. His gaze was sharp as he took my hand. “For the pack. And Cali.”

I nodded.

The two of us moved cautiously toward the front trenches, to the heart of the incoming attack. More and more revenants were appearing from the trees, making guttural sounds, their faces full of hatred. Their sinister glowing eyes made me think of blood. There was something so sick about it that my stomach lurched. But I could do this.

I was born to be Alpha.

I shifted into my wolf. I felt power course through me as my hands turned into paws, my claws sharp enough to tear flesh apart. My mouth became a snout, full of teeth that could hold off an army. Shifting meant reaching my true form, and there were very few things in this world as powerful as an Alpha wolf.

I mind linked with the others at the same time.

*Pick off any revenants that get around the trenches, and tell me if you see Letifer!*

The wolves offered their affirmation, and then they attacked a few revenants that had slipped through. Rishika was the fastest, always—she got to one of the things when it had barely jumped over the trench, ripping it apart with her teeth. I knew that I could count on her, that I could count on anyone in this pack. We were tough, and we could take anything Letifer threw at us.

The buzz of the battle was coursing through me, a new confidence settling inside my chest. Suddenly, I heard the hissing sound of another revenant that had managed to slide between the trenches. It charged directly at me, its teeth bared, dripping blood, ready to sink into my skin. I wouldn’t get injured, wouldn’t let any of that revenant poison reach my bloodstream. The moment it was about to bite my shoulder, I ducked and used my teeth to tear out its throat. That was the easiest, most direct way to get rid of them.

I kicked the body away, and a moment later, Greyson mind linked with me.

*Maybe we should have dug those trenches deeper...*

I looked in his direction, then over at the area he was supposed to guard. Even in the short time that we’d been fighting, dozens of revenants had fallen into the pits. Their bodies were piling up. The revenants weren’t as foolish as they looked, and had taken to walking over the staked bodies of the fallen, clambering out of the trenches on the near side.

This was bad.

They made a beeline for the prize. The pack house. Their glowing orange eyes were full of fury, and three of them went directly for me and Greyson. My brother and I had learned how to fight together, though. We clawed and bit and snapped our away through them, working like a team. He had my back, and I had his, and that was all there was to it.

We panted, staring at the zombies’ bloodied bodies on the ground before looking up.

Straight ahead, out at the trees, where there were dozens and dozens and dozens more glowing eyes. How many of them could there possibly be? How quickly did they multiply? Were we truly ready to take on such a huge threat when the numbers were different than what we had expected?

Chills crawled up my spine when I realized that Letifer’s manpower had increased rapidly, without me even realizing it, and our line of defense might not last as long as we had hoped. The pits were overflowing with bodies that became a bridge for more revenants to come directly onto our front yard. Within hours, maybe less, those monsters would have a clear, flat path to the pack house…

And to Cali.

**Episode 1789**

My heart was pounding in my throat as the two men I loved rushed toward the line of undead. I wished I could have kissed them, spoken to them before they’d gone out there. I wished I’d had just a moment to make them promise me that they would get out of this alive.

But there had been no time, and I hadn’t wanted to distract them from the upcoming fight. It wouldn’t have been prudent, and even though being prudent was not my strong suit, I was trying this new thing where I didn’t make reckless decisions. It would have been impulsive and also selfish to make both Greyson and Xavier focus on me right now.

*Everything’s going to be okay*, I told myself, ignoring my throbbing pulse.

I needed to think positive thoughts and stay busy—I had an important role within the pack house at the moment, after all. I was locked up with the witches and Lola, and if worst came to worst, I needed to protect my dad and my mother, the people I was most worried about. Neither of them were fighters, and I was the one who’d dragged them into this. I was the reason they were here, risking their lives, and there was no way I wouldn’t do my very best to keep them safe.

“We should barricade the front windows,” Lola told me, interrupting my thoughts. She looked concerned instead of bratty for once, which instantly caught my attention.

“Aren’t the trenches supposed to stop them?” I asked.

Lola moved closer to the window, pointing outside. “Look how many eyes are out there.”

I looked outside and gulped. “Yeah. Let’s block everything up just in case.”

Lola and I started to barricade the windows. We worked in sync, moving couches and bookcases and chairs in front of every potential entrance to the house. We left the door uncovered, and my mother moved to the porch. She rotated her hands, green glow pouring out of them as her magic made the plants and shrubbery grow into a thicket in front of all the windows. A natural barricade.

“This is good,” Lola told me. She didn’t sound so sure.

I nodded just as Torin walked into the hall. He looked lost, and it made my heart ache. A lump formed in my throat as I thought about Astrid, but I swallowed it down.

In a loud voice, I called, “Torin! Come help us. We need everyone to get this done.”

Torin’s eyes met mine, and they seemed almost vacant for a long moment. Under his breath, he said, “Yes. That’s what Astrid would have done.”

Torin started to grab chairs with a ton of energy, almost frantic now.

*Sweet Astrid*,I thought, feeling my eyes water. Wiping away a couple of stray tears when nobody was looking, I kept working. Torin, Lola, and I swiftly blocked up entrances all over the house, until there were none left to shut. Lola was back at the window, peeking out through the sliver of glass that we hadn’t covered.

“There are so many of them. Much more than I imagined.” She swallowed quickly. “Jay just axed one in half—I should be out there helping him. He needs me, now more than ever since he doesn’t have his wolf.”

“What?!” I said. “When were you going to tell me that?”

Lola groaned. “There was never a good time! It was a… vampire venom accident with Emmett. Jay’s still strong, right?”

I could see she was nervous as hell. “Of course,” I reassured her. “Jay is a great fighter, no matter what. We need you *here*.”

I panicked at the thought of my friend in the line of danger and grabbed her arm, pulling her closer to me. “You need to stay here with me and protect the non-fighters, Lola. You’re the girl for the job, okay?”

She breathed sharply, staring deep into my eyes. A long moment later, she nodded. “Okay.”

I pulled her into a hug before we silently looked outside once more. I felt the impulse to head out there too, no matter what my brain said. My first instinct was to be out there, fighting alongside my mates. I was drawn to the scene, holding my breath as Xavier and Greyson and the others battled the wave of revenants.

*There are so many more than we expected!* I thought, internally flailing.

Lola needed to stay here, because she was a fighter, great in combat. But what about me? I wasn’t the best at combat, but wouldn’t offensive Fae magic be more helpful out there? If I reached the middle of the fray, I would be able to create enough magical blasts to throw the revenants off the other edge, over the trenches.

“Okay, you should stay, but maybe *I* should go out there,” I told Lola, moving toward the door.

Lola gasped, blocking my way. “No way. If you die, your parents will kill me!”

I stared up at her helplessly. “But if *you* die, your dads will kill *me*—”

Lola grasped my shoulders. “I know it sucks to be waiting in here while the boys get to do all the fun stuff. But this is the plan. We have to trust our Alpha.”

Our Alpha.

My mate.

I needed to trust my mate.

*Don’t make any foolish decisions, Cali*, I told myself. I looked out the window again. Xavier and Greyson had three revenants to fight each, but my mates didn’t pause for a second.

The revenants tried to gain the upper hand by attacking at the same time, but Xavier slashed through all three of them at once. His claws went in deep enough that their heads popped off completely, blood gushing out. As for Greyson, he had a sneakier way of fighting, shoving one of the revenants into the other two before tearing into their throats.

My gaze flickered back and forth. As soon as I looked at Xavier, I was terrified that I’d miss something that Greyson did. I was unable to focus on only one, and it felt like a live manifestation of the ways in which the *due destini* curse was ripping me apart.

In the end, though, only one thing mattered right now.

Both my mates bit and clawed their way to victory multiple times, but there were always more undead coming.

*Shit! How many of these things are there? Thirty? Sixty? A hundred? Thirty thousand million?*

I was certain that Mace and Jay and Rishika and their groups of fighters had killed just as many on every side of the house’s perimeter.

“Could you go find Emmett?” I asked Lola. “We may need his serum sooner than we thought.”

If any of the wolves were bitten by a revenant, we were going to have to administer it ASAP. It seemed like that was the only way Xavier’s wound had healed and hadn’t become a larger infection. If we didn’t… No, I didn’t want to go there.

Lola swallowed audibly, staring at the yard. “Seems like it.”

I forced myself to smile optimistically. “Hopefully we won’t need it.”

But on the inside, I was terrified that things weren’t going to go so well.

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As Lola went downstairs to Emmett’s secret evil mad scientist lab, I led everybody to the second floor. We would have a better view from here, but that only made things worse for me, because now I could see everything.

*This is so great! NOT!* I thought. My worry kept growing as the battle continued. It felt like it had become one with my brain, one with my heart, and all I could do was stand there, peering through the window and down into the yard, feeling sick to my stomach.

The witches were already upstairs, keeping watch throughout the floor. Big Mac was out on a balcony, mumbling under her breath as she reinforced what had to be a protective spell on the pack house. I held my breath, watching the glow of magic as it crept over the doors and windows.

“The pack house is surrounded,” Torin told me. He’d been going from room to room, window to window on the entire second floor to scope out the situation. His report wasn’t exactly a surprise, but how—*HOW*—was this happening so fast?

*Again, how many of these things are there?*

“They’re coming over the trenches!” my mother called. I rushed over and saw her standing by a window, pointing outside.

“What? What do you mean?” I asked breathlessly.

The trenches were full, lined with the bodies of revenants. The surviving ones, so many of them, were walking over the fallen as if they were a patch of land on our lawn.

*OH MY GOD! No no no no!*

The trenches had been the only thing slowing the attack down. We needed to send out more people to fight—at least in theory. But I couldn’t be that person.

*… Could I?*

I looked at my mother, staring out the window, her expression dark with concern and fear. My father was standing a couple of feet away, rubbing his face. I couldn’t just leave them. Lola was in the basement, checking on the serum, but she was going to have to hurry back soon by the looks of it… All of our other great fighters were already out there.

*What else can we do? Fuck!*

“Physical fighting isn’t enough,” I told Big Mac.

Her expression was serious. “And defensive magic won’t be useful until they actually reach us…” She trailed off.

“What about offensive magic?” I asked her. “Weren’t you and Kira talking about that earlier?”

“Yes.” She stared out the window for a moment, and then she rolled up her sleeves. “I’ve got just the thing.” Big Mac stepped out onto the balcony again, her hands moving in a way that I hadn’t seen before as she recited a spell that I hadn’t heard before. Then, blue fire streamed out of her fingertips, zipping toward the trenches.

The werewolves outside howled at the sight of flame, elated when the bodies in the trenches caught fire. An eight-foot wall of flame erupted, burning with magical heat.

The revenants, shrieking and aflame, shrank back.

*This is incredible!* I thought, so proud of Big Mac, and for a moment I allowed myself to feel hopeful. The barriers were back again.

*But for how long?*

**Episode 1790**

GREYSON

An arc of blue flame roared over my head, and then all the trenches caught fire.

Rishika howled in triumph.

*The witches came through again!* her wolf mind linked, ecstatic.

I nodded, taking a breath. I needed this break. There were just too many of those bastards. They were so stubborn, spreading everywhere, like an infestation. Calling them cockroaches would’ve been an insult to the insect.

One of them actually kept coming forward, even though it was on fire.

*Fuck… Here we go.*

My jaw clenched as I got ready for a fight, but then the revenant collapsed. I would have admired its determination if it hadn’t been a soulless instrument of chaos.

*We need more fire*, my brother said. *Now.*

*But there are many, many more in the woods*, I replied. *They’ll find a way around sooner or later.*

Xavier and I peered through the wavering blue flames, through the greenish purple smoke. The revenants were mindlessly trying to cross through the fire, falling back, still looking like zombies in their bloody, dirty clothes. But then, among the faces, there was a different one.

A clean-cut man that both my brother and I knew all too well.

Letifer was there in the disguise of my father’s body, and I growled, surging forward. A second later, though, he was gone. Had he really been there, or had I dreamt it? Was this another one of those fucking visions?

No.

*No.*

I wasn’t gonna let anything distract me right now.

I’d barely finished that thought when several revenants broke through, moving between the fires.

*They’re coming*, my brother said.

I nodded, taking up a position next to him. I pounced on the first revenant that got into my line of vision, ignoring the burn I felt in my leg. I hurled the thing back into the fire, where the flames were still high and raging. Another revenant took its place, lurching forward, only for me to slash through it and push it back where it came from.

This happened what felt like another hundred times.

I was confident at first, steady, ready for anything. But then, as the revenants kept coming and coming and *coming* and never fucking *ending*, it started to feel like I was getting slower and slower. Was this the fatigue of the battle? Or was it something else?

Suddenly, blinking became hard. My whole body got heavier. I looked down at my paws and realized that I could barely move them forward.

Fear wrapped all around me, suffocating me.

Would these monsters mow me down if I couldn’t fight?

If I couldn‘t fight, what was my worth anyway?

If I couldn’t fight…

I wasn’t going to see Cali’s face again.

At the thought of her, of her eyes on me and her mouth on my own, I snapped back to myself, a surge of energy running through me. I dove toward two incoming revenants, fueled by the image of her, of us together after I emerged victorious. I would never let my mate down.

Just as the two revenants fell down at my feet, their heads hanging by bare strings of flesh, I heard Mace howling. It was followed by his mind link.

*The fire’s gone out!*

I looked over at the western side. Sure enough, one of the trenches was no longer on fire, and the revenants were pouring through the gap at lightning speed. Mace snarled and charged at them, but I could tell that he was getting overwhelmed—he wouldn’t be able to fight more than three at once. Or, at least, he wouldn’t be able to do it without getting bitten and infected.

Without thinking twice, I rushed over to join the fight. One of those fucking zombies tried to block my way. I ducked as its claws reached over to slice through my neck and went for its side, digging my teeth in deep. When the thing lost its footing, I went for the jugular. The stench made my stomach twist. Kicking the body into the flames that were still burning, I took up my position once more. I plowed my way to Mace’s side, getting rid of one revenant after the other, like I was playing one of those video games humans liked so much.

They’d probably hate them if they knew what the make-believe felt like in real life.

*You good?* I asked Mace as he took a second to breathe. He was bleeding from his side and his shoulder, and there was a huge bump on his forehead, but he was still upright.

*These bloody bastards won’t quit!* he snarled, his wolf letting out a rough kind of sound that was somewhere between a broken laugh and a growl. He was a strong fighter, this one, an Alpha. He could have just walked away from us, but he’d stayed here. He’d stayed to help defeat Letifer and his minions. He was, despite being annoying and stubborn and arrogant, an honorable man who chose to do what was good.

This battle wasn’t only about territory or family squabbles. It was about good and evil.

And I was really getting sick of evil ruining my life, day in and out.

For the next few minutes, with renewed strength and determination, both Mace and I kept the wave of revenants from moving forward. The gap in the wall of fire was still pretty big, and they continued trying to pour in, but we fought them off.

*How much longer do we need to do this?* Mace asked, panting. *Hate to admit it, but I could really use some witchy help right now.*

I was about to swallow my ego and very easily agree, when suddenly another bout of blue flame erupted overhead. The gap caught fire once more, closing up, and the revenants that were in its path screamed in pain.

I felt like fucking laughing with glee. This had to be Big Mac’s work. It was just beautiful, and so rightfully cruel.

*What the fuck?* Mace demanded. *They’re pulling back!*

We looked ahead of the flames, behind them. Through the wall of blue fire, I could see that most of the revenants were retreating back into the woods. Not all of them, though.

Some of them had been trapped on our side when Big Mac had renewed her flames. Rishika and Zainab got rid of six all at once, and another two went after my brother. Those seemed bigger, stronger, and somehow meaner. Their eyes glowed an orange so bright that it covered their entire face.

Smothering whatever snarky comment I had in mind, I was rushing over to help the Alpha when I noticed that the revenants weren’t *just* fighting my brother. They were trying to drag Xavier with them, back into the woods.

What the hell?

It was surreal to see a massive werewolf held by his back paws, dragged away like prey. They were trying to lure him to the other side, and the weird part was that they seemed to momentarily overcome him.

I couldn’t let that happen.

I started to run toward my brother, using all the strength I had, but suddenly…

Once more, I found myself slowing down. It was like running in a dream. I couldn’t get anywhere, my steps heavy, my head murky all of a sudden.

*Greyson! A little help here?* Xavier said. *What the fuck are you waiting for?*

I wasn’t waiting. I was frozen. A dozen thoughts swirled through my mind.

If Xavier died, it meant I would get Cali.

If Xavier died, it meant I would be Alpha again.

*If Xavier died…*

I shivered, shaking my head. What the fuck was this? What was going on with me? These dark thoughts didn‘t even feel like my own. I might be fighting with my brother every minute of the day, but I’d always felt that he was part of me. I had never thought about killing him, not even when he’d dumped me in that zoo. We were in the same pack. He was my flesh and blood. Had the battle drained me so much that I was giving up on my conscience? On my sense of what was right and wrong?

Still frozen, I watched as more and more revenants ganged up on Xavier, dragging him through the gap in the fire, between the two northern trenches. Xavier was fighting for his life, lashing out with all the strength of a furious werewolf, but there were just too many monsters.

And I was still frozen.

I had no idea what the rest of the pack was doing, why they weren’t helping Xavier, but I knew that I couldn’t. I was weak and sluggish and broken.

And then, a familiar voice spoke inside my head.

*You know what you need to do, son.*

I looked beyond the flames, at the tree line, where Letifer’s figure appeared in a flash.

When the moment was over, I looked back at my brother.

He was gone.

Only the sound of his howling remained.

**Episode 1791**

CHARLIE

Violet let out a yelp, jumping toward me. I instantly wrapped my arms around her, and she hid her face in my neck, hugging me tight. Her breaths were coming out short and sharp, her voice broken when she whispered, “This is horrifying…”

I swallowed roughly, looking around. There were severed werewolf heads all over, trophies on the walls. These hunters were proud of the ways that they’d tortured beings just like Violet and myself. The cruelty of the sight made me shudder.

“What’s wrong with her?” Zachery asked me, scowling as he pointed at Violet.

I glared at the asshole. “She’s been through a lot. Don’t worry about it.” In a sharper tone, I added, “Like you didn’t worry about properly locking the door. You know how it goes.”

Zachery huffed in anger. “I *said* it was an accident!”

I didn’t give a shit about his anger, really. “Can you just back the hell off? Stop obsessing over Daisy, stop fucking looking at her—she’s none of your business. Do you understand?”

Zachery fell silent, still glaring. I was glad for the break—I didn’t want to keep fighting with him right now. Violet had stopped shaking, thank god. She let me go, looking up at me with huge, vulnerable eyes.

“I’m gonna be okay.” She glanced around before wincing. “I just don’t want to look at those… things.”

It wasn’t just werewolves on the walls, either. The trophies included a banshee’s head, a minotaur’s head, a siren tail, some huge jaw that looked like it belonged to a dinosaur… What the hell had the hunters been up to? Seriously, what on earth was wrong with them? Not even animals deserved this kind of treatment.

“I hate this place too,” Sophie told Violet in a quiet voice, subtly moving between Zachery and myself. She squeezed Violet’s arm and added, “It’s like a live grave. It just makes my stomach turn.”

I was glad for Sophie. Violet seemed to agree. She stared at the girl fondly and was about to say something when Pepperdine started barking.

“Oy!” he said, standing in the middle of the room. “Listen up, hunters. Here’s the plan!”

Keeping Violet close, I fought to pay attention to Pepperdine as he outlined the battle plan. The instructors would move outside and secure the perimeter to make sure it was safe to leave the premises. The campers were to remain here in the safe house, only defending themselves if a revenant should break through. In theory, it wasn’t a bad plan. Now, if only Violet and I could ignore the fact that this safe house was a mausoleum.

As Pepperdine kept rambling, I felt that someone was staring at me. My gaze flickered across the room to Romilly, who, sure enough, was already looking. She gave me a little head nod that was more like a “come over here.”

*Romilly wants to talk to us*, I told Violet.

*Do you think it’s gonna be good or bad?* she asked.

*No idea*, I replied.

*Better get this over with*, *then*, she replied.

I took Violet’s hand and led her through the crowd of hunters to Romilly. Her expression was, as ever, severe. She led us to one of the room’s corners, and I stood close to her.

Under her breath, she said, “Act like nothing’s going on. Keep your eyes on Pepperdine. Hold your hand open.”

I did what I was told, Violet rigid by my side. And then Romilly pressed a metal key into my palm.

“What’s this for?” I whispered to her, my eyes still fixed on Pepperdine as I pretended to be listening.

“It opens the hatch to the safe room. It’s my personal key. No one knows I’m giving it to you,” she replied.

I swallowed roughly. “What do you want me to do? Lead the campers out?”

“No. These kids have no real fighting experience. They have to stay here, remain protected, but you and Violet have some special gifts that could be immensely useful in the battlefield. I can’t order you to do anything, but if you wanted to use those gifts topside, we could really use the help. Hunters are skilled, but you two can smell the monsters. You could save lives today.”

Violet’s voice came out low and tight. “Considering all those heads on the wall, I’m not sure I’m feeling very helpful right now.”

Romilly glanced at the nearest werewolf trophy. “Look, I can’t change the past. But I’m telling you right now that you’ve got a chance to change the future.”

“That sounds like a lot of responsibility to put on the shoulders of two teenagers,” I told her.

Romilly ignored my cold tone. “Don’t advertise what you are, but if we can explain to the others that your kind can be allies, it could go a long way toward fixing things—and fighting the real enemies, like the undead upstairs.”

“Why should we have to *explain* anything?” I asked Romilly. “Why do *we* need to put in the work for the hunters to realize they’re wrong and stop acting like beasts?”

Violet flinched.

I nodded at the walls. “Because that’s not the work of humans, Romilly.”

The woman fell silent. Then, she whispered, “You’re our only hope.”

Violet squeezed my shoulder. *She’s right. We may not like it, but it’s the right thing to do.*

Clenching my jaw, I took a deep breath. And then I put the key in my pocket.

“Thank you,” Romilly whispered. “Wait till the instructors leave before you sneak out. And be careful. I don’t want to see your heads on these walls.”

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Ten minutes later, the instructors were gone. They’d said they would be back soon enough. We weren’t supposed to open the door to anyone if they didn’t provide the secret code word.

“What happens if there’s an invasion, though?” Sophie asked before Pepperdine had walked out.

His expression was deadpan. “Have fun with the weapons rack.”

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The safe house had a few rooms to explore, so we all got to it. Violet and I went straight to the armory.

*We should probably pick up some of those weapons if we won’t be able to shift while fighting*, Violet said wryly.

I was about to reply when a loud *CRACK!* echoed in the room, startling me. A girl had used a whip to smack the floor. After our surprise wore off, everybody started laughing.

“I’m Wonder Woman!” she bellowed. “This is the Lasso of Truth, suckers!”

*Would the truth be that hunters are murderers?* I asked. *Because I already knew that.*

Violet nudged me.

*What? I get sarcastic when I’m under stress!* I replied defensively.

She sighed, squeezing my hand.

“Hey guys, look!” Another kid started fooling around with a pair of scimitars, whirling them around. “These are pretty intense. What monsters are they good for?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Sophie said with an arched eyebrow, and Violet and I snorted—half-amused, half-nervous about what was to come. My smile died out when I caught Zachery’s glare from across the room, though. He was holding a spear with a silver tip, and it felt like he wanted to throw it right at me.

*I’m gonna punch that dude before the day is over, so help me god*,I told Violet.

She paused. *Not a bad idea.*

I smirked, wrapping my arm around her shoulders. Suddenly, her eyes widened.

“What?” I asked, alarmed.

She moved forward, to the case right before us. “It’s a flame thrower!” Violet enthused, picking it up. “I wonder what that button does!”

“Maybe we shouldn’t try that out in a closed space, okay?” I took the thing away from her, and she waved me off, already distracted by her next find at the poison station. There was a strange gleaming liquid there, and Violet picked up the vial, her lips parted in wonder.

Before she could suggest drinking it just to see what would happen, I said, *All that looks great and all, but how the hell are we going to get out of here?*

Violet turned to me, her weapons adventure now forgotten. She frowned. *You’re right.* *There are way too many people to sneak away, and Zachery has been staring at us this whole time.*

“They’re keeping all the fun stuff away from us!” Sophie walked over before I could respond to Violet, wielding a halberd. “Look how cool this is!” she told Violet with a grin on her face.

Violet replied equally enthusiastically while Sophie looked between my mate and me. She glanced around before muttering, “What did Romilly want?”

Sophie had always been perceptive.

*Should we tell her?* Violet asked.

*I think so*, I replied. *She’s proven to be trustworthy time and time again.*

Violet nodded, squeezing my shoulder. Staring at Sophie, I whispered, “Romilly gave me the key to get out. She thinks Violet and I can help out on the DL during the battle, but I can’t figure out how to slip past all these crazy armed hunters.”

Sophie’s expression turned thoughtful as she looked around. And then she murmured, “I think what you guys need right now is my specialty. A distraction.”

**Episode 1792**

GREYSON

I watched, wide-eyed and still frozen, as my brother was pulled into the trees by the revenants. Why the fuck couldn’t I move? Was this some kind of spell? What kind of dark magic bullshit was I dealing with here?

I had never felt like this during a fight before.

I couldn’t even turn to look back to the pack house, but I could picture everyone watching though the windows, wondering what the hell was going on. They’d think I’d chosen to abandon Xavier—that I was some petty little puppy dog who was sulking over losing his Alpha status. I could imagine Cali hating me over this—assuming that I was trying to end the *due destini* like a coward.

Would they be right, though?

Could any of those things be true?

Guilt felt like a sickness in the pit of my stomach, and then a cold voice echoed through my mind.

*This is what you’ve always wanted.*

No. Not like this. I’d never wanted anything like this.

*Don’t deny it. Just give in, and you’ll get everything you’ve ever wanted.*

I’d never wanted Xavier to die or become a monster. He was my brother. My little brother at that. It was part of my duty as his older brother to protect him.

*Forget about him, and it’ll all be yours. Cali, the pack, everything.*

I fought to shake my head, to tell this hissing voice to get the fuck away from me—*get out.* But I still couldn’t move. I was a statue.

And then Mace rushed over.

*What the hell are you doing?* he demanded. He was still bleeding, but at least he was moving. Unlike me. *Come on! We can get him back if we both go right now!*

*I can’t*, I bit out.

Mace was panting. He stared at me. *What the shit is that supposed to mean? I know you guys have had your differences, but he’s your brother, he’s the Alpha, and we have to save him! Come on!*

*No, I literally can’t move*, I snapped. *My paws are frozen to the ground.*

Mace’s wolf narrowed his eyes at me. *That’s impossible. What are you playing at?*

I couldn’t fucking believe this. Any of it. I scoffed, *Oh, great. So you don’t believe me.*

Mace growled, lunging at me. At once, I collapsed to the ground, the thud of it making my insides vibrate.

Mace’s wolf hovered over me, snapping his jaws together before he flinched back.

*Well*. He blinked in shock. *You’re not physically frozen. But you did just flop over like a sad pancake.*

I had never been more fucking humiliated in my entire life.

I snarled internally. *I know that, asshole! Stop fucking around and go after Xavier. Get him back. I’ll follow.*

Mace was finally done wasting time, and he bounded off after Xavier’s scent. I remained on the ground, fucking furious at everything—and above all, furious at myself. I had never, not once in my life, been called a sad pancake. I was all muscle, barely had any fat in my body—*how* could I be so weak? What the fuck kind of spell was this? Why couldn’t I break it?

I needed to force myself to move.

But the more I tried, the weaker I felt. The drowsiness returned tenfold, like a disease spreading all over me. I couldn’t escape. I couldn’t do this, I—

*You have to*, a voice said in my mind.

But it wasn’t the creepy voice of my nightmares, and it wasn’t Mace either.

It was Cali’s voice.

It was a memory of Cali telling me, “*You have to, Greyson. You can do this.*”

She appeared in my head like a fantasy, right here in front of me. Softly, she touched my forehead, whispering, “*You can do this, Greyson. I can’t face Letifer’s evil alone.*”She stroked my cheek, my face that had become skin instead of fur, her eyes full of love.“*You’ve always been there for me when I’ve needed you. Now I’m here for you. I’ll always be here for you*,” she murmured, leaning down to brush her lips over mine. It was a kiss that started soft but became fiery a moment later, so deep I could feel it in my bones.

I could feel it in my soul.

Cali had always been part of me, anyway—the center of my world. All the good and the bad and the silly things she’d done had made her the amazing person she was today. I loved her so deeply that the idea of disappointing her was fucking sickening.

Unacceptable.

“*You can do this*,” Cali said against my mouth, after the kiss ended. There was an otherworldly glow around her, but in the blink of an eye, it was gone.

*She* was gone.

The fantasy was over, and I remained on the ground, frozen and alone.

Not for long.

I was a lot of things, but a coward wasn’t one of them.

I would protect Cali with everything I had. I would protect my honor. I would protect who I was, and what was left of me.

With a roar, I broke free from the lassitude that had gripped me like a soul-sucking demon and jumped up, springing after Mace.

I had to find my brother.

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The scent of Mace lingered in the air as I ran through the woods. Xavier’s scent was much fainter, covered by the stench of death. There had to be hundreds of revenants in these trees, and the idea of them jumping out at me made me fucking shudder.

What if I froze and flopped over again? What the hell had that been, anyway? Some sort of side effect from the witch mark? In theory, I was healed, but apparently that meant nothing around these parts. Either way, I would have to make sure it never took over again. I was in charge of myself, *I* was in control of my body—nobody else.

My thoughts were interrupted by a series of snarls.

I saw a cluster of figures up ahead—two werewolves, one growling, the other on the ground, and five revenants.

Mace and the revenants were fighting over Xavier.

I slowed down, circling them while remaining concealed to have the element of surprise on my side. My brother lay on the ground, fighting to stand, bleeding all fucking over. There were gashes on his side, cuts and various wounds, but I couldn’t see any bite marks. Relief flooded me.

When I said that I cared about Xavier, I meant it. Even after he’d fucking taken everything from me, I couldn’t find it in me to hate him. I was probably a sucker for it, but it was hard to ignore the feeling of protectiveness an older werewolf felt for his younger, occasionally horrible, siblings.

When I had a direct line of attack, I roared, leaping into the fight. The revenants shrieked and hissed, claws out, but it was too late—I’d stunned them for a brief moment that was long enough for me to tear apart anything I could get my teeth around.

*Finally!* Mace said, and I had to fucking agree.

*Finally*, I was here, and the fight shifted in moments. We killed four of the revenants, and the fifth started to scream and run away.

*He’s going to call for the others*, Xavier said.

I sniffed the air, looking around. All three of us could sense the army of undead lurking around in the woods, just waiting to attack.

I pulled Xavier up to his feet. *We need to run back to the pack house. Can you do it?*

Weakly, Xavier nodded. At least he was alive. At least he hadn’t been bitten. I wanted to ask him how the fuck he’d let himself be dragged off into the woods. Were those revenants that powerful? Or had Xavier been overcome by that same heavy energy that had pinned me to the ground?

We didn’t have time for my million questions, so I kept them for later. Together, we moved as swiftly as possible to the pack house. I kept expecting to be attacked from behind, and Mace seemed to be thinking the same—both of us looked over our shoulders every minute or two.

Nothing happened, though.

When we finally got to the pack house, the trenches were still burning with that blue flame, stretching high up into the sky, with only one gap.

*Why aren’t they following us?* Mace asked.

*This has to be a trick*, Xavier replied.

*No shit*, I wanted to say, but stopped myself. Sarcasm wouldn’t help anyone at the moment. It wasn’t like Xavier was having a good time here, either. He groaned in pain as we quickly crossed the flame barrier, and then all three of us paused, looking toward the woods. They were deadly silent. Even though this seemed like a good thing, my instincts were on high alert.

Had the revenants really retreated? Could this be over so easily?

**Episode 1793**

I had been pacing in front of an upstairs window for the past fifteen minutes. I was biting my nails, raking my hands through my hair. I had established a worrying routine by now, since I’d been feeling like this for hours.

“How long have the witches been gone now?” I asked my mom. She and my dad were sitting on the sofa in the corner, watching my impending breakdown.

“Ten minutes,” she replied.

“They’re just outside fortifying the spells, sweetheart,” my dad added, taking my mom’s hand. “It’s okay.”

“But what if they accidentally set up a dome again and Xavier and Greyson get stuck outside?” I asked with a gasp.

“Cali, Big Mac wouldn’t do that,” my dad told me seriously.

“But what if—”

“Cali!” My mom’s voice was firm enough to shut me up for, like, a few seconds. She walked up to me and squeezed my shoulder. “It’s going to be fine. They’re werewolves; fighting is what they do. And you’re connected to them in a very unique way. You’d know if one of them…”

I swallowed roughly. *Oh my god, is my mother REALLY talking about my mates dying while I’m freaking out about the possibility of them dying? REALLY?*

“I don’t know if this is helping,” my dad said awkwardly, interrupting the silence.

I kinda wanted to cry, so my mom pulled me into a hug. I held her tight, mumbling, “I have tried to mind link with them, but it’s not working.”

“It’s probably because they’re too far away,” my mom said, moving me to sit down on a chair. My thoughts remained restless, though.

*What if there’s something wrong with our mind link?* I wondered, my heart racing. *What if there’s something else going on? Greyson had a weird vibe going on earlier—he’d stood there frozen in the yard for ages before he took off after Xavier and Mace. What could it all* MEAN*?*

My dad sighed. “Cali?”

My head snapped up.

“You’re spiraling,” he said. “It’s all over your face.”

I laughed. Awkwardly. “It’s okay, I—”

I noticed movement outside and jumped up from my seat, rushing to the window once more. It was Jay—Jay, and he looked fine! Still had a huge axe with him. Rishika was walking next to him, the two of them moving toward the house without any massive injuries. Something eased inside my chest, but not for too long. I needed to talk to Jay and Rishika—they must’ve seen something, they had to know something about my mates.

The waiting was fucking *killing* me.

“Cali, where are you going?” my mom asked.

“Jay and Rishika are back!”

I rushed past my concerned parents and climbed down the stairs. Almost running to the door, I swung it open. I was ready to drill Jay and Rishika with questions, but my mouth dropped open when it wasn’t them I saw standing on the front porch.

It was Greyson and Xavier.

*Am I dreaming?* I wondered. *Have I finally lost my fucking mind?*

It was probably a long time coming.

“Is this real?” I choked out, and Greyson chuckled.

“We’re back, love,” he said, and a huge weight was lifted off my shoulders. I smiled so wide it hurt my cheeks, but my face fell the second I turned to look at Xavier. He was cut up all over, gashes and scratches and bruises all over his body. He seemed to be leaning on Greyson for support. That was a testament to how much he had to be hurting, because there was no way he’d accept Greyson’s help otherwise.

“Xavier…” I stroked his cheek, making him look at me. He seemed exhausted. “Oh my god, what happened? What did they do to you? Were you bitten?”

Xavier just shook his head, resting his hand on my shoulder. “You’re okay,” he said softly, and I couldn’t believe my ears—OF COURSE I was okay! My ass had been locked up in here the whole time!

“They didn’t bite him,” Greyson told me. I turned to see him staring at Xavier and me with an unreadable expression on his face. “But they did a number on him. I think they wanted him alive.”

I gasped. “What? But why?”

“No idea,” Greyson replied. “But they were taking him somewhere.”

“To Letifer?” I asked, my heart pounding.

“Maybe,” Greyson said darkly. “I thought I saw…”

Xavier moaned in pain before Greyson could finish his sentence. I was sniffling, staring up at him, when Kira walked up to us. “Get him upstairs—he needs medical attention.”

A frowning Mace also showed up out of nowhere, and he and Greyson took Xavier upstairs while I followed, trying to fight back tears.

“He wasn’t bitten, Cali,” Kira reminded me. “The worst is behind us.”

Was it, though?

My stomach tied itself up in knots when I saw Xavier lying on his bed, bloody, his eyes closed. Kira put some smelly ointment on the wounds, and the bleeding quickly stopped. I was hovering over him, cleaning his face with a damp cloth, when I felt Greyson’s touch at the crook of my elbow.

“I need to talk to you,” he whispered.

I faced Greyson. His expression was intense, worried, but I shook my head. “I’m sorry, but I can’t right now. Xavier needs me here.”

Pressing his lips together, Greyson looked between Xavier and me. “Okay. But I have to tell you something, sooner rather than later.”

I was about to speak when Kira piped up. “Cali, apply some of the ointment to Xavier’s face,” she told me. “That gash on his forehead looks bad.”

I rushed to follow her instructions, and Greyson nodded at me before walking out of the room. I couldn’t help but glance at his retreating back as he left, but then Xavier groaned deeply, and all other thoughts flew out the window.

“Shh, it’s okay,” I told him, caressing his cheek. “We’re here for you. You’re back in the pack house, and we’re fixing you up.”

He wrinkled his nose, wincing. He looked down at himself and then up at Kira. “Something stinks.”

“It’s an ointment that speeds up werewolf healing. There are a lot of gashes, and you’re bruised,” she told him in a serious tone.

“Still stinks,” he told her, huffing.

Kira ignored him like one would ignore a toddler, and did something to his knee that had him wincing.

“Where’s Torin?” Xavier asked. “I like his magic better.”

Kira scoffed. “A witch’s healing techniques are different than a Fae’s. Torin is too drained to perform any magic at the moment, so this will have to do. Stop whining.”

Xavier pouted, and I brought his hand to my lips, brushing them over his knuckles.

“I’m so glad you’re here. I thought…” I didn’t finish my sentence, sniffling.

“I’m fine,” he said. “What happened with the revenants, though?”

“They’re gone right now,” I replied.

Xavier’s expression darkened. “They’ll come back. And if I’m not ready, Greyson will let them walk right in.”

I let Xavier’s hand drop, stunned. “*What?* How can you say that? Greyson brought you back here!”

Xavier shook his head bitterly. “You weren’t there. I was screaming for help, and he did nothing.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. What the hell? “That can’t be true. There has to be another explanation.”

Xavier grunted. “Mace got to me first, not Greyson. He just stood there.”

A memory flashed through my head: Greyson standing in the yard, frozen. No… This couldn’t be. Greyson would NEVER betray his brother, or the pack! Besides, he did go after Xavier. Eventually.

*You know I’m telling the truth, baby*, Xavier said. *There’s something else happening here. Greyson can’t be trusted.*

I shook my head. “I can’t believe that,” I whispered. “You’re hurt; you’re not thinking straight.”

Kira stood up. “I need more ointment and gauze. I’ll be right back.” She glanced at Xavier. “Keep an eye on him.”

The moment she was out of the room, I told Xavier, “I saw Greyson bring you through that door. He’s not a traitor.”

Xavier scoffed. “You’re way too trusting, Cali. That’s not—”

Without thinking much, I grabbed both his cheeks and kissed him. Mostly to shut him up, and also because I was, truly, so glad to have him here. Whining and all. His kiss was as amazing as ever, passionate and comforting, the way he responded to me making my heart ache. He gripped the back of my neck, making my mouth open up wider for him, his tongue brushing up against mine till I moaned.

I had been so terrified of him dying, but now here he was, alive and real.

I was so in love with him I could’ve cried.

“Ahem.” Kira cleared her throat very loudly, her voice breaking through my ears. “Hey now, there’s no time for that, kids.”

I flinched away from Xavier, my cheeks flushed—both because of the kiss and because of Kira’s expression. Her eyebrows were arched.

“When I said to keep an eye on him, Cali,” she said, “I didn’t mean suck on his face till he faints.”

I waved her off, extremely embarrassed, and Xavier laughed with a wince. He smirked at me. “I like where your head’s at, but I’ve got to heal up and get ready for the next attack.”

I nodded, pressing my lips together. *I love you*, I told him.

*I love you too, Cali. So much*, he replied, squeezing my hand.

Kira opened up another tub of ointment. Almost gleefully, she told Xavier, “Here comes the stinky boner killer.”

He scoffed at her, flipping her off, and somehow I knew that I was leaving him in good hands. It was great to see him have a friend in Kira—definitely their own kind of friendship, but still a real one.

The moment I closed the door behind me, though, my worry returned, but for different reasons now.

*Why did Xavier accuse Greyson of being a traitor?* I wondered, my stomach clenching. *Could there be some truth to it? Is Greyson hiding something?*

I took a deep breath. There was only one way to find out.

I needed to talk to Greyson.

**Episode 1794**

MARTA

I was still shaking after witnessing the battle. The whole thing with all those revenants hurling themselves into the pit and then getting flambéed as they kept on coming was an image that had been burned into my brain.

I’d been able to sense all those lost souls struggling to survive and then fading away. That was the worst part about being a medium—feeling other people’s anguish when I couldn’t do anything to help. The pack didn’t have a choice, though. This was war, and the revenants needed to be stopped, even if they were nothing but infected souls.

Big Mac had done what was right for everybody in this house.

“That fire spell was amazing,” I told her quietly.

She was washing something in the kitchen sink and paused. She shook her head, sighing before she turned to face me. “These wolves are the best fighters I know, but magic is the thing that will win this battle… or lose it. Do you realize that, Marta?”

I gulped, nodding.

“I need you to be ready for the next wave,” she told me.

I felt sick to my stomach suddenly. “The next wave?”

“Letifer will keep sending revenants at us until he’s destroyed.” She smiled bitterly. “He will keep sacrificing souls until he gets what he wants, and we have no choice but to defend ourselves. Or die.”

Chills rolled down my spine. I could picture it now—an endless sea of revenants pounding on the pack house’s doors. I had been looking through the windows earlier along with everybody else, and the memory was still fresh and horrifying in my mind. The revenants had been stepping over each other in the trenches without flinching. They hadn’t even realized that they were trampling who were supposed to be their comrades. That, or they simply hadn’t cared.

The things were determined, that was for sure.

They were determined and doomed to follow orders. No escape for them.

*No escape for us.*

The idea of being trapped and stuck in this house while being surrounded by hundreds of those things, on all sides, was making me feel claustrophobic. But I did want to help. I needed to help the pack any way I could.

“What can I do?” I asked Big Mac. “I’m not a witch.”

“But you’re a bridge. And you can affect the revenants in a way that no one else can,” she told me, and I…

I felt like running away screaming. I didn’t want to admit that what Big Mac was saying might be true, but it was becoming clearer and clearer by the second. That was a responsibility that I didn’t feel ready for. At all. Ever.

“So no pressure, huh?” I asked, chuckling awkwardly.

Big Mac remained deadpan. “I have to go check on the house’s protection.” She pointed out the window. “You keep watch.”

I was left staring out the vine-covered kitchen window, still screaming on the inside. Keep watch, Big Mac said? This wasn’t what I’d signed up for! I had no idea what I *had* signed up for when I’d kept telling her that I wanted to help, but it was *certainly* not this. In some way, I missed being a prisoner in a poltergeist-haunted house—at least then, I hadn’t been constantly attacked by glowing-eyed zombies, and I also hadn’t felt a tremendous responsibility weighing on my shoulders.

I’d only known these people a few weeks, and now I was going to jump into battle with them?

I choked at the thought, my heart racing so hard that I could hear it. Was it getting hot in here? Why was I seeing dark spots? I swallowed, fighting to catch my breath. I took a step backward—I needed to sit down, I needed to—

“I need to get the hell out of here,” I said under my breath, shaking.

But my body felt too heavy with panic, and when I landed on a chair, I fought to breathe more evenly. The tightness in my chest got so strong that I wanted to cry, but then…

Something changed.

I felt ghostly arms around me.

Lilac was there, and his presence worked as an instant ointment.

“It’s okay to feel scared,” he said in my ear, hugging me tight. He was only a spirit, but I could feel his comfort already.

“I can’t do this,” I whispered. “I don’t even know what Big Mac’s asking me to do.”

Lilac stared at me intensely. “Well, whatever it is, I’ll be right beside you the whole time. I can help.”

I wanted to touch him. I wanted to feel him so badly that my heart ached for it.

“Kiss me,” I whispered.

He blinked. “But what about the break in the worlds and Vander and all that?”

I laughed, helpless. “What could possibly get worse right now?”

Lilac didn’t need to be told twice. He leaned in and kissed me gently. Softly, and then with more purpose. He instantly became more substantial, and I could hold onto him. His touch, his skin made me feel much more centered. My heart rate slowed a little.

“I’ll do my best,” I told him. “But I’m so new at this—I have no idea what a bridge can even do when it comes to revenants.”

He stroked my cheek. “We’ll figure it out together.”

I sniffled. “You just say that because you’re tethered to me.”

He smirked. “No. I say that because I’m tethered to you, and also because I love kissing you. So I feel like I should do my best to keep you happy, you know?”

I scoffed, and he snickered.

“I’m not kidding,” he said. “I really do want to help. You’re so important to me, Marta. I think you know that by now.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. Lilac had a way of making me feel better. Making me feel stronger, a little more courageous somehow. With him by my side, I would never be alone again.

“Sometimes, I think—”

“Marta!” Big Mac’s booming voice interrupted me before I could finish my sentence. “Come down here, we need you!”

Lilac arched an eyebrow. “Seems like we have work to do.”

Nodding shakily, I headed downstairs. Lilac was right next to me. I could feel him even though he’d become translucent once more.

I was about to call out to see where exactly Big Mac was when suddenly, someone grabbed me by the arm.

I was startled, about to scream when I noticed that it was Big Mac, who gestured for me to shut up. She had popped out of a storage closet and pulled me back in. My heart was racing all over again as I looked around at all the cleaning supplies and mops.

There were *so* many of them.

“Whoa,” I whispered, momentarily distracted. “Is Xavier obsessed with cleaning or something?”

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “Alphas are anal retentive about cleaning. Werewolves and scents—it’s a whole ridiculous thing.”

I was about to ask her more about that, but she quickly waved me off.

“Forget about the annoying werewolves,” she said. “I need you to listen to me right now.”

I held my breath, going straight back to alarm mode.

“I’ve watched you grow, Marta, and I know I can trust you,” she told me, her hands resting on my shoulders. There was a vulnerability to her face that I’d never seen directed at anyone other than Mrs. Smith. “Out of all of us, no matter what powers and gifts we have, you’re the most able to sense Letifer’s presence. That’s the real advantage of you being a bridge. So when the time comes, you’ll know exactly where he is. And because of that, you need to be the one to do this.”

“Do *what*?” I squeaked

She bent and picked up a bag, reaching inside it.

And then she pulled out the orb.

“You’re the person most capable of wielding this weapon, Marta,” she told me.

“You can’t be serious,” I said, fighting not to hyperventilate. “Is this a joke?”

“Do I look like I’m joking?” Big Mac deadpanned.

How was I supposed to take this? Letifer had tried to kill me. I was terrified of him, of what he could do. I had only just gotten my life back, and he wanted to take it away. How could I be the one who had to face him?

I felt like screaming all over again. “I can’t do this.” I sniffled. “I’m so sorry, I just can’t have that kind of responsibility on my shoulders, not when everyone’s lives depend on it! What if I screw up?”

Big Mac shook her head. “Marta, *please*. I promise you, you’re more than capable. I know your power is enough—I can feel it. Do you understand what I’m telling you here?”

I wiped my wet eyes, holding my breath.

Her voice came out dark but determined. “I believe in you, Marta.”

Somehow, those words made me breathe again.

“You’re the bridge. I *believe* you can succeed,” she repeated. “So the real question here is…” Big Mac held out the orb. “Will you do this?”

**Episode 1795**

I found Greyson in the living room, taking with Jay, Rishika, and Mace. All four of them had only scrapes and bruises left, werewolf healing taking over, and that made me breathe a sigh of relief. At least Jay seemed to still have that, too. Lola could remain defending the house.

*One less thing to worry about*,I thought. *For now, at least.*

The four of them were deep in conversation, Greyson taking reports from them about what had happened during the battle. His tone was even, authoritative, just like his expression. He was no longer the official Alpha, but he still had the presence of one. The three fighters seemed to believe so as well, because none of them seemed to have any objections to his grilling, not even Mace.

*Mace was out there when Greyson didn’t run to help Xavier right away…*

The thought made me shiver. It was fortified by the way Greyson was currently behaving toward the pack’s key players. He was acting like the Alpha, and Xavier’s accusations echoed in my ears. But would Greyson let Xavier get hurt just to regain his position of power?

*No. Just NO.*

I refused to believe that. Xavier was upset, and always quick to blame his brother for everything anyway. Greyson had gone after Xavier in the end—he was the one who’d brought him back.

“… anything else you need us to do?” Rishika asked Greyson, then.

He paused, glancing at the doorway where I’d been standing.

He gave me a curt nod and mind linked, *I’ll be right there, love.*

“Prep for the next wave,” he told Rishika. “That’s it.”

All three fighters exited the room. Jay placed his hand on my shoulder as he passed. “How’s Xavier?” he asked.

“Better,” I replied.

Jay exhaled in relief, heading out.

Greyson and I were left alone in the living room, staring at each other. The silence between us felt charged, heavy, and then Greyson took two strides and stood before me. I swallowed roughly at his proximity, at the intensity of his gaze.

*Cool down*, *Cali*, I told myself. *You can’t be getting all flustered right now!*

It was like the kiss I’d shared with Xavier all over again, only Greyson and I weren’t even kissing. We shouldn’t be kissing right now, even if it would be amazing and—

*Oh my god, I NEED to control myself!*

Clearing my throat, I said, “You said you wanted to talk. And I have a few questions for you too, actually.”

His eyes narrowed. “What kinds of questions?”

I ushered him to the corner of the room to give us some semblance of privacy and crossed my arms over my chest. “What happened out there, Greyson? Why did you pause before helping Xavier?”

Greyson exhaled sharply, shaking his head. “That’s exactly what I want to talk to you about. I can’t even explain it…” He seemed worried, alarmed all of a sudden, and that freaked me out as well.

“Please try. I’m dying here,” I said, flailing a bit.

He stared at me, pressing his lips together. “During the fight, I started feeling sluggish, like I could barely move.”

I blinked in surprise. “Well, it was a really intense battle. I’d be taking a ten-hour nap right now if I were you.”

Greyson pinched the bridge of his nose, shaking his head. “I don’t mean normal fatigue. This was worse. And when those things grabbed Xavier, I was frozen.”

I gasped. “Frozen? How?”

“I tried to run, but I couldn’t even move a step. It took Mace hitting me to move my body,” Greyson said. “And even then…” He trailed off, looking down at the floor.

He seemed so guilty and miserable that I couldn’t help myself—I wrapped my arms around him, the urge to comfort him overcoming everything else. Here he was, a man so strong, and he seemed intimidated. Spooked. It broke my heart.

And it also scared me shitless.

What could have overcome Greyson like that?

“What happened after that?” I whispered.

Greyson hugged me back, his chin resting on my head. Then, he faced me, breathing evenly. “I stayed frozen, Cali. I felt trapped. I felt broken, and the only thing that pulled me out of it was the thought of you.”

I looked up at him. The emotion in his expression made me shiver. “How?” I whispered.

He caressed my cheek with the back of his hand. “I heard your voice in my head, I remembered all the times we’d been together, and I…” He swallowed, glancing at my mouth. “I knew I needed to save myself, just to be with you.”

My heart was breaking. Greyson’s vulnerability made me want to wrap him in a cocoon to protect him. When he leaned down to brush his lips over mine, I pulled him closer in an instant. I opened my mouth up to him, let him lead, felt both of us become much more grounded through this moment of closeness. I needed to be close to him, always.

I felt what he’d just said in my bones.

Sometimes, the thought of my mates was the only thing that kept me going. I clung to him more tightly, but when Greyson broke the kiss to breathe, the oxygen made me come to my senses.

*As amazing as this is, it’s probably NOT the best time to be making out with him*, I thought, huffing internally. When he made a move to kiss me again, I placed a gentle hand on his chest to stop him.

“What?” he asked, licking his lips.

He was so fucking gorgeous, it hurt to look at him sometimes. I could’ve stayed with him like this forever.

“I love you, and you love me, but maybe let’s wait until the pack house isn’t being besieged by the undead. How about that?” I asked.

He snorted, his grip around me getting looser. “Of course, love.”

I poked his chest. “Also, you need to talk to Xavier, because he’s the Alpha and he thinks you *chose* not to help him.”

Greyson scoffed, dropping his hands from around my waist. The switch in his mood was so quick it felt jarring. “Seriously? I went after him. Mace was there!”

I raised my hands. “Don’t shoot the messenger! Just tell Xavier what you told me—it sounds like some sort of spell that froze you.” I scowled. “We have no idea what kind of spell it was, though, or who did it, which is truly horrifying.”

“I’ll say,” Greyson said dryly.

“The point is,” I continued, “please do tell Xavier the truth, because we don’t need any more drama right now. Xavier will understand.”

Greyson shook his head bitterly. “My brother’s always quick to accuse me of betrayal. You’d think I was his enemy by the way he keeps talking shit about me. He’s such a little—”

“Greyson,” I said in a firm tone.

He sighed, changing gears. “Point is, Xavier never understands when it comes to me.” He glanced down at my mouth, cupping my cheek. “Only you understand, Cali.”

I stared up at Greyson, holding his wrist. The way he touched and looked at me was so hard to ignore. I felt dazed, a little drunk with it, and when he leaned down to brush his lips over mine again, I felt helpless to stop it.

“Greyson!” Jay’s loud voice came from the hallway, and I flinched away, getting a grip on myself. UGH, what was it with these men and me acting like a horny teenager when we were all literally probably about to die? Was imminent death some sort of aphrodisiac?

Then again, we were always like this, death threats notwithstanding.

“I saw something in the woods,” Jay said, rushing into the room.

“Get ready for wave two,” Greyson replied darkly, and Jay nodded.

“What should I do?” I asked, buzzing with stress.

“Same as before. Stay inside. Stay safe,” he told me.

I scowled, ready to object as always, but Greyson continued. “I know how you feel about it. But remember, you’re what’s keeping me going.”

This man really had a way with words. *Damn*.

“Okay, that’s cute,” I said. “But I was thinking on a more practical level. Can I get more supplies out to the fighters or something?”

Greyson had opened his mouth to reply when Xavier walked into the room. He looked a little rough but much better, and relief coursed through me.

Glancing between Greyson and me, Xavier said, “Greyson’s right. Stay inside, Cali. Protect your parents and Torin, and help the witches like last time.”

I scrutinized every inch of him, worried. “Are you ready to fight again?”

He gave me a cocky smile. “I’m ready for anything.”

“Me too,” Greyson added.

Xavier scowled. “She didn’t ask you, though, so—”

Greyson scoffed. “Can you just stop being so damn petty?”

Xavier rolled his eyes. “Me? I’m the petty one? You literally—”

“Hey!” I barked. “No fighting before a battle. Greyson, didn’t you have something to tell Xavier?” I said pointedly, clearly referencing the freezing spell situation.

But Greyson shook his head. “We need to get out there. They’re going to attack at any moment.”

Xavier arched an eyebrow. “Look at that. My brother is right again.”

Before Greyson could tell Xavier to fuck off, I said, “Let me walk you to the door.”

I took each of them by the hand, my heart pounding with fear and longing. It was all fun and games till you started feeling like a freaking Spartan woman sending your men off to war. When we got on the porch, I got a glimpse of the woods and all the glowing eyes.

It seemed like they’d doubled since the first time.

I gasped.

“This is impossible. There are just so many, I—”

“It’s going to be fine, Cali,” Xavier told me. “We’ll beat them, just like before. We have more defenses that they haven’t seen yet.”

Shaking, I nodded. He gave me a kiss on the cheek before walking off, power rolling off him. He was strong, all of them were, but the revenant numbers seemed to be growing at lighting speed, and the odds did not seem to be in our favor.

“I’ll be back, love,” Greyson murmured. He leaned down and kissed my other cheek, and a lump formed in my throat. As I watched him go, it felt like I’d done this a thousand times before. I had no idea how much longer I’d be able to stand it.

One of these days, I wouldn’t be so lucky, and I would lose one of my mates. Or both.

And what the hell would I do then?

**Episode 1796**

XAVIER

The lead fighters and I moved out to our defensive positions, the rest of the pack strategically stationed all around the perimeter as instructed.

Ahead, across the tree line, I could see the revenants gathering. The blue flames were still flickering. They would block a lot of the approaching attacks, but there were gaps in them, and the revenants would come anyway.

They would come for me.

I still had no fucking idea why they’d tried to drag me back to the forest with them, but I wasn’t about to let that happen again. Whatever Letifer was planning, I would be able to fight it off. I needed to. For everyone in the pack, for my mate, and for myself as well.

“Jay, you’re with me,” I said before shifting into my wolf. Then I mind linked to the wolves at my side, *Rishika, keep an eye on Greyson.*

Greyson’s grey wolf shot me a sharp look. I expected him to start his nagging about me not trusting him, to which I would reply that he *had* actually let me get kidnapped, and then he’d find an excuse and mention that he’d helped rescue me in the end, after all.

I had no fucking time for his bullshit right now, but I was ready for a fight just before the battle if he wanted to give it a go. To my surprise, though, Greyson just looked away. As if he too realized that it wasn’t the moment to get into a pissing match.

Sometimes my brother did choose not to act like a dick.

I didn’t regret the way I’d talked about him, either—I was the Alpha, and I had the right to keep any liability out of the way and fight with Jay. Fight with someone I trusted one hundred percent, and who I was pretty sure didn’t want to steal my Alpha title and my woman.

My thoughts were interrupted by a hiss in the distance.

“They’re coming,” Jay said, clenching his teeth.

Jay took a step forward with his axe, and I stood back, letting him take initiative and keep his morale up. My best friend was a champion anyway, as a wolf or a human, and watching him attack the first revenant that poured through the gaps of flame was just the boost I needed.

A moment later, another two poured in, and I was on attack mode as well. Jay and I worked together flawlessly as ever, zigzagging between the five undead that kept charging at us. Digging my claws into one’s neck, I bit a second one on the arm just as it was about to scratch Jay.

The sounds they made, their stench, made fighting them a million times worse than fighting a normal opponent. But at the same time, the sense of accomplishment when they dropped dead on the ground felt even better. I snapped one’s head off and watched it fall, my wolf preening with pride.

“To your left!” he shouted.

I turned to see three more of the things staring at me with orange eyes full of hatred, their teeth and jaws drenched in blood and spit as they attacked me, all at once. Before I could react, Jay jumped in front of me. *We’ve got this!* I thought.

We did. The two of us clawed and bit and axed and got these monsters on the ground, shoving their remains into the fire to make sure that they didn’t just casually pop back up. Between the two of us, we defeated fifteen of the things. Jay whooped in triumph.

“That’s how it’s done, X!” Jay said.

I was feeling good about this. Kira’s smelly ointment had helped a lot. Shifting meant that most of my wounds healed extra fast, and the witch had also given me a potion to ward off fatigue. Kira talked a lot of shit, but she was a great ally.

Speaking of allies—good and bad ones—I looked over at Greyson. He and Rishika had a good rhythm going as well, so that was a positive. I wasn’t gonna let my guard down, though—Letifer was clever. There was no way he didn’t have any aces up his sleeve, but I was ready.

I could feel it.

Just then, Jay said, “Hey, do you see that?”

I looked in the direction Jay’s wolf was staring, over the flames, under the trees. A revenant stood in the shadows. It was taller, lankier, more skeletal than the others. It had a hood on, and it was cloaked like the Grim Reaper. I could feel the malevolence rolling off it as it stood there, all alone.

I shifted just long enough to tell Jay, “I’ll take care of that one.”

“Don’t go past the fire,” Jay warned, but I shook my head. This looked like Letifer’s ace, and I wanted to fucking destroy it. I took a few steps back and moved in a flanking maneuver, bypassing the flames, jumping over them to land in front of the thing.

But the creature had moved as well.

It seemed to work like a magnet, because with a wave of its hand, a sea of revenants ran forward, standing before it in formation. They worked as obstacles, standing between me and the cloaked figure. This was a battle move, and I knew I needed to retreat behind the flames again right away.

“Xavier, come back!” Jay said.

I was about to move when the weird figure pulled something out from under its cloak. Something shiny, gleaming, that it held over its head in one swift motion.

In an instant, I was knocked backward, right over the flames, back into the house’s yard.

Every inch of me was throbbing with pain, bathed in silver light that felt blinding, paralyzing, breaking. It felt like I was being torn apart by air, every breath I took nothing but agony.

It was pain like nothing I’d ever experienced.

*What the hell is going on?* Greyson demanded, frantic.

I groaned, pointing at the cloaked revenant with all the strength I had left, my paw trembling. Pins and needles made my whole body feel horrifyingly numb. The silver object was streaming light toward me, pinning me, and I couldn’t get away from it.

“Xavier, you gotta move!”Jay said.

But I couldn’t. I was buried under the weight of the light, on the ground like a broken dog. I had no idea how much longer I’d be able to stay conscious.

*Hold on!* Greyson said, and then—

A wolf-shaped figure blocked the light.

Greyson had jumped in front of me, taking the full brunt of the magical energy.

The pain was instantly gone.

I was panting, shaking, feeling sick. After breathing deeply, I fought to stand. What the hell was that thing? Where had Letifer gotten it? Was there something special about the cloaked revenant holding it? Could we even really kill it?

“What the fuck?” Jay rushed to me. “Are you okay?”

Panting, I shook my head.

And judging by his howl, Greyson wasn’t okay either. The silver light had him trapped now. I realized that the only options to get him out were for someone to take his place, just like he’d done for me, or to go straight to the source of the light and destroy it.

The latter was the only option, and I had no time to waste.

*Rishika, Mace—get your teams going and cover for me!* I said. *I’m moving on the revenant forces to stop the light before it kills Greyson!*

Greyson’s agonized roar of pain drove my message home. In seconds, the werewolves all amped up their attacks, forming a protective circle around me as I moved through the sea of revenants. A few of them slipped through the chain of werewolves around me, but I got rid of them swiftly, claws and teeth ready to attack.

I never lost track of my target—the cloaked revenant wielding the silver light.

I mind linked with everyone. *Make sure you don’t touch the light!*

My fighters were strong and smart, and none of them fell as the battle raged. Everything around me was made of never-ending motion, but the cloaked figure stood still, twenty feet away. Three revenants jumped in front of me, as if determined to protect the cloaked one, but Rishika dropped onto them like a grenade, snarling.

*Xavier, go!* she called.

The path to the hooded figure was now open. Empty. The werewolves kept fighting the revenants behind me, and the silver light got brighter and brighter the closer I got to the thing.

Stalking toward it, I could now see that the silver light was coming from a pyramid-shaped amulet that hung around the Grim Reaper creature’s neck.

And it was aimed straight at my brother.

My brother, who had pushed me out of danger.

*Wait for it*, said a warning voice in my head. *This might be some sort of trap.*

But I couldn’t wait.

Greyson’s anguished howl echoed through the woods, and I had no more time to think.

With a roar, I pounced on the revenant, fury vibrating through me as I felt the figure crash to the ground beneath me.

**Episode 1797**

GREYSON

It felt like I was dying.

And no, I wasn’t being dramatic.

The pain was excruciating, coursing through me like a current, a combination of electricity and repetitive stab wounds all over my fucking body. I was writhing, wondering if this was it—if this was the end, when I thought, *No*.

*No.*

I had to make it through. For Cali. For the pack. For myself.

I couldn’t die like this.

*I can’t die like this*, I repeated in my head over and over like a chant, a prayer. It wasn’t working, though. The agony became one with the marrow in my bones, and every inch of me felt defeated. The silver light was blinding, a fire that made me feel like I was getting burned alive, and I could no longer think.

I could no longer beg to live.

“Greyson!”

Someone said my name.

Something changed, because suddenly I could think again. I could breathe again, I could scream again, because I was still screaming—the torture had stopped, the light gone, but the pain lingered so heavily that I was still making a wounded animal’s sounds.

“Greyson, shit, are you okay?” Jay asked. He was right at my ear, poking me with his finger, and I felt like laughing. Fucking hysterically.

*Never better!* I replied.

Jay, the asshole, laughed. At least he sounded relieved. He patted my head, much like a human would to their pet dog. I nudged his hand away and scanned the horizon. Where was Xavier? And how had that light stopped?

“Xavier went after that weird hooded figure,” Jay said, anticipating who I was looking for. “The light was coming directly from that thing.”

The realization settled inside me. I had shoved my brother out of the light, taking his place, and Xavier had saved my life. He had stopped the pain. The relief I felt, the gratitude, was overpowering. It gave me the strength to stand and shake off the remains of pain.

“Can you fight?” Jay asked.

I snarled, glaring at a revenant that was running straight at me. Without hesitation, I opened my mouth and snapped its head off, spitting it onto the ground.

This time, he didn’t laugh. He could feel my certainty, and that grounded him as well. That was how a pack worked. A chain, always connected. I nodded to Jay who followed me.

A moment later, we joined the rest of the Redwoods and Blue Bloods, clearing a path for Xavier to get back safely, one disgusting revenant at a time. With every one of the things that I killed, I felt better. Stronger, somehow. I hadn’t realized it, but that moment when I’d been frozen during the first fight, allowing my brother to be taken away, had truly shaken me up.

I wasn’t a coward.

I wasn’t a puppet, easy for magic to trap.

And I definitely wasn’t someone who would let their brother get hurt. I’d proven that to myself only a few moments ago, when I’d jumped into that light, into the line of fire, for Xavier. I hadn’t even thought twice before I’d done it, before I’d risked my life for his.

Of course I would protect my brother.

Of course I would fight for the pack.

Those dark thoughts from before, they meant nothing. I knew who I was, and as I kept fighting, a lot of my old confidence was restored. As I hurled yet another revenant into the flames—I’d lost count of how many I’d killed by now—I saw something gleaming in the distance.

Letifer was watching me through Silas’s eyes.

I looked forward. Xavier was behind the wall of revenants, attacking the cloaked figure. He’d demanded that Letifer be left for him, but he was a little busy now.

I could do this.

But just as I made the decision, Letifer faded away. I growled in frustration. Were my eyes playing tricks on me? Had he just been an illusion? Was Letifer too chicken to actually come join the battle?

Was I simply losing my goddamn mind?

Xavier’s enthusiastic howl cut off my thoughts. He trotted back into the yard, scratched up but triumphant. I instantly ran to him.

*Did you kill that thing?* I asked.

*It escaped before I could kill it, but it’s out of commission for a while*, he replied. *And it can’t play with its toy any longer.*

I scowled. *How do you know that?*

He opened his mouth, unclenching his jaw, and dropped an object on the ground.

A silvery amulet.

*This is where the light came from*, Xavier told me.

I almost felt proud of him.

*I managed to grab it just before the revenant retreated*, he explained, before looking me up and down. *You took a big hit there. For me.*

We paused, staring at each other. Awkwardly, because neither of us was good at feelings. For real, if we could never talk about our feelings, ever, I was sure we’d both feel fucking ecstatic.

In the end, I just said, *Whatever. No big deal.*

Which was a lie, because I had literally almost died. But anyway.

To his credit, Xavier said, *I mean it. I won’t forget what you did for me, pushing me straight out of danger like that.*

I was about to get all mushy, but continue pretending I was tough, but then Xavier added, *But you need to back off till you feel better.*

*What?* I snapped*. I’m fine! I was back in battle in no—*

*I don’t want you to push yourself*, he declared. *I know how excruciating that light was, and you were under it twice, maybe three times as long as I was. Plus, that cut looks deep.*

The light had left a razor sharp cut on my chest.

*I’m fine*, I said.

*No*, he insisted. *You’re no good to the pack if you’re dead. Go back to the house and let the witches fix you up. And take that thing along*. He nosed at the amulet. *I need to know what they can tell us about it*.

I huffed, weighing my options. I knew that he wouldn’t let this go, so I picked up the amulet and retreated toward the pack house, just as another wave of revenants barged into our territory.

This was fucking ridiculous. Why would he order me out of the fight? I knew my limits, and Xavier needed to trust me to pull back when I needed to. And after all, hadn’t I just saved Xavier’s life? Hadn’t he just admitted to it? What kind of thanks was this?

I shouldn’t have told him it wasn’t a big deal.

I should’ve told him that saving his life was actually a huge deal. Because that light had hurt like a son of a bitch, and I was kinda still vibrating with pain through my spine, *so fuck you, Xavier.*

As I fumed, I suddenly realized that I’d gotten to the back of the house. Why was I even here? I frowned—I couldn’t remember making this decision. Just as I got to the back door, I saw movement.

What the *hell*?

A lone revenant had somehow snuck past all the fighters and was scratching at the door, trying to get inside. This sick little thing—I was going to rip it the fuck apart. Stalking toward it from behind, I was ready to attack as quietly as possible, so as not to alert any other revenants.

But as I readied myself to attack…

I couldn’t.

Once again, my body wouldn’t obey my mind.

The revenant slowly turned to face me, its eyes glowing in the fading light of dusk. It gave me the undead version of a snarling smile, all teeth, and raised its hand. I was certain that it was going to pounce on me, frozen as I was, and eat my fucking face off or something.

The revenant, though, simply pointed at the door.

Terror washed over me.

What the fuck was going on? Why wasn’t the thing killing me?

All of a sudden, I felt myself move again. Finally. I would get to kill this thing, after all. With a snarl, I attacked, but the moment I closed in—

Everything stopped all over again.

Everything stopped, but shifted at the same time.

I shifted, with no intention of my own, returning to my human body.

I walked right past the revenant and opened the door, held it open, and twisted my head to look at the revenant as if we were friendly.

As if this were a nightmare.

This couldn’t be fucking happening.

What the *hell* was I doing?

*What the hell…*

*What the…*

I was nothing but a puppet. Someone else was holding my strings, and I had no free will of my own. I stared at my arm as it moved, straining against my own body while I gestured for the revenant to come in.

I gestured for the revenant to come in.

And then I stood there frozen and horrified, watching while the thing walked into my pack house.

**Episode 1798**

I was still worried about Artemis, so I headed upstairs to check on her. She didn’t seem herself after getting back from the woods, and if I couldn’t join the battle, at least I could look after my sister.

But as I reached her door, I paused, listening. I could hear something low and muffled on the other side, but only barely make out the language through the door. As I pressed my ear into the wood, I could make out a little more, and I was surprised that it sounded familiar. Was that Fae language?

I shook my head, feeling frustrated with myself. For the thousandth time, I wished I knew more about my own heritage—and even my own powers—so I could understand what I was hearing.

Closing my eyes, I listened hard. Whatever the language, the sound was haunting and eerie, and it sent shivers up my spine. Suddenly, my eyes flew open. Whatever was making that sound could be attacking Artemis, who still wasn’t fully fit to fight.

Without bothering to knock, I pushed the door open and looked around, but all I saw was Artemis, standing at her window, staring out at the battle below.

When she glanced over her shoulder at me, her expression was cool and not a bit surprised, despite my sudden entrance. “I wasn’t expecting you,” was all she said.

I’d been so sure those muttering sounds were coming from in this room. I half-anticipated someone else to come bursting out of the closet, or the bed. “Did you hear anything?”

She frowned. “Like what?”

“Like a spell?”

“Oh.” She nodded. “It’s the protective spells around the house. They leave echoes, sometimes.” She glanced back out the window. “The wolves are doing well. I wish I could be out there fighting with them.”

“Me too,” I said, stepping next to her and looking down at the chaos below. Though the sight made my stomach turn, it felt nice to be sharing the moment with my sister, both of us wishing we could be doing more to help.

“This sucks,” Artemis said, looking frustrated. She glanced over at me. “What would you be doing, if no one was holding you back?”

I looked at her quickly. “Whose holding me back? You mean Xavier and Greyson?”

She shrugged. “Well, they are Alphas. And they do want to protect you at all costs.” She looked at me carefully. “But I wonder if they’re making too many decisions for you.”

“What does *that* mean?” I asked.

“You’re an adult, Cali, and you do have Fae magic. You’re not exactly helpless, are you?”

I let this settle in for a moment. Artemis was right. I’d let Xavier and Greyson hide me in the past because I was worried about them, and staying safe seemed to help them focus, but… was it a waste of my powers? If I could turn the tide of the battle with my magic, *should I*? Would they be in less danger?

For a moment I imagined myself on the front line of the battle, holding my hands out straight, blasting revenant after revenant, clearing a path as I walked, as the Redwood pack stood watching me in awe. They would see how powerful I could be, how strong. I could even be selected as the rightful Luna of the pack—

My reverie was interrupted by a scream, and I looked around wildly. “What the hell was that?”

“I have no idea,” Artemis muttered, looking baffled.

She followed as I sprinted from her room and down the stairs, following the sound of screaming and the scuffling of feet.

What in the world could possibly be going on? The pack house had so many protective spells on it. There was no way anything managed to get in. Maybe Emmett had had some kind of lab disaster. It was the only thing in the house I could think of that could be so chaotic. As I reached the bottom of the stairs, I rounded the banister—heading for the basement and Emmett’s lab—but stopped when my parents came out of the living room, looking rattled. My dad was holding a stake and looking particularly uncomfortable with it.

“I heard a scream,” my mom said, looking at me with wide, scared eyes. “It sounded like Torin.”

Before I could say anything to that, Big Mac rushed in from the kitchen. “Anyone know what that was?” We all shook our heads, which didn’t please her. “It sounded like an attack, but that couldn’t be. The house is locked down. It’s impossible.”

Kira had followed her, and she shook her head. “Maybe not. Maybe those spells aren’t as strong as you thought.”

Big Mac glared at her, clearly offended. “I know my own magic, thank you very much. No one’s getting into this house unless we let them in.”

There was another scream, and everyone shut up. We looked around, trying to locate the source.

“It’s coming from the back of the house,” Kira said.

We all rushed in the direction of the sound. I made it down the hallway first and stopped—horrified—when I saw Torin grappling with a revenant, trying desperately to fight him off. The orange-eyed thing had already clawed at his arm, drawing blood, which had soaked into his shirt, but Torin was fighting a good fight. He was fending the thing off with a cast iron frying pan, though he was screaming with fear.

Without even thinking, I lifted my hand and let loose a volley of energy that shot straight at the revenant. It felt amazing. This was exactly what I’d envisioned a moment ago. I didn’t need to be kept in the house every time we faced danger. I could be a protector of this pack, too.

My power knocked the revenant away from Torin and made the thing stumble back, but it didn’t hurt the monster. Instead, the orange-eyed thing turned to me, snarled, and began to advance.

Shit. Okay, maybe I *wasn’t* ready for this.

Instinctively, I backed away from the revenant, which made a lunge for me. As it neared me, I saw that it was larger and beefier than the revenants I was used to seeing. I held up my hands and aimed another blast at it, and next to me I heard Artemis begin to mutter something under her breath. It was indistinct, but it sounded like a spell. My second blast of energy was less potent than the first. My fear had to be getting in the way.

I clamped my lips shut, but a little cry of fear escaped. The revenant just kept coming for me, snarling as it slashed its reaching hands at me, clearly trying to get close enough to bite.

My focus was solely on the revenant, but around me, I was aware of the others attacking the thing, though without much success. I heard the ringing clang of Torin’s pan again, but the revenant didn’t even pause as it advanced on me. I kept walking back, sending out blasts of energy that were getting weaker and weaker.

I took a deep, steadying breath and held up my hands, trying to summon my power—trying for one more blast. But I felt a little frantic, even as I tried desperately to calm myself. I wasn’t sure I could draw up enough of my magic to get the job done.

Then, to my right, I heard Big Mac’s voice scream out, “*SILEO*!”

The revenant stilled, as though it had been turned to stone by her words. Its skeletal hand was still raised, and I could see that it was reaching out to the side, about to strike a cowering Mrs. Smith.

Big Mac yanked Mrs. Smith out of the way, and I raised my hand again, feeling magic flowing through me, ready to strike—but before I could do anything, I saw a flash of black and a ringing clang so loud it made my head throb.

The revenant collapsed onto the ground, the back of its rotten skull caved in. Behind it, Torin stood, his thin face flushed, the frying pan clutched in his hands.

“Torin,” I breathed, my heart racing. “You killed it.”

Torin looked down at the revenant, clearly stunned. “Did I? I guess I did,” he said, a slow smile spreading across his face.

“Okay, we can do the speeches later,” Big Mac muttered, grabbing the revenant’s wrist and dragging it toward the door. “Help me!” she snapped. “We have to get this thing outside, where we can set it on fire.”

Kira and my dad jumped forward to help her pull the dead weight.

I moved around them and hurried toward the door to open it, but I stopped when I saw that it was wide open.

“Greyson,” I gasped. He was standing in the doorway, staring outside. “What are you doing?”

He looked over at me, his eyes wide. They got wider still as he looked past me at Big Mac, Kira, and my dad, dragging the revenant toward the door.

“Don’t just stand there,” I chided, thinking he was probably in shock that a revenant got past his defenses. Which made me think, “How *did* one of these things manage to get in?”

His gaze shifted back to me. “I let it in.”

**Episode 1799**

VIOLET

A distraction was a good idea, but I couldn’t shake my doubts. Sophie seemed really nice. She had been supportive and trustworthy, but it was just asking a lot to put all of our trust in this one person—this one *hunter*—no matter who she was. If anything went wrong—even accidentally—we could be exposed.

Charlie looked over at me, and I could see some of my own doubts reflected in his eyes, but he shrugged. “I think it’s our only option here. We don’t have much time.”

I chewed the inside of my cheek, thinking. He was right—we didn’t have much time—but I wished we did. I hated making rushed decisions.

“What’s your plan?” I asked, turning to Sophie.

She shrugged. “Pretty simple, really. It’s just this.” She turned to the room at large and screamed, “SURPRISE ATTACK!”

There was a weird, suspended moment of silent shock, then Sophie lunged toward Chad, her halberd held over her head, the steel arc of the blade glinting in the light.

He responded in an instant, swinging his mace around to meet the weapon, and the clang made my ears ring. Chad’s weapon was heavy and hard to wield, but he was strong, and when he brought it around again, Sophie barely dodged out of the way as he slammed it down on the concrete where she’d been standing. She swung her halberd, and Chad ducked under the blade, but she caught him in the ribs with the staff end, making him gasp.

The fight was fierce enough that it took me a moment to realize that it was a mock battle—a training battle—and they weren’t aiming to kill. Injure, sure. Maim even, but not kill. And they moved so smoothly it was clear they’d all done this before. I looked around the room—mini-battles were breaking out all over the place as small knots of hunters play-fought. Some even giggled as they took aim at each other—they were edgy, and this must have been their way of working out their nervous energy.

*Well, that was distracting*, I thought, looking over at Charlie. *Let’s move while everyone else is hacking away.*

Charlie nodded, and we each grabbed the closest weapon at hand. Charlie reached for a heavy two-handed sword, and I grabbed a pair of nunchucks. We pretended to fight as we moved toward the roof hatch. It was largely unsuccessful, considering I’d never used nunchucks before and most of the damage I managed to do was to myself.

Charlie snickered as I smacked my hand again, and I glared up at him.

“Let’s switch,” I snapped.

“No way! I’ve been dying to try the Zweihänder,” he said, whipping the sword around.

I rolled my eyes. “Put it away.”

“Fine, fine,” he said.

Everyone was so distracted, they didn’t even notice us moving around them, and Charlie reached up, got his key in the lock, and opened the hatch.

“You first,” he murmured.

I bundled the robe around me and jumped. Grasping the lip of the hatch, I pulled myself through. Charlie followed and closed the hatch behind himself, sealing the other campers safely inside.

We were back in a tunnel, which I assumed would lead us outside, where the instructors were fighting the revenants. I thought of the weapons we’d left down below. “Maybe I should have picked a weapon for fighting revenants.”

Charlie looked at his hands. “Well, I don’t know about that. Our claws will do the job just fine.”

I grinned at him, and we headed down the tunnel.

It didn’t take long before we reached the grate that led outside, but before I moved it, I smelled the air.

“Anything?” Charlie asked.

“I don’t smell any revenants,” I murmured. “Not nearby, anyway.”

Still, I was careful as I eased the grate open. As soon as I stepped out into the cold night air, I shifted into my wolf. Beside me, I felt Charlie do the same.

My senses more acute now, I could smell the revenants. There were faint traces heading into the woods.

*There are more than I thought.*

Charlie nodded his shaggy head in agreement.

We moved toward the strongest smells, and after only a few hundred yards, we slowed. Ahead of us, a pair of revenants shuffled through the trees. The moment I caught the bright orange glow of their eyes, my hackles went up, and I crouched low, ready to fight.

*I’ve got the one on the left. You take the one on the right. Stay quiet so the hunters aren’t drawn here.*

Charlie nodded again, and without wasting another moment, we attacked.

The revenants didn’t even know what hit them. We ambushed them, ripping into them from behind. They reached out with their clawing hands, but it was too late. I tore out the throat of my revenant, then pinned down its shoulders and kept yanking until I’d taken off the entire head.

It was gross, no doubt about that. I chucked the revenant head as far away as I could, but despite the gore I knew this was good. This was right. This was where I was supposed to be. Up here, fighting. Not down in some pit with a bunch of werewolf-hating teenagers and gruesome trophies all over the walls.

Charlie’s revenant put up a fight, but he subdued it, finally kicking the head free of its body with a powerful thrust of his back legs.

Decapitated, these monsters hopefully wouldn’t rise again for a while, so we left the bodies to be burned later. It was risky, but we also couldn’t risk getting caught by hunters, so we had to move on. We continued quietly through the woods.

*There are hunters over here. Let’s go this way*, Charlie said, leading me up the rise of a hill.

*I can smell more over this way*, I said a little later. *Revenants.*

One, we caught staring into the trees, like he was waiting for a bus. Charlie bit his head off before the thing could even turn to see us.

We came across another pair ripping into the body of a rabbit. They put up a fight, but Charlie and I were pumped up with adrenaline. We were unstoppable.

As we circled around the camp, I thought of Romilly’s words. She wanted us to check the perimeter. So I looked as we walked the wall, trying to see what was coming. Ahead, I saw something that made me increase my speed. It was a tree—a huge oak that had fallen onto the boundary fence, crushing it. The fence would have been almost impossible for the revenants to climb, but damaged, they were slipping right in.

I looked back at Charlie. *This is how they’re getting in. They can climb along the tree and avoid the barbed wire completely.*

Charlie jogged over to join me and looked carefully at the section of damaged fence. *Why didn’t the hunters notice this? There were border patrols.*

I pawed the ground, then sniffed the air. *The soil displacement is fresh. The tree just fell. Maybe with the help of some magic.*

Charlie looked at me. *We have to find Romilly. She has to know about this.*

I nodded. But we’d just turned back in the direction of camp when I caught the sent of something foul in the air. It was the undead. I sniffed in all directions, trying to figure out where the smell was coming from, but my heart beat fast when I realized it was coming from several directions at once.

Shit.

If we were about to get ambushed, could we fight them off?

*Can you smell them?*

Charlie looked over at me. *I can smell them, but I can’t see them.*

*Me neither. And it’s making me nervous.*

Without having to discuss it, we moved into a back-to-back formation, circling around as we scanned the trees, looking for movement. We sniffed the air, trying to pick out where the revenants were coming from.

Then Charlie yelped as a revenant dropped down, inches in front of his nose.

They’d been hiding in the trees above us.

More dropped down, and I snarled and lunged, not waiting for them to make the first move. Pain like hot lightning exploded across my ribs as one hit me with the force of a Mack truck, but I spun and grabbed the thing, shaking it like a ragdoll. I flung it away, throwing it so it knocked another revenant over. I turned and swiped at another oncoming monster, drawing blood that was thick like swamp mud.

I fought down my revulsion and swiped again, knocking the thing down. It put up a hell of a fight, scratching and kicking, and I was bleeding and wheezing by the time I’d torn the thing’s limbs off.

One of the others jumped onto my back, and I twisted around to pull it off. I grasped the thing’s arm in my jaws and felt the bones snap as I bit hard. Next to me, Charlie roared, and a revenant went flying, slamming hard into a tree and sliding to the ground with a sickening groan.

The fight was brutal, but one by one, we neutralized the undead, and five minutes later I stood, panting, in the middle of the trees, surrounded by the tattered bodies of the four revenants.

I looked over at Charlie, feeling gratified. I loved when we fought side by side, one cohesive unit. I could practically feel the mate bond between us strengthen.

Charlie spat a piece of bone from his mouth. *We have to get a hunter out here to burn these bodies.*

I looked around. *Yeah.*

*And we need to tell Romilly and the others about the perimeter breach.*

I was about to suggest I stick around in case more revenants approached the fence, but I caught another scent in the air. A human.

*A hunter is nearby. Get low*, I commanded, my heart beating hard. *Stay low until they move past.*

When Charlie responded, his tone was weird. Calm and empty. *Too late.*

I looked at Charlie, then followed his gaze. There was a figure in the shadows, a hundred yards in front of us. A hunter, aiming a crossbow directly at us.

**Episode 1800**

GREYSON

The moment I came back to myself and my mind was my own again, a feeling of absolute revulsion washed over me like a wave.

Cali was looking up at me, her face pale with horror. “What do you mean, *you* let it in? If that’s a joke, it’s the worst one I’ve ever heard.” When I didn’t answer, her voice got higher, more panicked. “Oh god, you’re not joking, are you? Greyson? You can’t be serious.”

I shook my head. “I… I couldn’t help it. I had no choice. It was like… I was under some kind of compulsion.” I swallowed, though my throat was dry as the desert. “It was awful.”

The last of the color drained from Cali’s face. “I don’t believe this. You would never endanger anyone in the pack.”

“I was trying to stop myself—trying to stop my body from moving, but I couldn’t.” Speaking the words was torture. I could feel the bitter taste of them on my tongue. They burned like poison. “It was like being in a nightmare. I walked right up to the door and just…” I swallowed hard. “Just let the thing in.” Cali gasped and clapped her hands over her mouth. “I couldn’t even move to help you or shout to warn you.”

Her dark eyes searched my face desperately. “It was like before? You were frozen?”

I nodded, my stomach twisting so painfully I thought I was going to throw up. When Cali stepped toward me, as though to touch me, I took a startled step back, away from her. “Don’t touch me!”

“Greyson,” she said, reaching out to me.

“This could happen again,” I growled. “I can’t hurt you, Cali.”

Pain flashed through her eyes, but she stepped away.

A nearly unbearable weight pressed down on my chest. What the hell had I just done? Was this what was going to push her into my brother’s arms? Would this insanity force her to choose Xavier?

As we’d been speaking, Big Mac, Tom, and Kira had dragged the revenant’s body past us and outside. Tendrils of smoke wafted toward us, and when I looked over, I saw that they’d lit the body on fire.

Big Mac looked around. “We can’t stay out here. We’re too exposed. Everyone needs to get back inside before we see another revenant surge.”

But Kira shook her head, her eyes on the woods to the west. “I think they’re retreating again.”

Tom pointed toward the east. “That way, too.”

I scanned the trees, watching the fiery orange eyes fade into the shadows. Night was falling all around, and everything was far from secure thanks to whatever had its hooks into me. I had no idea what Letifer had planned.

I turned back to Cali. “Big Mac is right. You need to get back inside, where it’s safe.”

“Not without you!” she cried, looking terrified.

Before I could answer that, there was an echoing howl, and I looked up instinctively. It was a signal. The werewolves were returning to the pack house. I looked around and saw them limping toward us.

The battle was over. For now.

“Greyson, let’s go,” Cali said, watching the other werewolves heading toward the house.

But I didn’t move. “It’s still too dangerous. I can’t be in the house with you right now. Or anyone.”

“Greyson,” Cali said, looking tearful.

“The compulsion could return at any time, Cali,” I said, shaking my head. “I can’t risk it!”

“All the more reason to keep a close eye on you,” Big Mac said, stepping toward me.

“And if there’s a spell on you, we want to break it as soon as we can,” my mother said, moving to stand next to her. She looked scared but resolved.

I looked at the three women in front of me, their faces set with determination. These women all had faith in me. They trusted me. They were willing to help me, even at risk to themselves. My gaze slid to Cali, and my heart ached. I hated that I’d done something that could have hurt her. And that I could do it again. If anything happened to her, it wouldn’t matter if it was because I was under something else’s control. It would still destroy me. I’d still never forgive myself. I’d still never be able to face the pack—or my brother—ever again.

As I got lost in these excruciating thoughts, Cali reached out and grasped my hand with both of hers. Her touch sent a shock through me, like electricity. But it calmed me, too. Her touch had always done that.

“Please, Greyson,” she whispered.

And I was nearly swayed. I would do anything for her, and all she was asking was for me to come into the house.

*All I want is to be with you, love, and to protect you. But right now, I’m the biggest danger.*

Cali’s eyes filled with tears. She reached up on tiptoe and pressed a kiss to my lips. “You let me decide what dangers I’m going to face, okay? Now get your ass in the house so we can find out what’s going on.”

Her words shocked me into a smile, and I nodded, finally persuaded. “Okay.” I took her hand, and we walked in the back door. Everyone else was inside, and the long hallway was clear of people, but for one. At the far end, Xavier stood, covered in blood.

Cali gasped, and I felt her attention shift to him, almost like it was physically slipping out of my grasp. “Xavier! What happened? Are you okay?”

Xavier walked toward us, his eyes on Cali. “*I’m* fine. The revenants are not.”

There was something about him—a powerful confidence that flowed out of Xavier as he strode toward us. He was in full Alpha mode, and I could see its effect on Cali as she looked at him.

He turned his eyes to me. “I told you to come back to report to Big Mac. What’s the verdict?”

My jaw flexed. “I haven’t had the chance yet.”

It had been easy to confess what had happened to Cali—it had felt like the most natural thing in the world. But the thought of telling Xavier of my failings—my weakness—stung like hell.

“Report what to me?” Big Mac asked, striding over. Was there *anything* this witch didn’t overhear?

I fished the amulet out of my pocket and handed it to Big Mac. “Xavier pulled this off that cloaked revenant that was casting the silver light.”

Xavier glowered at me, clearly annoyed that I hadn’t obeyed his orders, then turned to address Big Mac. “Yeah, I managed to get the amulet, but the cloaked thing escaped before I could kill it. I need to know what it can do without the damn amulet.”

Big Mac looked down at the gem, her brows furrowed. “This is strange. I’ve never seen anything like this before.”

“Can you figure it out?” Xavier demanded.

“Maybe,” Big Mac snapped, looking up. “But I’m going to need some time. This isn’t the kind of thing you can just google, okay? It takes time.”

“Fuck, Greyson,” Xavier snarled, rounding on me. “This is great. She could have been working on this already. This is fucking important. We’ve got life-or-death stakes going on, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

“You think I haven’t?” I growled, not meeting his eyes.

“So why didn’t you report it immediately, like I asked you to?” Xavier demanded. “Time matters—”

“It wasn’t his fault!” Cali cried, stepping between us.

Xavier looked down at her, surprised. “What?”

“There was a spell, or something, he couldn’t help it,” she explained.

This didn’t seem to clear anything up for Xavier. “What are you talking about?”

I couldn’t stand this. I felt like I was going to explode. After everything that had happened, the last thing I wanted was for Cali to have to fight my battles with Xavier. “I came across a revenant as I was coming back to the house to find Big Mac.”

“So?” Xavier asked, still not following.

“And I opened the door for it. I let the thing into the house.” I felt sick. It didn’t matter that I was under some sort of curse or spell. He’d never let me forget about this, I knew that. And I didn’t need one more thing he could hang over my head.

He looked angry and horrified, but worst of all, he looked betrayed. Truly betrayed. And the worst part was, I felt it too. I couldn’t trust myself. I’d never felt that before, and it made me dizzy, like the ground had dropped out from beneath my feet.

“What the fuck?” Xavier breathed out, almost like a sigh.

I didn’t know what he was asking. I don’t even think *he* knew. And I wouldn’t know what to answer anyway. So, I just nodded. “There’s only one thing to do—”

“Greyson.” Cali’s voice was a whisper.

But I didn’t look at her. I kept my eyes on Xavier. On the Alpha. “I need to be locked up.”

**Episode 1801**

XAVIER

I could be ungenerous about my brother, but nowhere in my wild imagination would I have ever thought Greyson capable of something like *that*. He had seen a revenant, and *invited* it into the house? He hadn’t been able to stop himself? He’d been under something else’s control?

But, after a long moment, everything clicked into place. I thought of the moment during the first battle when I was being dragged off and had screamed for his help, and he had just looked at me, still as a statue. It had pissed me the hell off at the time, but… was it possible that he really hadn’t been able to move? Was it possible that something had literally been holding him in place?

I had to admit, it was easier to stomach *that* idea than the idea of my own brother just *choosing* to betray me. Greyson and I got in each other’s faces plenty, but he was my brother. He was blood, and betrayal of that kind would be hard to live with. Not to mention the fact that, despite what I thought of him, he’d never willingly endanger the pack, or Cali.

As I thought about all this, Cali turned to Greyson. “Big Mac, Kira, me, Artemis—everyone with power in this house will do everything we can to heal whatever’s going on with you, okay?” The desperation was evident in her eyes. “I won’t let anything take you away from me, Greyson.”

Greyson looked down at her, their gazes locked.

The whole scene made me sick. There was a part of me—a large, angry part—that wanted to take Greyson’s suggestion and throw him behind bars, where he couldn’t hurt anyone. The same part of me wanted to grab Cali and spin her around to face me, then kiss her right in front of Greyson’s face. *I* was the Alpha, after all.

But I took a deep breath. I had to get ahold of myself. I had to focus. I glanced out the windows. The battle had hit a lull, but I knew it wouldn’t last long. I looked up at Greyson. “Come with me.”

Without a word, Greyson followed as I led him to the basement. I was surprised that Cali hadn’t objected, but when I glanced over my shoulder, I saw that she was following. I rolled my eyes when I saw Big Mac, too, just behind Cali.

“We need to start thinking about what kind of spell is going to be best for keeping Greyson confined—” Big Mac started.

“Big Mac!” Cali protested.

“—but comfortable,” the witch added quickly.

I led the group to one of the basement rooms and pushed open the door.

“Stand down at that end,” I ordered Greyson.

“Hang on,” Cali said, grabbing Greyson’s hand as he went to move into the room. “Can I have a moment before you lock him away?”

It only took me an instant to imagine what that “moment” would consist of, and I hated it. I sighed. “Okay, but don’t go into the room. It’s too risky.” I turned the other way but stayed close enough to intervene if anything happened, and unfortunately, also close enough to hear everything.

“I know you can do this,” Cali said to him. “I’m sorry this is happening, but we’ll figure out what it is and how to stop it. I promise I’ll come check on you.”

I could feel her emotion for him, and it churned my stomach. “Okay, that’s enough of that,” I said, turning back to them. “Down there.” I nodded toward the end of the room. I didn’t want to waste any more time.

Greyson moved to the far side of the room, and Big Mac stepped forward.

She produced a bag from her pocket and spread a thick layer of salt along the threshold of the doorway. “*Protectio trahit subjectionem, et subjection protectionem*,” she murmured. Light shimmered in the salt for just a moment, and she looked up, satisfied. “Greyson won’t be able to cross this threshold now. We can talk, and I’ll be able to break the spell if needed, but he’s confined.”

I put my hand up to the doorway and felt the strange sizzle of the magic barrier. It hurt, but I pushed against it, testing it. It was strong. Even in my wolf form, I wouldn’t be able to cross it.

“All right. Let’s get to work,” I said, and nodded toward the stairs.

“Come on, girl,” Big Mac said, grabbing Cali by the wrist and tugging her up the stairs. “We’ve got a war going on.”

“Hold on!”

I turned to look back at Greyson, who’d stepped up to the door. “What do you want?”

Greyson watched Cali and Big Mac disappear up the stairs. Then, once he was satisfied we were alone, he turned to me. “No matter what happens, you have to promise me something.”

I felt anger rising in my chest. It was pretty ballsy of Greyson to start demanding shit at this moment.

He must have read some of this in my face because he took another step toward the door, his nose almost brushing the magic barrier. “No matter what, Xavier, you have to watch out for Cali.”

Fury flared hot in my veins. “That’s the one thing you never have to ask of me,” I spat.

“I know,” he said in a genuine tone.

I didn’t want to talk about Cali with Greyson, so instead, I said, “We will figure out what’s wrong with you. Just sit tight, and don’t get into any trouble.”

He smirked. “Good luck on the battlefield, little brother.”

Then I turned and left him.

Upstairs, Torin was moving around quietly between the kitchen and living room, treating the injured fighters. Everyone was quiet and pale, like they couldn’t quite believe what had just happened. Over in the corner near the fireplace, Kira, Big Mac, and Marta were standing in a knot, speaking in low tones.

“—most of it held up fine, but I think we’re going to want to run a check, just to see what spells need to be reinforced after that revenant entered the house. You never know what he screwed up,” Kira was saying.  
 Marta nodded. “I can still feel the thing’s presence in here.”

“Me too,” Big Mac said grimly.

I turned away from them and looked over the pack. They were bloodied and shaken, but it was time to start planning tactics for a nighttime attack.

But all thoughts of strategy went out of my mind when I caught sight of Cali, who was standing near the window. She looked pale and scared and just… lost. Like she wasn’t sure how she had found herself here.

She had been upset by what happened with Greyson, obviously, and for a moment I let myself imagine what it must have been like for Greyson, to be overtaken by some unknown force. To be unable to control what you did or didn’t do. What if *I’d* been the one to invite the revenant into the house? What if *I’d* been the one who’d put Cali in danger like that? What if had been me who’d betrayed the pack?

Just the thought made me feel sick, and I pushed it away. I couldn’t think of it now. It was too dark, too unknowable, and I had other things to think about.

I walked over to where Cali stood, looking blankly out the window. “I know this is hard,” I started, keeping my voice low, “but I’m going to make sure that Greyson is fixed. Somehow.”

Cali looked up at me, blinking in surprise. She hadn’t heard me walk over. “I know you will,” she said.

I was struck by her certainty. She had such faith in me. She didn’t doubt my sincerity. Other people might have—and with good reason, I had to admit, considering that Greyson was the reason I didn’t have Cali to myself—but not Cali.

After a moment, Cali stepped back and looked me over. Her brows furrowed. “You’re hurt.”

“I’m fine,” I said quickly.

“You need to rest while you can, Xavier.” Her eyes softened as she looked at me. “I’ll walk you to your room.”

I shook my head. “I have stuff I have to do. I’ve got to plan for the next wave of attacks.”

Cali narrowed her eyes. Then, without warning, she shoved me hard in the chest. When I winced, she gave me a satisfied smile. “Just because you heal fast doesn’t mean you can ignore the fact that you *need* *to heal*.” She looked around. “Everyone here knows what they need to do. Use this time while you’ve got it.”

I was about to argue, but I stopped myself. I had to admit that she had a point. I shrugged, and when she grabbed my arm to tug me upstairs, I didn’t stop her.

At my door, she looked up at me. “I should probably go down and help the others.” She shrugged. “Not that I know *how* to help. Everyone has a job but me.”

“Don’t say that,” I said. “You help by just being here.”

She smiled, but her smile was sad, and she had that lost look in her eyes again.

I opened my door, pulled her into my room, and put my arms around her.

She hesitated for just an instant, then relaxed into my arms. “I’ve been so scared all day, Xavier.” She looked up at me, her dark eyes liquid in the dim light. “Every time you leave, I just think…” She closed her eyes and shook her head.

“Hey,” I said quietly, “I’m here now.”

I leaned down and pressed my lips to hers. Before that moment, I hadn’t realized how cold I’d been, but Cali’s warmth filled me, and I pulled her even closer.

And—judging by how fast she responded to me—she needed me just as much as I needed her. She kissed me like she wanted to forget everything *except* me, and I let her, sliding my hands beneath her shirt, feeling the softness of her skin, the slope of her curves, the lace of her bra.

As I kissed Cali, I felt the weight of responsibility for the pack slipping off my shoulders—if only for a moment—and I’d never been so grateful to lose myself in her.

**Episode 1802**

ARTEMIS

I dipped the tea bag into the steaming water meditatively, watching the hibiscus tea spreading like blood. After a moment, I pulled myself from my reverie and, pouring a spoonful of honey into the cup, carried it onto the porch.

Rishika was standing on the edge of the deck, her eyes trained on the perimeter, where the pack house grounds met the woods. The rest of the pack was exhausted—I had stepped over half a dozen sleeping werewolves on my way to the kitchen. But Rishika was still awake, alert, and ever watchful. Every inch the consummate warrior, ready to do whatever was needed.

I had spent so much of my life completely on my own, relying on no one else, and the idea of depending on anyone at all still felt new and scary. But if I had to rely on anyone, I was glad it was her.

Rishika—sensing someone behind her—turned. “Hi, there.” She smiled at me. “What are you doing, lurking behind me?”

I held out the cup. “I thought you could use this.”  
 “Thanks,” she said, accepting and taking a grateful sip. “*Oh*, that’s good. It’s getting pretty damn cold out here.”

“Yeah,” I said, shivering. Now that I wasn’t holding the hot tea, I could feel the cold seeping in, and I wrapped my arms around myself. “How are you feeling? Are you healing okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said, taking another sip of tea. “But I have to admit, I’m not dying to start another fight.”

That surprised me. “Do you need more help? I could fight. Do you think Xavier would be okay with that?”

Rishika raised her eyebrows. “I don’t know…”

“Why? I’m healthy again. I’m fine,” I said. I took a step toward Rishika. “And I want to help. I don’t want you to have to face whatever’s coming alone.”

I’d caught her off-guard, and her face softened. She leaned in and pressed a kiss to my lips. “I assumed you’d be safest in the house, but I’ve seen you fight, so I’d never turn down that offer.” She shrugged. “It’s between you and Xavier. I trust you to do the right thing.”

I smiled. I loved Cali, but I didn’t understand her relationship with Xavier and Greyson. If she had made the same offer to fight, they would have told her no way. I could never be in a relationship so restrictive. Rishika gave me space, and I appreciated that she wasn’t so protective.

I took a step closer to her. It was partly to keep warm, and partly because I wanted to be nearer to her. Rishika sighed and slipped her arm around my waist. We leaned our heads together and looked out at the quiet evening. I knew it was only a brief respite in what would be a difficult night, but—in that moment—I felt safe, content, and truly happy. I held fast to that feeling.

“Artemis!”

I turned, looking toward the voice calling me from inside the pack house. I felt a chill pass through me. It was Big Mac. What did she want with me? There was something about the way that witch looked at me…

I could tell she didn’t trust me.

“Artemis!”

Rishika gave a low chuckle. “Duty calls.” She kissed me again, then pushed me toward the door.

Walking slowly, I headed inside and toward the den, where Big Mac usually holed up to do her magic work. She was there, sitting in a chair, looking at the silver amulet that Xavier had pulled from the mysteriously cloaked figure.

I stopped in the doorway and looked at the strange, pyramid-shaped object she held in her hand. There was an energy radiating from it, and I narrowed my eyes, trying to identify it. It felt dark—Dark Fae.

Big Mac looked up at me. “Oh, good. You’re here.” She held up the amulet. “I wanted your help with this. There’s something very strange about it. I wondered if it may be Fae magic.”

I took a cautious step into the room and took the amulet from Big Mac. I looked at it carefully, examining the engraved scrollwork on the sides. The Dark Fae energy was powerful, and it emanated through my body as I held the thing in my hand.

“It’s Fae, but I can’t tell much more than that.” I looked up. “How did it get here? I thought the portals were all sealed, up until recently.”

“That means nothing,” Big Mac said dismissively. “Over the centuries, all kinds of things have been brought into this world. This amulet could have been sitting in a closet somewhere for years before Letifer gave it to that revenant. He was a warlock, after all.”

“That’s true,” I murmured, looking down at the thing again. The amulet didn’t seem very complicated. I turned it slightly in my hand and noticed a Fae symbol etched into the back. I cleared my throat and looked up the witch. “This is interesting, but I’m not worried about it. Just lock it up with any other artifacts we have.”

As I handed the amulet back to Big Mac, I felt magic flowing through the room. But—beyond the room—I could sense something else. It was further away, but somewhere in the house, and powerful. It was something that felt like… Didi’s power.

But how could that be? Didi was dead.

Although, Big Mac did say witches’ magic stayed around after they died. But she must have been powerful if I could feel it. It was like a shadow following me around the house.

I reached out with all my senses, and the image of Marta flashed into my head.

“Where’s Marta?” I asked suddenly. The question came out of my mouth before I knew I was forming it.

“Why?” Big Mac asked shrewdly, looking up at me.

“I wanted to talk to her. As a bridge, she might be able to offer some insight on the amulet,” I said smoothly.

Big Mac stared at me for a moment. Then she shook her head. “Maybe later. She’s asleep. She was so wiped out by the whole thing with the revenant inside the house, I sent her up to her room to rest.”

She took the amulet from me and turned to put it in a drawer in the desk. There was an iron box in the desk drawer, and I knew it was covered in magical protections. I knew that was where she kept objects imbued with power.

I took the moment while her back was turned and her attention was elsewhere to search for more magic around me. I closed my eyes, trying to focus—trying to identify what it was that I was sensing.

*There.*

It was there. It was an object—something powerful that was laced with the pure energy of Didi’s soul. And it was close to Marta. Very close.

I swallowed hard. “That sounds like good advice. I think I’m going to go rest myself.”

Big Mac didn’t even turn to look at me, so I left her fussing over her locked iron box and headed upstairs, led by the draw of this new magic.

When I got to Marta’s room, the door was closed. But rather than knock, I eased it open very, very slowly, figuring that if I startled her, I would cover by saying I was checking up on her.

But there was no response from inside.

So, I pushed the door open and stepped inside, closing it behind me. The bedside light was on, casting a dim, yellow glow, and Marta was sprawled out on the bed, fast asleep. I knew how exhausting a fight like the one we’d just been through could be, especially when you were using magic, so I figured Marta probably wouldn’t wake up, as long as I stayed quiet.

I stood still for a moment, casting my senses around, trying to find the magic that I was after.

*There.*

My eyes focused on a drawer in the nightstand, second from the top.

I moved toward it and slowly eased it open. When it squeaked, I froze, my eyes on Marta. But she didn’t stir. I pulled the drawer the rest of the way open and… there it was. I stared at it for a moment, then reached in to pick it up, looking at it in wonder.

It was the shape of a small globe, but small—small enough to fit into my hand. It was warm to the touch, and I could feel the heat of it moving through my body. I didn’t know how, but somehow, I *knew* that it was a weapon.

I smiled.

And now it was *my* weapon.

I stood straight and nudged the drawer shut with my knee. I slipped the object into the pocket of my sweater and moved back toward the door, and when I walked out of the room, it was with a smile on my face.

**Episode 1803**

I lay in the bed next to Xavier, facing away from him and toward the window. The kissing had been amazing, but I was serious about him needing rest. And I had needed this—this quiet, relaxing time with my mate. Xavier always made me feel special, even when he had so much on his mind.

Turning onto my other side, I propped my head on my hand to look at him, overwhelmed by the love I felt for him. I just felt so safe with him, so comforted. He looked over at me and smiled, but when he looked past me, out the window, his smile faded.

I sighed. I wished the real world wouldn’t intrude on this moment—that we could stay suspended here forever—but I also knew that wasn’t possible. There was still so much to do, and the pack needed its Alpha.

Dropping my head down to his, I gave Xavier a slow kiss, wanting to make the most of every moment we had left.

He seemed to feel the same, and as he slipped his hand around my waist, it began to wander down, fitting around the curve of my backside.

I felt the familiar stirring below my belly, and I started to wonder if maybe we did have a bit more time to spare, but Xavier pulled away with a groan.

“Fuck.” He shook his head. “We can’t,” he said, looking tortured. “I’ve got a watch coming up, and I can’t bail. I have to set an example.”

I couldn’t help but be a little disappointed, but I covered it as best I could. I was really proud of Xavier. I gave him a playful push. “Well then quit slacking and get up,” I said with a grin.

He grinned back and—nipping my ear—got to his feet. I hopped up after him.

“Wait,” I said, “let me look at you first.” He rolled his eyes but lifted his arms and did a little spin. He looked fully healed, which was a relief.

Though it made me think of Greyson, who was wounded as well. I bit my lip. I hoped he’d been able to recover, too. Maybe I should go and see what I could do to help with that strange spell he was under. If it *was* a spell. Whatever power was controlling his movements, it had to be dealt with.

As I’d been thinking, Xavier had made his way to the door, and he turned back before opening it. “I’ll see you later. Around here?” he asked with a grin.

I laughed. “Maybe.”

He threaded his hand into my hair and kissed me hard. He bit my lip, hard enough to make me yelp in surprise, then, smirking, he swaggered out of the room.

I shook my head as I watched him go. He’d gone full Alpha. Though in fairness, not much had really changed. He’d always been like this.

With a rueful laugh, I glanced out the window. It was fully dark outside. Night had come, and I could feel the time ticking away.

The next attack was coming. It was just a matter of when.

The first person I found when I headed downstairs was Big Mac, who was in the den, twisting herbs into bundles. My mom was there, too, sorting the herbs into piles on the desk.

She looked up when I walked in. “Hello, sweetheart.” She smiled at me, though her eyes were worried.

“I was wondering if you’d learned anything about Greyson’s condition,” I asked, picking up a sprig of rosemary and twirling it in my fingers.

Big Mac twisted a bunch of rue and answered without looking up. “From what I can tell, it’s some form of compulsion or persuasion magic.”

“What is that?” I asked.

“It’s something that allows the caster to take control of the victim—Greyson, in this case—despite his own will.”

I gasped. “You mean he’s possessed?”

Big Mac glanced up. “Not exactly, at least not fully. Greyson is still Greyson, but he’s being controlled.”

“What do you mean?”

She shook her head distractedly. “I don’t know enough about it. And I’ve got other things to worry about right now,” she snapped. “Your mate is secure enough where he is.”

I looked at her, feeling annoyed. I wanted Big Mac to fix this—*now*. But I stopped myself. I was being selfish. Big Mac *did* have other things to worry about. She was trying to protect everyone, and Greyson probably *was* safe in the basement for the moment.

I took a deep breath, trying to steady my nerves. “We’re going to need all the fighters we can get for the next battle, even with the orb to take out Letifer at the end.”

Big Mac looked up, a small smile lifting the corners of her mouth. “Yes, we do have that.” Her hands stilled on a bunch of parsley. “Speaking of which, I have to go take care of something.” She dropped the herbs and bustled out without another word.

I looked after her, confused. “What’s she doing?”

“I’m not sure,” my mom murmured, “but she’s antsy.” She sighed. “I guess we all are, waiting for the next wave of the attack.”

I looked over at her, taking in the worry lines that were starting to look permanent. “I’m sorry, Mom.”

“For what, honey?” she asked, surprised.

“For getting you and Dad stuck here. This isn’t what I intended.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” my mom said. She dropped the herbs and walked over to me, putting her arms around me. “Life is complicated, and even more so for beings like you and me. I’m just glad I’m here. And I’m going to defend my little girl, no matter what. Your dad will, too. We’re always here for you, sweetheart.”

I smiled into her shoulder and closed my eyes against the tears. I was glad she was here, too, and I thought of how many times fate could have gone the other way and taken her from me.

My mom leaned back and looked me in the face. “You’re thinking about Greyson, aren’t you?” I nodded. “You must be worried about him. Why don’t you go talk to him? He’ll want to talk to you, too. He’ll need to see you still believe in him, even after what happened.”

I wiped my eyes with a shaking hand. “Maybe I will.”

My mom nodded. “And maybe you can get more clues about how to end the compulsion curse, or whatever it is that’s affecting him.”

“I hope so,” I said, already turning to go. I wasn’t under any curse, but I could feel a pull toward him, compelling me forward. I wanted to go to my mate. I wanted to see him face to face.

Down in the basement, I walked past Emmett’s makeshift lab, where he was working on the serum, and hurried to Greyson’s room.

He looked up the instant I stepped close, like he could sense me. He stood and took a step toward me. I saw desire flash at me from the depths of his grey eyes, and my body responded instinctively. He wanted me, and I wanted him. We wanted to be together.

But a moment later, he seemed to remember himself, and his eyes darkened. “You shouldn’t be here.”

His words felt like a slap.

“Don’t say that,” I whispered. “I told you I’d come check on you. I’m your mate, Greyson. If there’s one person who can understand what you’re going through, it’s me.”

He shook his head, looking away. “I don’t even understand myself right now.”

I put my hand on the wood of the doorway, which was as close as I could get to him. The magical barrier sizzled beneath my touch. “I’m safe. Now tell me, while we’ve got the time—when did you first notice the feeling of compulsion?” Greyson looked up, clearly surprised. “Was it during the battle, when Xavier was taken?”

He sighed. “I’m not sure. I think it’s happened before. Everything goes cloudy, makes me feel hazy.”

I thought about this for a moment. “Is it possible you were hit with anything? Did you see a figure, or hear a spell?”

Greyson shook his head. “No. I’ve been thinking about it, and there’s nothing I can point to. But the feeling was real, and it was powerful. I couldn’t push past it.”

My heart beat fast. Greyson was one of the strongest men I knew. If he couldn’t fight past this thing—whatever it was—what could? How could we counter magic we couldn’t even identify?

Greyson tentatively took another step toward me.

I held my hand to the magical barrier, wishing I could touch him. *Really* touch him.

He held his hands up like mine, though the barrier separated us. The pull of the mate bond made my heart ache. He leaned forward, and the barrier crackled with energy.

“I love you, Greyson,” I whispered.

Greyson went still.

After a moment, I wondered why he hadn’t spoken. “Greyson?”

Without a word, he stepped back, then hurled himself at the barrier with the force of a freight train.

I jumped back, shocked. “What are you doing?”

“Get away!” Greyson yelled at me, though his lips barely opened as he spoke.

“Stop!” I screamed. “Please! Stop!”

But he wouldn’t. Over and over he hurled himself at the barrier, which—though invisible—was solid as a brick wall.

“*Greyson!*”

He was trying to speak, but his face was twisting, and no words were coming out. And, as I stared at him in horror, he shifted into his wolf and sprinted toward the barrier again.

**Episode 1804**

CHARLIE

The crossbow was aimed right at me, and I stared it down, riveted. But only for a moment. My body stayed as still as stone, but in my head, I started doing some quick calculations, computing the trajectory of the arrow, and trying to determine our chances if we ran.

They weren’t great.

I stepped in front of Violet. If the hunter shot, at least I’d be able to protect her from a direct hit. My heart was beating so fast it felt like it was thumping in my throat. Whoever this hunter was, if another fight was coming, I needed to be ready for it, so I took a deep breath and steeled myself.

Then, the hunter shifted—only slightly—but enough for their outline to sharpen a little. I squinted, then—with a flash of intuition—shifted into my human form.

*Charlie! What are you doing?* Violet’s voice was shrill in my head. She sounded panicked. *Don’t shift! You’re stronger as a wolf! We need to fight together!*

*Trust me*, I told her, then turned to face the hunter.

“Mom?” I called.

There was a long moment of stillness where nothing moved. My pulse pounded in my ears.

Then the hunter lowered the crossbow and stepped toward us.

“Charlie?” My mom’s face was a mask of fear and confusion as she looked between me and Violet, who was still in her wolf form. “What the hell do you think you’re doing out here, young man?”

*I don’t trust this, Charlie*, Violet said. She sounded scared. *Is your mom going to turn us in?*

I swallowed. I couldn’t answer her with perfect certainty, but despite everything, I had to believe my mother wouldn’t do something so horrible.

“Romilly sent us out here,” I told my mom. “Didn’t she tell you?”

“*No*, she did not,” she said, shocked.

*That’s weird*, I thought. Romilly had said that no one knew she was giving us the key to the safe house, but I thought at least my mom would be in on it. Did Romilly think she’d say no?

“She asked us to help out,” I explained. “We’ve been checking the perimeter, and we just found the breach in the fence that the revenants have been using to get into the camp. It’s there, see?” I said, pointing. “We think more are coming. We don’t have much time—”

But my mom was already nodding, understanding. “Okay, okay, I got it. You stay here. Keep watch. I’m in contact with the others. I’ll get them to rendezvous here in a few minutes, and we’ll check it out. Hopefully we can get it repaired before any more can get in.” She glanced at Violet—still a wolf—and me—naked—and her eyebrows arched up. “And in the meantime, you two had better come up with a damn good excuse for being out here.”

She turned on her heel and headed out, pulling out a two-way radio, which crackled with static as she started speaking into it.

Violet looked up at me. *Maybe we should hide.* But before I could answer, she lifted her nose into the air and sniffed.

“What?” I asked.

*There are more coming. Revenants*. She paused, concentrating. *Vampire revenants. A lot of them.*

I could sense Violet’s fear. I could almost feel it in the air. And I understood it. There were only two of us. How many of these monsters could we fight at once?

Gritting my teeth, I shifted back to wolf form just as we started to hear them shuffle toward us through the woods. They were approaching from the other side of the breach in the wall.

I turned, snarling, ready to face the new threat. Next to me, Violet pawed at the ground. She was edgy—too edgy to stand still, apparently, because after a moment she growled and leapt up onto the fallen tree, walking it like a ramp. She stopped at the top and looked out over the woods beyond the wall. It was a smart move, and she was smart to have thought of it—it was the best view of the field.

*They’re coming*, Violet said after a moment, and raced down.

I could hear them. It was the sound of feet shuffling through the fallen leaves and old snow, and when the orange eyes appeared over the breach in the wall, I pounced. There were more of them than there were of us, so I figured out best approach was to not give them any time to gain the advantage.

Violet seemed to get this too, and it seemed to work well—for a while. But there were just so many of them. Dozens of them. As soon as we took one out, another arrived to replace it. And they just kept coming.

We were getting tired, and we were falling behind. Revenants were climbing the wall before we could dispatch the ones we were fighting. We weren’t going to be able to keep up.

Then I glanced over just in time to see Violet take a sharp blow from one of the revenant’s powerful hands, right across her face. She snarled and bit the thing, tearing out a chunk of its face, but blood was leaking from her eye where she’d been injured.

This was getting to be too much. We were overwhelmed. We couldn’t keep up.

*Violet. Run—*

But I was cut off when an arrow whizzed past me, hitting the revenant I’d been fighting right between the eyes, killing the thing instantly.

“Do not maim the wolves!” a familiar voice boomed. “Attack only the undead!”

It was Romilly, and when I shot a look over my shoulder, I saw her directing her snipers toward the revenants still scaling the wall.

“Take the left flank, Pepperdine!” my mom shouted.

I assumed Sergeant Pepperdine had arrived with more backup, but I couldn’t see what anyone behind me was doing because another revenant had just leapt onto me, and I dove for it. The arrival of backup filled me with fresh fight. Maybe it *was* going to be possible to win this skirmish against the wall-jumping revenants.

Arrows were zipping through the air all around my head, and behind me, I could hear the clang of metal hitting bone as Romilly took down one revenant after the other. I’d had no idea she was so good with a sword.

I kicked away a revenant head as it rolled beneath my feet when—out of the corner of my eye—I saw a revenant lunge toward Sergeant Pepperdine.

Pepperdine stumbled and fell, and the revenant loomed over him, looking like he was about to bite, so—acting on pure instinct—I ran toward them. I sank my teeth into the monster and clamped my jaws tight, hurling the monster away from Pepperdine with a quick twist of my head. I stood, watching the revenant sail, then crash into a tall oak with a sickening crunch. I was tired, panting with the effort of the quick action, but I was pleased with myself—glad I’d been able to move fast and save my teacher. But when I looked down, Sergeant Pepperdine was looking up at me, his eyes wide with fear.

I moved back quickly. I had saved him, but I had to remember that he didn’t know who the hell I was. To him, I was still something to be feared. To him, *I* was a monster, too.

This was driven home when Sergeant Pepperdine pulled a knife from his belt and flipped it open.

My stomach twisted. I knew hunters feared werewolves, but I’d heard Romilly tell them not to hurt Violet and me. I shot a quick glance around the small clearing, and I was startled by what I saw. I’d been so caught up in the battle, I hadn’t noticed who’d arrived. It wasn’t just Pepperdine and Romilly now. Nearly all the instructors had arrived, and the way they were looking at Violet and me, it was clear that they thought *we* were part of the revenant attack.

My heart thudded hard. *We have to run, or they’re going to kill us.*

When Violet’s voice sounded in my head, it was weak and near tears. *Charlie,* *I can’t run.*

I looked at her quickly, and my blood ran cold. She was still in her wolf form, on the ground, and her back leg was broken.

It felt as though my whole body had turned to ice. I couldn’t move. Next to me, Sergeant Pepperdine clambered to his feet, his knife held out in front of him, his eyes on me. All around me, the hunters were closing in.

There was no way out of this.

Except one.

I looked at my mother, whose eyes were wide with terror. Her mouth began to open with, no doubt, some half-cooked excuse to prevent the hunters from doing what they had trained to do all their lives. We had no choice if we were going to prove we weren’t the enemy.

So, slowly, I shifted back to my human form.

There were gasps. Then the whispers started. They moved through the clearing like an icy breeze. I opened my eyes to see the same shocked expression replicated on every face in the clearing.

I held up my hands as I looked around. “I can explain.”

**Episode 1805**

GREYSON

The barrier held strong as I slammed myself against it, over and over, snarling and sweating. My mind was a raging mess. I was both aware of the impulse that was making me behave like a wild animal—sending shockwaves of pain through my body—and also fighting like mad against it. I was trying to stop myself, but I couldn’t.

Cali stood in front of me, behind the barrier, her eyes alight with fear. She looked frozen.

*Go!* I commanded. *Get away from here!*

“Greyson,” she whispered, half-sobbing.

*I’ve lost control. You’re in danger. Get away from me. Get Big Mac. Get Xavier. Get anyone, for god’s sake. You’re not safe!*

Cali’s eyes shifted around. She wasn’t moving. She looked frantic and confused. I knew she wouldn’t want to leave me here, and running from me was the last thing she could bear to do, but I needed her to listen to me.

I slammed into the barrier again.

Shit, was it weakening? I snarled. Cali was right in front of me, and I had the strongest urge to get to her—not to help her, but to sink my teeth into her and tear her apart. The urge to kill her was nearly overwhelming, and it was ripping me apart from the inside. It was clouding my thoughts like a film of blood over my vision.

I shook my head, trying desperately to regain a grip on my mind, but I felt it slipping away, further and further.

Tears were streaming down Cali’s face, but only the smallest part of me felt anything like pity. The rest of me—most of me—felt only a feral need to *kill*. I felt disconnected and wild. I howled as I threw myself as the barrier. It sizzled and buckled.

Cali screamed and finally—*finally*—began to slowly back away, her eyes still on me.

I felt myself gearing up for one more run into the thin shred of magic separating her from me.

Drawn by Cali’s screams—and probably the sound of me hurling myself at the barrier—Emmett appeared from his lab, looking startled. Lola was behind him, followed by that other vampire girl.

Lola looked at me, then grabbed Cali’s arms and yanked her back, away from me. “We need some help down here!” she bellowed, not taking her eyes off me.

Others were coming; I could hear their footsteps on the stairs. My window was closing. I was losing my opportunity to escape—and to get Cali. But the barrier was weakening. I could sense it. The magic that had made it was strong, but I was stronger.

Big Mac and Kira rounded the corner, joining the group on the other side of the barrier. Cali turned as Orla joined the group and ran into her mother’s arms, sobbing.

I crouched down, panting, my sides heaving with the effort, and made one final leap. I was determined to punch through the barrier. And as I hit it, I felt the magic crack. It had worked!

I was passing through when Cali whipped around—rounding on me—her eyes sparking with fury. She held up her hands, and I was hit with a blast of energy so powerful it felt like it had stopped my heart. The Fae magic shot me across the room and slammed me against the back wall with the force of a bullet.

And then everything went black.

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When my eyes fluttered open, the pain was waiting to meet me. My head pulsed with an ache so overwhelming, I wished I had stayed unconscious.

“Greyson?”

I looked up. Cali’s face hovered above mine. As I blinked, the rest of the information fell into place: I was on the floor of the basement room, in my human form, and Cali wasn’t the only one with me. Emmett, Lola, that vampire girl, the witches, and Orla were all gathered, staring down at me. And I was bound at my wrists and ankles with silver-coated shackles.

But then—worst of all—everything came back to me. Everything, and it felt as though my blood had suddenly turned to ice. I looked up at Cali. “I was about to kill you.”

Her dark eyes widened, and she nodded. “But you didn’t. We stopped you—not *you*,” she corrected herself quickly. “We stopped whatever was controlling you. And it’s going to be okay,” she said, almost more to herself than to me.

I nodded, though I didn’t believe her. I had tried to kill Cali. My *mate*. The love of my life. Nothing was ever going to be okay again. I swallowed. “I told you I was dangerous.”

“He *is* dangerous.”

I stilled.

Xavier stepped into my eyeline and looked down at me, his blue eyes cold as ice. “Let me see him.”

The group backed away as he crouched down, testing the shackles, making sure they were secure.

*This is exactly what I was afraid of.* Xavier’s voice in my head was tense and bitter.

I gritted my teeth. *You didn’t see what I did, Xavier. It’s not enough to lock me up. You have to send me away.*

Xavier’s face was grim. *I wish I could, but until we defeat Letifer, no one’s fucking going anywhere.*

Cali—who hadn’t heard our mind linked conversation, knelt down next to Xavier. She took my hand, her eyes filled with tears. “I can’t stand to see you like this.” She looked up at Xavier. “We need to work together—*all of us*—to help Greyson defeat this. Whatever this is.”

Xavier didn’t look convinced, but Cali looked down at me.

*I know how strong you are*, she told me. *You’ve defeated this before, out on the battlefield today. I saw you. You can defeat it again.*

She was right, and I dug deep, trying to summon the feeling that had snapped me out of the compulsion earlier. It had been the memory of Cali, and the strength of our mate bond. As a werewolf, I’d always believed the bond between mates was one of the most powerful forces in existence. Could it be strong enough to break this magic, whatever it was?

I closed my eyes, concentrating. I thought back, remembering the moment I’d first met Cali. Recalling that electric moment when I’d known to the core of my being that we were mates.

The concrete floor was cold beneath my back, and the silver shackles bit into my skin, but the memory of my mate bond with Cali was like a tiny fire in my soul, and I crouched over it, letting it warm me.

I squeezed her hand. *You’re right. I’m going to fight this, and I’m going to need your help to do it, love. But you can’t be near me. Not physically. It’s too dangerous. I won’t take that risk.* I took a deep breath and looked up at Xavier. “This is how it’s going to go. I’ll stay down here, cuffed. I’ll need a guard outside the door at all times. No one should visit me alone.”

Xavier narrowed his eyes but didn’t object.

I looked at Big Mac. “You’re going to need to put up that barrier again, but make it stronger this time.”

She nodded, all business.

But Cali shook her head, looking miserable. “It’s not right, Greyson. You shouldn’t be treated like a prisoner, not when you’re the victim.”

I looked past her to Xavier. “That’s the Alpha’s call.”

Xavier looked a little startled, but he nodded at me. “You’re right. This is the best way to protect our pack.” He hesitated. “And our mate.”

It was a strange moment. There was a sense of harmony between us—all three of us. We looked at each other. No one was smiling, but there was an understanding. For the first time, we were all on the same page. It was good to be working in tandem… but strange.

Xavier got to his feet, and when I struggled to get to mine, Cali reached out to help me. I moved to the doorway with them and watched as Cali and Xavier stepped out, then Big Mac spread more salt on the threshold.

I leaned out and pressed a kiss to Cali’s lips. Then I gave Xavier a nod. “Do whatever you have to do, Alpha.”

Xavier hesitated, then nodded back.

“Okay, everyone clear out,” Big Mac commanded, making a shooing motion. Cali gave me one last sad glance as her mom put an arm around her and everyone left us alone.

“Back up,” Big Mac snapped at me. “And try not to ruin this one,” she added. Then she recast the barrier spell again.

This one seemed to take longer, which I hoped meant it was stronger than the last one. I felt a sense of deep relief, watching her create the barrier. I felt like myself for the moment, but I didn’t know when that was going to change, and I felt better knowing I was safely confined.

Big Mac finished and stepped back, looking satisfied. It looked as though she was about to say something, but before she could speak, Marta rounded the corner and charged toward her at a sprint.

“There you are!” she cried. “I’ve been looking for you everywhere!”

“Why?” Big Mac asked, looking immediately concerned. “What’s going on, Marta?”

Marta looked pale and terrified. “I can’t find it,” she panted, leaning over to catch her breath. “I think I’ve lost it!”

**Episode 1806**

MARTA

I’d finally found Big Mac. My head was still spinning, and I was trying to wrap my brain around the fact that the orb she’d given me was actually gone. I hadn’t been able to believe it when I’d woken up and found it missing. I hadn’t even intended to fall asleep. I’d just lain down for a minute and then…

“Marta, keep your voice down.” Big Mac grabbed my arm, catching my attention. “Come with me.”

Big Mac put an arm around me, looking back once at the area Greyson was in. I was shaking under her as she led us to the empty hallway. She looked at me intently. “What’s going on? What happened?”

I took a deep breath. “I put the orb away for just a minute when I went upstairs to rest. And then when I woke up, it was gone,” I finished, shuddering.

“Gone?” Big Mac’s face was unreadable. “What do you mean, *gone*?”

“*As in disappeared!* It’s not there! How could I make it clearer? Someone must have come in while I was asleep and taken it,” I said frantically. It was torture explaining this to Big Mac. She had entrusted me with the object, and I hated that I’d let her down. I’d been nervous to take it when she’d offered it to me, and this was exactly the reason why. I couldn’t even successfully babysit the orb. My throat burned, and my eyes prickled as they began to fill with tears.

“Are you certain it’s gone?” the witch asked slowly. “You’re sure you couldn’t have misplaced it?”

I shook my head. “No. I ripped the room apart looking for it. Lilac too. Believe me, it’s not in there.” I swallowed hard. “It’s gone. I’m sure of it.”

Big Mac gave me a long look. She seemed shaken, but not as much as I would have imagined. She certainly didn’t seem to be freaking out, and I couldn’t understand it. Was she in shock? Did she not understand what had happened? This wasn’t some little potion I’d lost track of. This was a unique magical object, made with the soul of the now-departed Didi and capable of destroying a powerfully evil being like Letifer.

After a moment, Big Mac turned and headed for the stairs that led to the first floor.

I stared after her for a moment, then followed, dodging in front of her. “Did you hear me? I’m telling you we no longer have the orb. If Letifer attacks, we’re completely screwed.”

Big Mac gave me one of her even stares. “I heard you.”

I goggled at her. “*And?*”

She raised one eyebrow. “And what makes you think it’s really missing?”

How could she be so damn *calm* about this when I was having a heart attack?

I closed my eyes as the reality of the situation set it. The orb was gone, and it was all my fault. I’d accidentally fallen asleep, and I thought I’d heard someone in my room, but I was so tired and had figured it was just Lilac doing something weird. It wouldn’t have been new.

“Lilac? Are you there?” I’d called, rubbing my eyes. He manifested in front of me. “What were you doing in my drawer?”

“Nothing.” There was an edge in his voice. “Marta, we have a problem.”

“What do you mean?”

“When you fell asleep, I wasn’t here.”

*That* had woken me right up. “What do you mean you weren’t here? Where did you go? And how? We’re tethered together.”

Lilac had sat next to me, taking my hand. “I think I was pushed back to the spirit world.”

“*What?*”

“I don’t know how it happened, but when you woke up, I was pulled back here.”

“So you weren’t in my room just now?”

Lilac had looked bewildered. “No?”

I’d sat up and looked around warily. But the room had been empty.

He’d looked worried. “No one else but another pack member could come in here, right?”

I’d shaken my head, ready to tell him I’d probably just had a bad dream, but I stopped. Because something had caught my eye. It was the nightstand where I’d put the orb, and the drawer wasn’t fully closed.

Slowly and carefully, I’d gotten up out of bed and stepped toward the drawer. I’d closed the drawer completely—I was sure of it, because I’d put the orb in there to keep it safe, and I had taken no chances. The last thing I wanted to do was roll over in my sleep and accidentally set it off or something. So I yanked open the drawer and stared down.

But my worst fears had been confirmed when I’d seen that the drawer was empty, and my stomach had dropped like a stone.

I had tossed the room, looking absolutely *everywhere* Lilac and I could think of, though I was sure I’d put it nowhere except that drawer. I’d come close to a panic attack, wondering where the hell the orb could have gone—and who could have come in to take it—when I realized it really wasn’t there. And that I was going to have to tell Big Mac that I’d closed my eyes for five damn minutes and somehow managed to screw everything up.

I’d rushed downstairs to find her—to throw myself on her mercy—and now the witch was standing there, acting like there was no problem. What the hell was going on?

*And what makes you think it’s really missing?*

I closed my gaping mouth. “I think it’s missing because it’s not where I left it, and I *checked*,” I finally managed. “I looked everywhere. It’s not there. It’s gone. Someone was in my room, and they took it.”

Big Mac shrugged airily. “I believe you, Marta.”

I was ready to pull my hair out in frustration. “Then why are you being so damn calm about this?” I snapped.

Big Mac looked around for a moment, as if she were checking if we were really alone. My anxiety continued to build—what had I done wrong? Was she just that disappointed in me? I reached for Lilac’s ghostly hand, wishing desperately that I could squeeze it.

“It’ll be okay,” he whispered.

I hoped he was right.

Big Mac turned back to me. “Watch very closely.”

The witch began to twist her hand, and there was a soft light. I watched as slowly something began to appear in her hand out of thin air. My jaw dropped as she held it out to me.

It was the orb.

“What the hell?” Lilac murmured next to me.

Had she tricked me? Was this one of her little witch tests that I hadn’t even realized I was going to fail? That burned at me. All that panic for nothing…

“But how is that possible?” I asked, my eyes on the small orb in her hand. “I had it twenty minutes ago. You gave it to me.”

Big Mac shook her head. “What you had was a very convincing decoy.”

I looked up at her, shocked. “*What?* A *decoy*?”

“I apologize for scaring you, Marta. You did nothing wrong, but I had to be certain of something,” she said. “I trust you, but don’t mention this to anyone. Can you promise me that, Marta?”

I nodded. “I promise.”

“Me too,” Lilac said.

Big Mac continued. “I suspected there was a mole in the house. I’ve been worried for some time. And I was afraid that if we put all our hopes into one weapon, it would be the perfect opportunity for the traitor to act.”

“What do you mean, act?” I asked. Next to me, Lilac looked as confused as I felt, which was kind of a relief. At least I wasn’t the only one having a hard time keeping up.

“Ruin our plans,” Big Mac explained. “Hand the victory to Letifer.”

“So, what did you do?” I asked, my eyes back on the orb. This one—the one in her hand—was the real one. I could feel the orb’s energy in the air. But the other one had felt real, too. I had felt *that* as well. “How did you make the decoy feel so real?”

Big Mac smiled. “That was pretty brilliant, wasn’t it? I have to admit, it was one of my better ideas. When I created this decoy, I gave it the illusion of magic, so it appeared to have the same magical aura as the original, but it was just a replication.”

“But *why*?” I asked, still feeling a step behind. “Why did you go to all that trouble? What was the point?”

“The traitor,” Big Mac said, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. “There’s someone in this house who’s working for the other side. Maybe working both sides. And I figured with this object floating around, they might be so tempted to steal it, they couldn’t resist. And,” she said, raising her eyebrows, “it sounds like that’s exactly what happened.”

My stomach twisted. The idea of a traitor within the house was horrifying. I glanced at Lilac, who looked even paler than his usual ghost self. I didn’t know much about werewolves, but I knew enough to know that loyalty to the pack was huge.

I shook my head. “But who is it? Who would betray the pack like this?”

Big Mac’s eyes narrowed. “That’s what we’re going to find out.”

**Episode 1807**

My mom had to practically drag me out of the basement. I hated leaving Greyson down there. Wasn’t it cold? Basements were so notoriously damp and freaky… The idea of him just sitting down there, not knowing what was happening to us up here… I hated it.

I desperately wanted to help him. Cure whatever was hurting him. And hurt whoever was doing it.

Letifer.

*I love you*, I mind linked, but I had no idea if he heard.

“Hang in there,” Mom said, giving me a kiss on the forehead.

I sighed, hugging myself. Where were we supposed to go from here? Greyson being compromised showed that the best of us could be. How were we supposed to win against that?

“He’s going to be fine.” I looked up to see Xavier in front of me. “It’s for the best, Cali. You know that, right?”

“Maybe,” I said, frowning.

I looked back at the basement door. Knowing Greyson was down there, being locked in… Without thinking about it for another second, I turned toward the basement door. Xavier caught me by my elbow.

“Cali,” he said, his voice low. “Don’t make it harder on him.”

I opened my mouth, unsure of what to say. *Is he right?* It was then that the basement door opened, and Big Mac and Marta came into the living room.

“Oh good, you’re all here,” Big Mac said.

“How’s Greyson?” I asked.

“We have bigger problems than him right now,” she said. “The orb was stolen.”

“*What?!*” Xavier and I said at the same time.  
 Xavier approached the witch, his back rigid. “I saw you put it in that safe.”

Big Mac glared at him. “Apparently someone else did too. Or are we so sure you don’t have it?”

Oh boy, this wasn’t good. The last thing we needed with our only major weapon against Letifer gone was a mutiny in the pack itself. I stepped between Xavier and big Mac.

“How can we find out who it is?” I asked. “Maybe we can figure it out quickly and not have to point fingers anywhere.”

She shook her head. “It’s not going to be that simple. I have to cast another spell to start tracking the magical trail of the orb,” Big Mac said. “That’s going to take a while, and I don’t like to make accusations I can’t prove. But we need to act fast.”

*Act fast, but it takes long. Great, another witchy oxymoron.* I was on the verge of asking exactly how long she thought that would all take, but before I could, we all jumped when we heard a shout from outside.

“*Revenants!*”

It was Sage, calling from the porch, where she was on watch.

Xavier jumped into action, heading outside immediately. My heart stuttered, and I thought of Greyson, locked up in the basement. He was behind a magical barrier, and shackled. He couldn’t defend the house. I took a deep breath. It was my moment to step up, and I felt a wave of fierce determination flood through me.

I turned to Big Mac. “We need to know who the traitor is as soon as possible.

“Don’t tell me what I already know,” she said. “I’m going to start the spell now.”

Figures. Turning, I strode from the room, following Xavier and the others outside. Shockingly, my mom and dad were among them.

“What are you two doing?” I asked, hurrying up to them. “Go back inside!”

Mom smiled and gave me a big hug. “Don’t worry, Cali, I’ve been in my fair share of fights before.”

“But… what about Dad?” I asked.

“I’ll be fine,” Dad said, giving me a thumbs up. He was white as a sheet. “I’m ready for whatever gets thrown at us.”

“What do you think you’re doing?”

I turned to look up into Xavier’s stormy blue eyes. He was clearly not pleased to see me out here. “I’m here to help,” I said stubbornly.

Xavier glanced at my parents, then tugged me away from them. “No,” he said firmly.

“Xavier—”

But he was already shaking his head. “It’s way too dangerous out there for you, Cali. You don’t know what it’s like when things start going down. It’s hell. You could get hurt, or worse.” His voice broke.

The anguish in his eyes broke my heart. I knew this was hard for him—all of it, the revenants, this thing with Greyson, the new responsibility of being Alpha—and I didn’t want to make it worse, but I knew what I had to do.

“You’re down a fighter,” I said. “I can’t replace Greyson—I know that—but I have my magic. I can help defend the pack.” Xavier opened his mouth to argue, but I spoke over him. “If Greyson was Alpha, he’d let me fight.”

This was unfair—and a low blow, and I knew it—but I didn’t feel like I had a choice.

Xavier’s jaw clenched, and his eyes hardened to cold blue ice. “Good thing Greyson isn’t Alpha, then,” he said, raising an eyebrow.

“Okay, that’s it!” Rishika called out, clapping her hands together. “It’s time. Those revenants are getting closer every second we stand here. Let’s move out.”

The pack mobilized instantly and headed out the door. Xavier turned, but I caught his arm.

“I’m coming, too.”

He looked at me for a moment, a muscle in his jaw twitching, then nodded. “Fine. But you’re staying close to the house. You have my permission to use magic from the porch.”

I rolled my eyes at this concession. But, as small as it was, it was actually a major win, and I grinned as I followed Xavier and the rest of the pack out the door. *I was finally a fighter!* I stayed on the porch and watched as the pack moved into position on the wide lawn, facing the dark forest. One by one, they shifted into their wolf forms and dropped to four paws, waiting.

They were ready, so I took their cue and concentrated, thinking of the strongest magic I could, summoning all the energy I possessed. I wanted to be ready when the moment arrived.

The darkness was thick, but as my eyes adjusted to the dim moonlight, I saw them. Dozens and dozens of flaming orange eyes moving in the distance—coming at us from the blackness of the trees.

A shiver quivered up my spine, and for a moment I almost lost my nerve. I could still go inside. Xavier would probably be relieved if I did, and no one else would even notice. I could lock the door and find my mom and just wait for all this to be over.

But I gave my head a hard shake. I *wasn’t* going to run. This is what Xavier and Greyson did—they faced the nightmares. And they did it for me. I could be that strong, too.

The revenants appeared from the trees, growing from moving eyes into dark figures as they stepped from the darkness of the forest. The wolves snarled as they approached but waited—watching.

But when the first knot of revenants crossed the line where the dome had sat—the unofficial border line—they were met by Rishika and Mace, who attacked immediately and without mercy. Rishika slammed one revenant to the ground while she kicked another with her powerful back legs. It went flying backward, taking out another two like a couple of monster bowling pins.

But there was another wave coming—the revenants kept marching toward the house, without any apparent fear or hesitation.

I took a deep breath and called up all the energy I could. It spiraled around me, the air supercharging, and I could feel the magic coiling from the top of my head to the tips of my feet, filling me with power. I stretched out my hands and let loose, lighting up the air around me with the blast of power. The force of the power issuing from me nearly knocked me off my feet, but I braced myself and held on. Over the pounding rush in my ears, I could hear the garbled screams of the revenants as they were pushed back, and I felt energy flood through me.

*I can do this. I can freaking do this!*

That wave of revenants was stumbling back, struggling to power through the wall of energy I’d created, but beyond them, I could see another wave coming. But I wasn’t scared. I felt alive and powerful. I wouldn’t have chosen it, but the porch was actually the best place for me to be. It had the best angle for me to blast my magic, and I moved one hand, then the other. I’d never worked like this before, but I was able to create independent energy streams with each of my hands, holding one wave of revenants back as I attacked another, giving the werewolves a moment of cover when they needed it to regroup or rescue an injured pack mate.

Taking my eyes off the revenants for just a moment, I scanned the wolves for Xavier and found him fighting a large revenant with matted black hair. He was doing fine, and was about to take the thing down when I saw something he hadn’t seen, and gasped.

The cloaked revenant was back, and heading right toward him.

I readied another burst of power and aimed it right at the figure, ready to blast the thing back before it reached Xavier. It was close, but I could do it—I *knew* I could. With a yell, I blasted the thing with a huge burst of energy. A shot of greenish fire rushed toward it with the speed of a bullet. But—too late—I realized the cloaked figure wasn’t the only thing moving. Xavier had also noticed the figure and lunged for it, just as I released the blast. I watched in horror as both the cloaked figure and Xavier were engulfed by the power of my spell.

**Episode 1808**

“No!” I screamed, but it was too late. My magic hurtled straight for Xavier and the revenant, and I lost sight of them as it exploded in a ball of light.

Panic pulsed through my veins, and I didn’t think twice before leaping off the edge of the porch and racing toward Xavier. I skirted around and shouldered past pack members who were ripping revenants apart, barely cognizant of the battle raging around me. My entire world had narrowed to Xavier, to making sure he was all right, making sure that I hadn’t hurt him.

I skidded to a halt when I reached the trenches. *Oh my god…*

Horror and dread took my breath away. The trenches were filled with the still-writhing bodies of revenants that had fallen and been impaled on the spikes. My stomach clenched, and my mouth filled with saliva.

*Don’t throw up. Don’t throw up. Xavier needs you—you don’t have time to toss your cookies.*

I took a deep breath and willed the contents of my stomach to stay where they belonged. I eyed the trench again, focusing this time on the relative width of it rather than its writhing, snarling inhabitants.

Could I jump across? It seemed like a pretty wide distance to cross, and if I fell short, I’d end up in that trench full of revenants and spikes. Not exactly a great way to go. But if I made it across… then everything would be fine, and I could go help Xavier. It wasn’t *that* far, right? It was doable. One big jump was all I needed. Like the kind of superhero-type leap I’d seen a hundred times in movies.

*This is real life, not a movie… but I* am *full of adrenaline. And people perform amazing feats of strength all the time to protect the people they love!*

I had to do this. Or, at least try. Xavier was somewhere on the other side, and nothing was going to stop me from making sure he was okay.

I backed up several steps and took a deep breath. *It’s now or never, Caliana.*

And then I lunged forward—and jolted to a stop when a strong, firm hand wrapped tight around my arm. Just like that, my center of gravity was thrown out of whack. I stumbled as I was wheeled around. I had no time to fight, no time to prepare an attack, and I let out a delayed scream as I came face to face with Lola.

She blinked. “Wow! Cali, it’s me! I’m not going to hurt you!”

I tried to jerk my arm out of her grip, but she held tight.

“What are you doing?” she demanded. “Have you lost your mind? Were you seriously about to jump into that trench?”

“No! I was going to jump *over* it!” I gestured to the battlefield with my free hand. There was no sign of my mate *or* the cloaked revenant. “Xavier’s out there somewhere, and I think he’s hurt. I need to help him!”

“Cali, you can’t—”

With a lurch, I broke free from her grip and started sprinting toward the trench.

“Cali, NO!”

I blocked her out. I couldn’t be distracted. I had to find Xavier, had to save him. *Focus, Caliana. This is just like in* Wonder Woman*. Run really fast, and then take a flying leap. Be like Wonder Woman!*

I was nearly at the trench now, Lola’s screams echoing behind me. I took a deep breath—and stumbled, then face-planted, then rolled directly into the trench and onto the writing pile of dying revenants.

*Oh, fuck.*

I landed face to face with a revenant that looked like he’d died a solid century earlier. One orange eye glared at me, and the other eye was nothing more than a dark, glistening hole. My stomach started another rebellion.

“Hurp.”

Countless hands grabbed at me, pulling me in every direction, clawing at me.

“No, no, no, no, no,” I whimpered. I flexed my hands and readied my magic, but the revenants had me by the wrists. I couldn’t focus a blast like this.

“Let—*go*!” I wrenched my wrist away from the revenant, popping its arm out of the socket. The hand still clutched my wrist, hard enough to bruise.

“What the—ah!” The hands pulled me deeper into the trench. “Let go!”

“Cali, stop fucking around!” I heard Lola snarl. I looked up from the revenant stew I was stuck in and saw Lola standing on the edge of the trench, her fangs exposed and shining in the moonlight.

“Lola, help me!”

I reached out to her, the revenant hand still on my wrist. She grabbed my hand and pulled me upright and then stomped across the revenant bodies, her feet making crunching and squelching noises that only increased my nausea. The revenants groped and clawed at us, and as we reached the opposite side of the trench, another one latched on to my leg.

“Ah! Lola!”

I grabbed her tighter, and she spun around with a hiss and tore the revenant’s arm off his body. For good measure, she also yanked off the hand still attached to my arm. We tumbled free and collapsed on the other side of the trench.

“Oh my god…” I gasped out, trying to catch my breath. And then I was on my feet again, racing deeper into the battlefield to find Xavier.

Lola was hot on my heels. “You’re welcome, by the way!”

“Thank you! Really! You just saved my life!” I dodged a snarling revenant and the pack member fighting it and kept running. “But I have to find Xavier!”

I raced to the point where I’d last seen him and the cloaked revenant, and my heart sank. There was no sign of either of them. Where could they have gone?

Lola glanced around. “We’re up to our eyeballs in revenants right now. We need to get back to the house.”

I shook my head. “No, not until I know Xavier’s okay.”

Lola muttered something, but I ignored her. I would never forgive myself if I’d caused Xavier any harm. He was fighting for his life out here—he couldn’t afford to be injured.

*If I hurt him with that blast, I’m never using my magic again.*

We continued forward, going deeper into the woods. I had no idea if we were heading the right way, but I couldn’t *not* look for my mate. The grass and dirt were flattened heading into the woods, as though they’d been trampled recently, though I couldn’t tell if a werewolf or a revenant or something else entirely had caused it.

Suddenly, Lola froze. “Cali, stop.”

I stopped. “What—”

“*Be quiet.*”

My mouth snapped shut. I still wasn’t used to seeing Lola like this, all vamped out with her supernatural hearing and her razor-sharp fangs. She seemed so much more serious now than she’d ever been as a wolf. And frankly, a hell of a lot scarier too.

“Something’s coming,” Lola whispered.

“Is it Xavier?”

Before Lola could answer, a revenant burst out of the forest and collided with us.

The breath was knocked out of me as I hit the ground. *Ouch…*

Ripping and snarling noises sounded nearby. Lola was fighting with the revenant—and it seemed way more powerful than the ones she’d torn apart in the trench. I had to help her.

I stumbled to my feet and raised my hands to ready a blast. Lola and the revenant were too close together—I couldn’t get a clean shot. And after what I’d done to Xavier, I couldn’t risk hurting Lola too.

The revenant’s hands locked around Lola’s neck, and a whole new wave of adrenaline washed through me. Letifer and his revenants had already taken too much from me—I wasn’t going to lose my best friend, too.

I ran straight for them and rammed into the revenant shoulder first. All three of us crashed to the ground, but the monster’s grip on Lola’s neck loosened enough for her to break free.

*Mission accomplished—oh shit.*

Before I could rally, the revenant climbed on top of me and opened its mouth wide to sink its teeth into my shoulder.

“No, thank you!” I shoved at its chest, trying desperately to hold it back. “I’m not on the menu tonight, buddy!”

Then Lola leapt onto the revenant’s back, grabbed it around the neck, and literally ripped its head off.

Revenant blood poured from its severed neck and onto my face and chest.

“Oh my god!” I scrambled back, wiping at my eyes. My stomach clenched again, and this time there was no holding it back. I puked and puked until there was nothing left inside me. Even then, the putrid scent of the revenant still clung to my skin, my clothes.

“Sorry about that,” Lola said, from her place standing over the revenant’s body. She tossed its head aside like a soccer ball, then walked over to help me to my feet.

“You’re one badass vampire. And best friend,” I admitted, wiping at my face. “Can you use your super-vamp powers to hear Xavier?”

She cocked her head to the side, listening, and then shook her head. “I can hear revenants fighting, but I can’t make out where Xavier would be. Can you try mind linking with him?”

I took a deep breath and reached out—but suddenly something crashed through the trees, and Xavier’s wolf flew out with a howl, slamming into Lola.

**Episode 1809**

GREYSON

I fucking hated this.

It was bad enough that I’d been sidelined from the fight for our lives, that I’d lost Alpha and was maybe losing my mind too—but now I had to watch Cali walk away while I was forced to stay behind. No, not just forced. Tied up, shackled in the basement with silver cuffs because I’d proven I was a danger to myself and those around me.

My mate was heading out into battle now, and I couldn’t protect her. Hell, I could have killed her when I’d lost control. Every second that passed in which I was caged down here was another moment of torture, imagining again and again what could have happened if Cali hadn’t been ready with that blast that had knocked me out. If I’d been able to reach her, to tear her apart like that force in my brain had told me to do. This was the worst kind of nightmare. I couldn’t help, and I couldn’t control the force inside my body that was telling me to hurt the people I cared about.

And now all I could do was lie here uselessly and trust Xavier to keep our mate safe.

Which just wasn’t fucking acceptable.

I knew Xavier would do his best to protect Cali, but I couldn’t see how it would be enough. We were up against something we’d never seen before—true evil, and a dark power that we just couldn’t seem to match.

Plus, Xavier was Alpha now, a fact that never failed to grate at my nerves. He wouldn’t be able to give Cali the full protection she deserved if he was worrying about protecting and leading the pack, too. His attention would be spread too thin, and Cali would inevitably pay the price. It wouldn’t even necessarily be Xavier’s fault. That was just what happened when you were the Alpha. Your pack had to come first.

After all the time I’d spent trying to protect this pack and keep it together through one shitshow after another, I knew better than anyone the battle Xavier was facing, from within and without.

I tugged uselessly at the cuffs around my wrists. *I should be out there. I should be fighting alongside the pack, keeping both Cali and Xavier safe*.

But nothing was the way it should have been, because instead of being Alpha, or even Xavier’s second, I was a fucking threat. If they let me out, there was no way to be sure that I wouldn’t just join forces with the revenants and try to kill the people I’d fought so long to protect.

Something was happening to me. Something I couldn’t explain or control. And until I was able to rid myself of whatever the hell was doing this to me, I was going to be a liability instead of a help.

I paused to listen for signs of the fight outside, but there was nothing. Either because I was tucked away in the deep basement, or because of Big Mac’s enchantment, I couldn’t hear anything outside this room. It was silent—except for my own ragged breaths and the rapid beating of my heart.

I hated that I couldn’t hear anything beyond this room. Everyone I cared about could be dying right now, and I wouldn’t have had the first fucking clue about what was going on.

I tried to mind link with Cali.

*Love? How are you doing?*

Silence. Either she didn’t want to talk, or she couldn’t hear me. *Fuck! What’s going on out there?*

I tried mind linking with Xavier. I wasn’t particularly keen to talk to him, nor did I think he’d be pleased to hear from me, but desperate times and all that.

*How’s it going?* I asked him. *Is Cali safe?*

Again, nothing. Was Big Mac’s spell blocking the mind link? Or were they already too far away from the pack house? Or…

*Don’t think about that. They’re not dead. You saw them just a little while ago. It’s gotta be the spell. They’re fine.*

No matter how hard I tried to reason with myself, I still didn’t quite believe that everything was just hunky-fucking-dory upstairs. This was Letifer we were talking about. He had an army of revenants, and apparently some of them could compel people. So… the odds weren’t great.

I really needed to get the hell out of here.

I crossed the room, the cuffs still tight around my wrists and ankles, and approached the threshold. I hesitantly pressed my palm against the barrier. The second time had to be the charm, because unlike when I’d broken through it before, the barrier now had zero give. It was as unyielding as a solid brick wall.

*Did Big Mac have to choose now to be meticulous about locking me up?*

I pushed against the barrier again, harder, and met resistance on both sides. It was pushing against me, and the silver cuffs were pulling me back.

*Right. The cuffs. Even if I break through, I can’t go anywhere without breaking these cuffs too.*

Suddenly, the room seemed a hell of a lot smaller, and it took everything I had not to yank at my cuffs until they snapped. If I so much as broke skin with these cuffs on, I’d poison myself. And without Big Mac and Cali’s help, I’d die a quick and painful death. Probably alone in this basement while everyone else was outside fighting the revenants.

And then Cali would be alone. With Xavier.

That last thought sent a jolt of heated fury through me, and I tugged at the cuffs again.

“Stop that,” a voice called out. “You’ll only hurt yourself.”

Kira stepped out of the shadows of the staircase.

“Shouldn’t you be upstairs fighting?” I asked.

“I came to check on you. I can imagine how hard this must be for you. Plus, you *are* supposed to be guarded.”

“What’s happening out there? Is there any news on the battle?”

She tilted her head to the side, considering my question. “Some revenants have crossed the trenches. It feels like there’s a whole wall of them out there, but so far none of them have been able to make it to the house.”

I swallowed roughly. “And Cali?”

Kira bit her lip, like she knew that I wasn’t going to like her answer. “She’s outside too.”

I blinked. “She’s *what*?”

*Why the hell would Xavier allow her to be outside right now?*

Oh, I was gonna fucking *end* him if any of those monsters touched even a hair on her head. I needed to get out of here, to make sure she was okay. I knew all too well the kinds of stupid risks Cali was willing to take to protect the people she cared about.

And yeah, she had Fae magic, but would that be enough to keep her safe? She was hardly a trained warrior.

I sighed and met Kira’s eyes. “Listen, I know we don’t know each other very well, but I need you to break this spell and let me out. I can’t just sit down here while everyone I care about is up there fighting for their lives.”

She winced and shook her head. “I’m sorry, but Big Mac and Xavier both made it clear that I’m not allowed to help you. And being a witch in a house full of werewolves, I’m not inclined to disobey them.”

“But—”

“I know that werewolves will do anything for their pack, and I also know how you feel about Cali,” she continued, “so please know that I’m not refusing you lightly. But you and I both know that the best thing you can do right now is stay put.”

“Like hell it is,” I growled.

“I promise to keep you updated about Cali and the pack, but that’s the best I can do.” Kira offered me an apologetic smile and scurried back up the stairs.

*Fucking witches. Why the hell did Xavier ever bring this one home?*

The worst part was, I knew she was right. Right now, I was just as likely to hurt the people I cared about as I was to help them. Staying put *was* the best thing for me right now—the best thing for everyone. It had been *my* idea.

But it still felt so, so wrong. Standing back while a battle was being fought wasn’t like me, and the Alpha in me was roaring to get out and *do* something.

Gradually, the sounds of the battle began to reach me, softly at first, then growing louder—shouting, screams, howls, and snarls.

*Is Big Mac’s spell wearing off?*

I looked toward the barrier and then turned away, clapping my hands over my ears. *Stay out of it, Greyson. You’ll hurt someone. Like you almost hurt Cali. Don’t give in.*

And then I heard a piercing scream that went straight to my heart.

*Cali!*

I mind linked with her. *Love, are you okay? What’s happening. I’m coming for you!*

Again, there was no response. Now, I had a sinking feeling, and I knew why. I tugged at the cuffs, which were beginning to chafe my skin. If the silver did poison me, would I have enough time to get upstairs and help Cali before I succumbed to the poison?

Her scream rent the air a second time, so loud it sounded like she was right here in the room with me.

“Xavier!” I bellowed. “Let me out of this fucking cage!”

“*Stop*.”

I froze, and horror slipped down my spine. I knew that voice. That cloying, childish voice.

I spun to face the doorway.

Shaine stood on the other side.

*What the fuck? How had he gotten here?*

The boy pressed his palm against the barrier, first meeting the same resistance I had. And then, with a furrowed expression, he pressed harder, and a ripple shuddered through the barrier. Suddenly, I could see where the magic ended, could see the barrier stretching, and finally breaking as Shaine stepped into the room.

He smiled. “I’ve come to help you escape, Daddy.”

**Episode 1810**

CHARLIE

Well, this was either the bravest or the stupidest thing I’d ever done.

I was standing, buck-ass naked, in front of my teachers at hunter camp after having just shifted from my wolf form into my human form. They’d seen everything now. There was no way they didn’t know the truth about me.

But I’d give up my most dangerous secret a thousand times before I let them hurt Violet.

“I… I can explain,” I stammered, holding my hands up in front of me to show I wasn’t a threat. “Just… please don’t hurt Daisy.”

Sergeant Pepperdine stalked toward me, his nostrils flaring with anger. “What in the Sam Hill is going on here?”

Romilly rushed forward, placing herself between me and the raging Pepperdine. “It’s not what you think—”

The sergeant brushed past her as quickly and efficiently as if she’d never been there in the first place. “Enough, Romilly. Are you siding with the enemy now? What’s gotten into you?”

Her shoulders slumped. The question seemed rhetorical, but I still couldn’t help responding.

“We’re not your enemy,” I said. “Daisy and I are here to help.

Maybe it was a little silly, when Violet and I were as exposed as we’d ever be to these hunters, to keep using her cover name. But if she was outed, and I was outed, then it seemed like the very least I could do was not completely blow her cover. Any small measure of protection was better than nothing at all, right?

“You lying beast,” Pepperdine growled.

Romilly caught Pepperdine’s shoulder and tried to turn him away from me. The man wouldn’t be moved, so she strode forward to stand at his side, closer to me but no longer blocking me. I couldn’t decide if that was a bad thing or not.

“He’s not lying,” Romilly said loudly, so everyone clustered around to witness this debacle could hear her. “I asked them to help us.”

The sergeant’s jaw dropped, and his face rapidly moved through several shades of red. “I don’t know if you’ve simply lost your mind, or what else could account for this unacceptable change of allegiance, but *never* in the history of this camp have hunters worked with werewolves. Not once. And I’ll be damned if I’m going to allow it to happen now. Not on my watch!” He turned away from Romilly and raised his voice, seemingly to counter her earlier statement. “Werewolves are the enemy! Always have been.” Then he turned back to her and lowered his voice as he brandished a silver knife. “Now, get out of my way. I’m going to take care of these supernatural spies once and for all.”

I swallowed roughly and braced myself to shift. I didn’t want to fight Pepperdine, or anyone else at this camp, but I would if I needed to. I wasn’t going to let anyone hurt Violet.

As Pepperdine strode forward, eyeing me with significantly less respect and dignity now that he knew I wasn’t human, my mother rushed up and grabbed his arm.

“Stop,” she said. “Charlie is my son, *and* he’s a werewolf.” Her throat worked silently for a moment, and I knew how hard it was for her to admit this out loud. This was her secret shame, all her hopes and dreams for me crumbling to dust right in front of her. But she cleared her throat and continued. “But that doesn’t mean he’s the enemy, either. Think of how many campers Charlie has protected. He’s not here to hurt anyone.”

Something in my chest twinged. This was probably the closest thing to true acceptance I would ever get from either of my parents. It was nowhere near what I’d been hoping for, but it was so much more than I’d feared.

Pepperdine shrugged her off. “I can only imagine how difficult it must be for you, especially to live with this knowledge. To accept that your son has become a monster. But it doesn’t make any difference. The wolves must be killed.”

Then my mother *shoved* Pepperdine back so hard, he stumbled and dropped the knife. While he was down, she picked up the knife and stood in front of me, just like Romilly had. “I swear to god, if you harm a single hair on my son’s head, I will gut you and not feel an ounce of remorse.”

My jaw dropped. *Holy shit! Is my mom finally accepting me?*

Tiny bits of relief shot through all my worry and dread. At least Violet and I weren’t alone in this. And hey, it was kind of nice to be on the safe side of my mom’s death threats for once.

*Wow, that was a dark thought. If we make it through this, I should probably talk to my parents a bit more about all of this…*

“Iris, *stand down*,” Pepperdine snapped as he got to his feet.

“You stand down,” she countered.

He rushed forward to try to push her aside, and my mom threw back her fist, and all hell broke loose.

Pepperdine’s nose made a satisfying *crunch* as my mom’s fist plowed into it.

“*Hey!*” he spluttered around the blood gushing from his nose. He tackled her to the ground, and then they were in the middle of a full-on fight.

Romilly rushed forward. “Enough, you two. We don’t to have fight!”

Pepperdine responded with a punch to my mom’s stomach that made her groan. My vision went red, and I stepped forward with a growl, but my mom was quick on her feet, and she managed to scramble onto Pepperdine’s back and lock an arm around his neck.

To her credit, Romilly didn’t back down either. I tried to step in, to help separate my mom from Pepperdine before he hurt her, but my mom shoved me back.

“Stay away from him, Charlie!” she snapped.

I turned to look at the rest of the hunter instructors. “Someone do something!” I called to them.

But they were all like deer caught in headlights. Their gazes flicked from me, to Violet, to my mom and Pepperdine. Nobody moved.

“Charlie, help me,” Romilly snapped. “Since nobody else seems inclined to step up.”

Together, we managed to pull Pepperdine and my mother apart. His nose was still bleeding profusely, and his face was swollen and purple beneath his eyes. My mom was looking a little better, but not much. Her shirt was torn, and a bruise was rising on her cheekbone.

Pepperdine panted as Romilly held him back. “You have to remember,” she said, “the real enemy is out there—the revenants, the vampires. Charlie isn’t who you should be worrying about right now.

He scoffed. “I can’t believe you’re buying into this far-fetched story! You and Iris are clearly traitors if you believe in defending werewolves! Hell, maybe Iris is a werewolf too? Are you a dirty beast as well, Romilly?” He flashed my mom and me a deranged-looking grin and then glanced around at the rest of the instructors. “Who else? Who else among you are traitors to this camp and everything we stand for?”

The others glanced at each other nervously. I couldn’t tell if they were uneasy with the idea that more people in their midst might be werewolves, or if they were simply creeped out by Pepperdine going off the rails.

I looked over at Violet and mind linked. *Don’t worry. I’ll get you out of this. I promise*.

I just wished I knew how.

*Should I shift and lead them away from Violet?* I wondered. *Or maybe I should just take her with me. But could I outrun the hunters while carrying her?*

Suddenly one of the hunters let out an earsplitting shriek. “Vampires!”

Pepperdine spun around and shouted, “Hunters! Grab your weapons! They’ve broken the south end!”

I spun around as a crowd of vampire revenants came charging out of the woods, and all hell broke loose for a second time as all the hunters broke away from the group and started fighting the revenants. For the moment, Violet and I seemed to have been deemed the lesser evil.

The fighting around me turned into a life-or-death struggle, with the instructors and the more experienced campers fighting the super-powered revenant vampires. I couldn’t stop worrying about Violet. I tried to fight my way over to her.

*Don’t worry, Violet! I’m coming to protect you!*

Some of the less experienced campers from the safe house came rushing in to join the fray—Chad, Seth, Sophie, Aisha, and Reggie among them—throwing themselves at the vampire revenants with their stakes ready.

I only partially shifted, turning my hands into deadly, clawed paws to use as weapons. I didn’t dare fully shift with so many trigger-happy hunters around.

A revenant leapt toward Violet, and I intercepted him just in time. I slammed him into the snow and then used my claws to tear his head off. I looked up just in time to see a revenant slamming Pepperdine into a tree. The man crumpled to the ground, completely vulnerable to the monster.

I knew what I had to do. I rushed over and pounced on the revenant, tearing its head off before it hit the ground.

Pepperdine and I locked eyes for a beat.

“I’m on your side,” I reminded him.

Then I shoved him off to rejoin the fight. Nearby, Sophie was locked in a struggle with a vampire revenant. When it saw me coming, it abruptly changed direction, perhaps thinking I would be easier prey.

It was dead wrong.

“Charlie, catch!” Sophie threw a stake toward me, and I drove it through the vampire’s chest right before it would have slammed into me. Then I tore its head off and let it fall to the ground in a heap.

I tossed back the stake. “Thanks for the assist.”

Sophie smirked slightly before taking off to fight another revenant. Then I turned to check on Violet, and my blood ran cold.

She was gone.

**Episode 1811**

“Xavier, stop!” I screamed as he slammed into Lola. What was going on? Was he possessed too? Or did he think that Lola was somehow threatening me? She *did* look kind of scary when she was all vamped out like this.

But still, my mate and my best friend couldn’t fight—no matter how things ended up, we’d all lose.

I was ready to charge in again—shoulder-slam style—but before I could, Xavier used Lola’s body as a springboard to launch himself at the revenant that was creeping up behind her.

*Oh my god. He’s saving her! Thank god.*

Except now I was worried about Xavier. Was he hurt from when I’d blasted him? I couldn’t just let him fight this revenant alone. The monster threw Xavier’s wolf off and sent him rolling through the woods. My vision went red—nobody hurt my mate!

When the revenant charged toward me and Lola, I was ready. I lunged forward to meet it halfway, my hands raised.

“Leave us alone!” I shouted as I blasted it back. It smacked into a nearby tree trunk with a sickening *crunch*, and then Xavier was on it. His teeth sank into the revenant’s neck, and he ripped its head off with one jerk of his powerful neck. Some of the blood and slime splattered outward and landed on Lola.

“Ew… Xavier! Keep your mess to yourself, will you?” She wiped a glob of slime from her cheek and grimaced.

*What a baby. She didn’t get anywhere near as drenched as I did.*

With the revenant dispatched, Xavier shifted back to his human form and stalked toward me. I was so relieved to see him, alive and mostly unharmed and so close that I could touch him, that I *did* rush forward to hug him. “Oh, thank god—”

He held his hands up at the last second to keep me at bay. “What the hell are you doing out here, Cali? You’re supposed to be back at the pack house. You weren’t supposed to leave the porch, remember? That was our deal.”

“But—but,” I spluttered. For some reason, it had never occurred to me that he wouldn’t be happy to see me here. I should have known better. “I was worried about you! I saw you fighting that weird revenant, and then I blasted it and you got in the way… I thought I hurt you with my magic. I had to make sure you were okay.”

Xavier’s face softened, and his hands dropped to his sides. “You shouldn’t worry about me. I can handle these things. They’re strong little shits, but I can handle them.” He snaked out a hand and gently pulled me forward and into his arms. “But what I can’t handle is the idea of losing you. Don’t you understand that?”

I breathed in his scent, and some of the dread I’d been feeling almost melted away. “I feel the same way about you.”

“Hey, lovebirds, this is really cute, but we’re still in the middle of a battlefield,” Lola reminded us.

Oh. Right. Shit.

Xavier backed up a bit to put some space between us. “I appreciate you worrying about me, but I want you to go back to the pack house, okay? There are still a whole lot of revenants out here. I want you back on that porch, or, better yet, inside the house.”

Ugh. His protectiveness was sweet, but by now it felt more than a little old. “Where did the revenant go? The one in the cloak? Did you kill it?”

He shook his head. “I would have, but after your blast wounded it, I lost track of it in all the chaos. I’m pretty sure it was York.”

My jaw dropped. “Seriously? Will he not die?”

Lola glanced back the way we’d just come. “Can we continue this conversation back at the pack house? I don’t like the idea of Jay fighting when I’m not around to help.”

“Yeah, let’s go back together,” Xavier said.

He led Lola and me back to the house, careful to keep us away from the brunt of the fighting, and even taking us slightly out of the way to avoid groups of revenants. Between him and Lola, we smelled or heard any revenants long before we ever came across them.

We reached the trench sooner than I would have thought possible. A chill swept down my spine at the thought of crossing that mass of writhing bodies again. I couldn’t do it. Once had been more than traumatic enough. If another dying revenant latched onto me, I was absolutely going to lose my mind.

“Isn’t there some other way into the house?” I asked

My fear and disgust must have been written all over my face, because Xavier rubbed the back of my hand with his thumb. “I can shift and carry you across. But either way, you’re going back to the house—it’s too dangerous for you out here.”

“You just admitted that my Fae magic helped you fight York. We’re fighting for our lives here. Are you really going to sideline me when you know I can help?”

Before he could reply, a panicked yell ripped through the air.

“That’s Jay!” Lola gasped out. “I’m heading back. I’ll see you two back at the ranch.”

She took a flying leap over the trench—the exact kind of graceful, powerful, superhero-style leap I’d been trying to pull off myself. When her feet hit the ground on the opposite side, she took off at a sprint to regroup with her mate.

“Come on,” Xavier said. “I’m taking you back to the house.”

He shifted and then sank down low on his front legs to allow me to climb onto his back, but I didn’t move. He wasn’t just going to steamroll me. Not this time.

Still in his wolf form, Xavier let out an annoyed chuff.

I shook my head. “No. I’m not going with you. Not until we talk about this and you hear me out.”

With a long-suffering sigh, Xavier shifted back. “Cali, come on—”

I cut him off. “Why can’t you see how useful I could be? I may not be a werewolf, or an experienced fighter, but I’m strong. And it’s going to take everyone we have to win this fight.”

“You won’t be useful if you get hurt. And it’s not just about you being helpful. There’s more to it than that.”

“What do you mean?”

“The truth is, having you out here is dangerous for me because all I can do is worry about you. If you stay back at the house, then I can focus on the fight and on defending the pack, like I should. I’m the Alpha, Cali. I can’t afford to worry about you every moment of this battle.”

I shrugged. “That sounds like a personal problem.” I tried not to think about the fact that the only reason I’d crossed the trench in the first place had been to make sure Xavier was okay. We were both compromised here.

“Hey!”

We turned to see Big Mac approaching. *Great timing. At least now he can’t take me back over the trench if he’s got to deal with Big Mac.*

“My tracking spell is in place. If we follow it now, it will lead us to whoever stole the orb,” she said.

Xavier scoffed. “Who cares about that? We need to regroup at the pack house, beat these revenants, and be done with it. There’s no time to go on a wild goose chase for something that will probably reveal itself on its own.”

“Except we’d be on the offensive against whoever has betrayed us to Letifer,” Big Mac reminded him. “Seems like a pretty important detail, don’t you think?”

As Xavier and the witch kept arguing, I noticed a wisp hovering by the tree line.

I pointed at the wisp. “Guys—”

“I’m the Alpha here,” Xavier snapped at Big Mac. “And I’m telling you to drop this.

They weren’t listening to me. With one more glance toward them, I stepped away and followed the wisp.

*Where could it be leading me? Is it taking me to York?*

I paused and looked back. It seemed irresponsible, even for me, to keep following. But Big Mac and Xavier were still arguing about what to do next. Even if I managed to interrupt them, that didn’t mean either one of them would want to follow the wisp. Big Mac would probably be fixated on her own spellwork, and Xavier would still want to haul me back to the pack house.

*Maybe if I follow it a little farther, I’ll be able to prove to both Big Mac and Xavier that I’m useful.*

I hurried to catch up with the wisp as it darted into the trees. Just as I moved into the forest, a revenant lurched out at me. With a small scream and a wave of my hands, I blasted it back. It didn’t get back up.

*Okay, maybe I should head back to Xavier…*

I turned around and gasped.

The way back was blocked by even more revenants.

“Back off!” I raised my hands up. “Don’t come any closer.”

They didn’t listen. I didn’t even know if they could hear me anyway. It seemed like Letifer’s entire army was lining up to surround me.

*So this is how I die…*

Suddenly, a huge wolf leaped in front of me and started tearing into the revenants. I wanted to step in and help, but I was a bit gun shy after nearly blasting Xavier. The wolf ripped a revenant’s head off and dropped it in front of me. Our eyes met for a single moment.

*Wait, is that* Ava*? Is Ava actually helping me?*

She burst into movement again, ripping through the line of revenants with a violent sort of grace. I’d never seen anything so terrible and so beautiful in my entire life.

The wisp appeared again. I glanced at Ava and called out, “Thank you!” before racing after it.

I needed to be more careful this time. The woods were teeming with revenants, and the wisp didn’t seem to care too much about that. I followed it deeper and deeper into the woods, skirting revenants and blasting the ones I couldn’t avoid, until we reached the foot of a small incline. Then the wisp flashed and disappeared.

I looked around. *Why did it lead me here?* There was nothing here but trees.

Somewhere far behind me, Ava’s howl echoed through the woods.

And then a lone figure appeared at the top of the rise.

My jaw dropped. “*Artemis?*”

**Episode 1812**

XAVIER

God, this witch was a pain in the ass. We were ass to ankles with bloodthirsty revenants, and she was choosing *now* to send us on a wild goose chase after the orb?

“We need to figure out who the mole is!” Big Mac snapped. “If you’re truly worried about the safety of the pack, then this is the bigger concern. The revenants aren’t going to stop coming, but we might be able to actually change things in our favor if we can oust whoever has been sabotaging us.”

Honestly, right at this moment, I couldn’t for the life of me remember why we kept these witches around. They didn’t care about anything except their own agendas—and even then, they were nothing but trouble.

“Enough,” I snapped. “I’m done arguing with you. I’m the Alpha now. If you truly want to be a member of this pack, you need to respect my position and listen to what I say.”

The witch dared to roll her eyes at me. “Yes, Xavier, you’re the big man on campus. I get it. But this problem isn’t going away. We need to follow the tracking spell *first* and deal with the traitor. Maybe they’ll tell us something that will help with this uphill battle we keep fighting against the revenants.”

“You just said the revenants won’t stop coming—so by that logic, what? We should just give up on protecting the pack house and let Letifer take what’s ours?”

“I understand your desire to protect the pack—believe me, I do.” Big Mac’s voice softened, just slightly. “But no matter how many revenants we kill, the pack house won’t be safe until we find out who’s betraying us. Now, I’m going to keep using the tracking spell. Will you come with me, or not?”

I sighed and let out a growl. “Cali, let’s go back—”

I stopped. Cali was no longer off to my right. She was gone.

I spun around in a circle, scanning the edge of the forest and the yard for my mate. “Where the hell did she go now?” Dread coiled tight in my belly, a knot so large and drawn so tight, suddenly I could barely breathe around it. I took a deep breath and tried to push away that dread and panic that never failed to make me lose my common sense.

*Pull it together, Xavier. The pack needs you. Cali needs you.*

I looked around again with a renewed sense of purpose. Cali was gone. The only question was: had she wandered off again, or had someone or something taken her?

Suddenly, a group of revenants moved in on us. And even though I was tired and covered in revenant slime and blood and god only knew what else, these bastards suddenly seemed like more of an inconvenience than anything else. A roadblock standing between me and my mate.

Which didn’t bode well for the revenants.

I shifted and threw myself at them, channeling all my panic and fury into ripping them apart while Big Mac stood off to the side and blasted them with her magic.

But was this exactly what I’d been telling Cali I was worried would happen? Was I now so worried about her safety that I wasn’t focused enough on the pack? Was I not doing everything I should to protect the pack? To be the Alpha I’d told them I was?

I didn’t like the answer my gut gave me. Because the truth was, right now, I didn’t care about the pack at all. Not like I cared about getting Cali back—which only pissed me off more.

As it turned out, I didn’t need the backup. I had more than enough rage to take out the whole group of revenants.

I ripped the head off one of the stragglers and then rushed over to help Big Mac, who was taking down the last one on her own.

“Watch out!” she yelled to me as she let another spell fly toward the revenant. The magic hit the revenant straight on—and sliced him right down the middle.

*Hmm. Nice touch.*

Rishika rushed in as we cleared out the last of the revenants, her face bloodied from battle. I shifted back so Big Mac could hear whatever Rishika was obviously here to report.

“What are you doing here?” I snapped. “Why aren’t you defending the house?”

She shifted back. “Ravi’s defending the house—Kira sent me to deliver a message. Greyson’s gone.”

“He’s *what*?”

“Kira went to check on him, and he was gone. He’s not in the basement or in the house, as far as any of us can tell.”

“How did he get out of those cuffs without poisoning himself? Out of the *magic barrier*?”

Rishika shrugged. “According to Kira, there’s no signs of struggle or anything down there. He’s just… gone.”

Fuck. This was the absolute last thing I needed. Had someone managed to let Greyson out? Or had my clever brother found some way to escape? Either way, it was just one more complication. And if Greyson was hoping to fight the revenants, I didn’t want him running across Cali’s path out here either. He would absolutely lose what was left of his shit if he found out I’d lost her.

Big Mac’s brows rose. “He shouldn’t have been able to escape my spell. I made sure of that this time.”

“Yeah, well, your magic clearly sucks,” I growled.

“Watch it,” she snarled. “I have a lot of spells that will prove otherwise.”

“Fine. If your magic’s so good, then how did he break through it?”

She sighed. “I don’t know.

This was just getting better and better. Sure, I liked keeping Greyson locked up downstairs for my own personal, selfish reasons, but I also didn’t want my brother out here fighting when he was clearly fucked up and not fully able to defend himself.

“God dammit, Greyson.” I felt like I was being pulled in four different directions. I could try to find Greyson and put him back downstairs before he hurt someone; I could follow Big Mac to find the orb thief; I could stick around and protect the pack as Alpha; or I could go after Cali and bring her home.

I couldn’t do it all. Fuck Big Mac’s plan, and fuck Greyson. Right now I needed to find Cali. And as soon as I did, I needed to stash her somewhere safe and focus on the pack.

Wind rustled through the trees, and I got a whiff of Cali’s scent from the tree line several feet away. “I’ve got Cali’s scent. She’s missing, and we need to bring her back before we do anything else.”

The raw edges of my rage and terror must have shown on my face because, surprisingly, Big Mac and Rishika didn’t try to argue with me. Instead, they followed as I dashed toward the tree line and into the forest.

We’d barely made it half a mile into the woods when I stopped suddenly.

There was a wolf up ahead. Ava. But what the hell was she doing here?

My ex-mate shifted back to her human form when she reached us. She was absolutely covered in blood. Was that… Was that Cali’s blood? Had Ava hurt her?

I grabbed her by the shoulders. “What did you do? Where’s Cali?”

Ava shoved me off with a hiss. “I just saved her from a bunch of revenants!”

I blinked, only just holding back the protective instinct to tear apart the wolf in front of me. “Then *where is she*? Did you save her, or did you kill her?”

“She ran off.” Ava pointed behind her. “Somewhere in that direction. It seemed like she knew where she was going.”

My eyes narrowed. “If something’s happened to her—” A group of revenants crashed through the woods, along with the shrouded figure of York. I let out a furious growl. “I don’t have time for this bullshit!”

I shifted and lunged straight for York. That bastard was like a cat with nine lives, and he just wouldn’t stay dead. That was going to change right here, right now. I’d rip each life out of him myself.

Ava and Rishika jumped into the battle, and Ava mind linked with me.

*Go look for Cali*, she said. *We can handle things here.*

Was Ava seriously being nice about Cali right now? I didn’t trust it one bit, but Big Mac was already plowing through the forest and leaving the group of revenants to Ava and Rishika. Shit, this was all moving too fast for me.

*Finish these bastards off, and then get back to the pack house right away*, I ordered both women before dashing off after Big Mac.

When I reached her, I shifted back to human. “Why did you just bail like that?”

“I’ve picked up the tracking spell again,” she said. “We’re getting close to the thief.”

I scoffed. Of course she didn’t care about Cali. All she cared about was finding whoever had taken that orb. At least I could still smell Cali’s scent, so we hadn’t ventured off the path *I* needed to be on. There was someone else mixed in with Cali’s scent. Someone I didn’t recognize. But at least I knew Cali was still alive.

We broke through the tree line and came to a crest, where we found Cali with Artemis. I took a step forward, ready to gather my mate in my arms, but then Big Mac pulled me back.

“Be careful,” she whispered. “Artemis has the orb.”

I blinked. Why would *Artemis* take the *orb*?

“Cali!” I called. “Get away from her.”

“Why?” she asked

“Because Artemis has the orb!”

Cali turned to her sister, confusion etched into her expression. “Is that true? Why would you have it?”

Artemis laughed, and I rushed forward to pull Cali back. She jerked out of my grip.

“Artemis, what’s wrong?” she asked.

Then Artemis’s smile faded. “Artemis isn’t here.”

**Episode 1813**

GREYSON

Somehow, I was in the woods, far from the pack house.

*How… How the hell did I get here?*

My mind felt like it was moving through sticky, thick glue, and tracing back the sequence of events that had brought me here felt next to impossible. My eyes clenched shut on the image of the dark, quiet forest.

*Focus, Greyson. What happened to you?*

My memory was beyond fuzzy, beyond mired in glue like the rest of my mind, but bit by tiny bit, pieces and images slipped through. A slow drip that revealed my encounter in the basement with Shaine.

*That freaking creepy kid.*

I’d thought he was a ghost, or a vision, or something ephemeral that existed only in my mind. Something that couldn’t affect the physical world.

I’d been wrong.

Shaine had broken through the powerful magic of Big Mac’s barrier, and then… And then he’d approached me, that sweet, creepy-ass smile on his face.

“I’ve come to help you escape, Daddy,” he’d said, and then he’d snapped my silver shackles with the smallest brush of his tiny fingers.

The *thunk* they’d made when they hit the floor was one of the more visceral parts of my memories. And then Shaine—the ghostly apparition of the son I’d *never* asked for, and who never got less chilling to be around—had taken my large hand in his small one and led me back across the threshold. I hadn’t spoken. I hadn’t argued. I hadn’t screamed or laughed or demanded to know what the fuck was going on.

I’d just… gone with him.

My memories ended with us walking through Big Mac’s barrier.

And then I’d woken up here.

How had I gotten here? Had I walked all this way with Shaine leading me? Through the battle raging outside the pack house? Wouldn’t one of the pack members have seen me and wondered what was going on? And why hadn’t I been torn to pieces by the revenants?

My mind spun with all the unanswered questions. And where the hell had Shaine gone? Or… was all of this just another dream? Had Shaine ever really been at my side to begin with?

I shook myself and pulled in a deep breath.

*Pull it together, you idiot. You’re clearly in the woods, far from the pack house. Let’s assume that is a real fact and start there—and worry less about how you got here and more about what you’re going to do next.*

The woods around me were silent, so I had to be pretty damn far from the battle. But how far? And how long would it take me to make it back? The only upside to waking up here in the woods was that now, I could help with the battle.

Now, I could protect Cali.

Was she still at the house? I had to assume so. The one thing Xavier and I agreed on was keeping Cali safe, and even if he was allowing her to join the fight, I couldn’t see him letting her run out onto the field.

*Maybe if I shift, I can make it back in time to help… if I haven’t lost too much time already—*

Soft whispers sounded nearby, and I froze. From my place in the forest, I couldn’t quite make out who was speaking, or what they were saying, but one thing was certain.

I wasn’t alone in the woods anymore.

Slowly, silently, I crept forward through the forest until I came across a shimmering pool shrouded in mist. My gaze slipped over the pool, and I had the strangest feeling of déjà vu. Like I knew this place, even though I’d never been here before.

Voices floated in and out through the mist.

“Who’s there?” I called. “Cali? Xavier?”

Immediately, the whispers stopped.

I stepped closer to the pool. If I could just see through this mist, I might be able to figure out who the voices belonged to—and whether they were friends or foes. Something just wasn’t right about this. I shouldn’t be here, not when the pack was fighting for their lives, not when I was so out of control that I could attack them just as soon as help them.

Shit, I was so far gone that I’d ended up in the woods, miles away from the pack house, with no memory of how I’d gotten here. I needed to get back to the house and back to that basement. Big Mac and Xavier could lock me up again, and then everyone would be safe.

I turned to leave—only to come face to face with Shaine.

He grinned up at me. “Goodnight, Daddy.”

And then, with a strength that belied his childlike appearance, he shoved me backward into the pool.

Icy cold water rushed in around and above me, completely engulfing me. I kicked and splashed to right myself in the water, but it felt as if some inescapable force was dragging me under. No matter how hard I kicked, or how much my powerful arms moved through the water, I could barely keep my head above the surface long enough to take a breath.

One gulp of air was all I got before I was completely submerged.

*What the hell is going on? I’m stronger than a kid! Stronger than the gravity in some pool in the woods.*

I tried to shift, thinking that would help me fight against whatever was pulling me under, but nothing happened. I was stuck in my human form, as if something had separated me from my wolf.

I fought and fought, my lungs burning, in the murky blackness of the pool. And then the darkness slowly receded and I found myself floating—not fighting—through a misty dream world, populated by people and memories from my past.

I wasn’t drowning. Not anymore. I felt… at home?

Shaine rushed up to me and threw his arms around me. It didn’t even occur to me to be wary of the boy, despite everything. “I’m glad you’re here, Daddy. Would you like to meet my friends?”

Before I could respond, the little boy beckoned someone closer, and Maren approached us. She hugged me tightly and gave me a deep kiss. This, I knew, was wrong somehow. I just didn’t know why.

I tried to resist her embrace, but I couldn’t. Something kept my arms locked around her body and my mouth moving compliantly with hers.

Then she broke away from my lips and smiled. “It’s okay. You don’t have to be afraid.”

My mother rushed in, bearing two mugs. “Here. Have a white chocolate mocha. It’ll make you feel so much better.”

In the background of this eerily domestic scene, I thought I heard a familiar voice calling my name. I couldn’t quite make out who it belonged to. I looked around, waiting for someone else from my life to pop up.

Then my mother pressed the mug against my hands. Her eyes flashed orange. “Drink up, son. Before it gets cold.”

The familiar voice echoed louder. “Greyson, you need to leave. Get out.”

Recognition nearly plowed me over. “Joss? Is that you?”

Then Cali appeared and took my hand. Her fingers were every bit as icy as the pool had felt when I’d fallen in.

Cali opened her mouth to speak and let out a horrible, shuddering gasp. “I can’t,” she wheezed. “I can’t…”

She couldn’t breathe! She was dying, her face turning a startling shade of blue with every passing second.

I screamed her name, but no sound came out. My mate slipped from my grasp and slowly sank into the darkness.

*No!*

I reached out for Cali, desperate to save her, but once again my body was held back by an unseen force. Joss’s voice kept echoing, getting louder and louder until she appeared before me, a shining beacon in the dark.

“Don’t you dare let them beat you, Greyson,” she said. “Fight this. Be the Alpha I know you are.”

I tried to speak, tried tell her that I needed to save Cali, but my mouth filled with water.

Oh god. I was drowning.

My vision began to tunnel as I choked for air.

“You can only save Cali if you save yourself first,” Joss said. “So save yourself. *Fight*.”

My oxygen-deprived body jerked into action, and I used every ounce of my strength to pull myself to the surface. The cool rush of oxygen when my head broke through the water was the sweetest thing I’d ever tasted.

Gulping down air like a fish on dry land, I crawled to the edge of the pool, then coughed up the water in my lungs. Slowly, painfully, I pulled myself onto my knees, and a surge of energy zinged through my body.

I began to move like a puppet on strings. I had no control over what my body did. All I could do was watch as I moved.

I felt my wolf come back to me, but I still couldn’t shift—something was stopping me. My body began to walk away from the pool and into the woods. I tried to dig my heels in, to get my legs to stop, but nothing I did so much as slowed my steps.

Up ahead, my mother, Sage, and Zainab burst through the tree line.

*We’ve been looking everywhere for you*, my mother said through mind link.

I opened my mouth, ready to tell them to stay away, but my vocal cords seized up. I couldn’t speak, couldn’t warn them.

And then, suddenly, as they drew closer, I was consumed by a burning hatred for every last one of them.

**Episode 1814**

VIOLET

This situation couldn’t have gotten worse.

My broken leg ached with every step as I was pulled forward by the rope wrapped around my neck. I desperately tried to reach out to Charlie through mind link—I could’ve sworn I could hear the sounds of the battle being fought between the revenants and the campers, so we couldn’t be that far apart, could we?—but no matter how hard I tried to reach out to him, no matter how many times I cried out for help, he never answered.

He couldn’t hear me. Maybe we were too far apart after all.

My captor slapped the rope against my shoulder. “Keep up!”

I growled up at Zachery, my hackles raised. I tried to expose each and every one of my teeth, a warning that he’d better stop messing with me. He just huffed and tugged even harder on the rope twined around my neck, and I had to scurry even faster to give the rope some slack. My leg ached terribly with every hurried step.

When he’d first tried to abduct me, I’d just gone limp, but then I’d learned the hard way that he had no problem just choking me. Much as I hated being dragged along like some kind of monster, I knew I couldn’t give Zachery any reason to just kill me. He was a strong hunter with an entire camp’s worth of backup, and even though I was a werewolf, I was tired and wounded, and the only backup I had here was Charlie, whose hands were more than full right now.

I still couldn’t believe he’d gotten the jump on me, to be honest. I’d just been so distracted by the tension unfolding between Pepperdine and Charlie and his mom, and then when the revenants had attacked, we’d all been forced to rush to defend ourselves… I’d never seen Zachery coming—not until the rope was already wrapped tight around my throat and he’d dragged me halfway into the cover of the woods.

I limped after Zachery, trying desperately to find a balance that allowed me to go slowly enough to keep as much weight off my leg as possible *without* getting choked out by the rope. Even now, my leg was still more broken than healed. If I’d been able to properly rest it, I might have actually been able to use it without blinding pain, but since Zachery seemed determined to drag me along, I was putting more and more pressure on the bone while it tried to knit itself together. It’d take forever to heal, assuming it even healed properly at all.

A particularly sharp burst of pain exploded up my leg, and I let out a whine. Zachery, instead of slowing, just glanced back with a smirk and continued on without missing a beat.

God, I hated him so much right now. *I should just shift and show him that I’m Daisy. He might stop this. He might…*

My shoulders slumped.

*Or he might take advantage of my more vulnerable form and try to kill me even faster.*

I never would have guessed that Zachery was capable of so much ill will when I’d first met him. But now I didn’t even consider him trustworthy when we were interacting as fellow campers—to assume he *wouldn’t* respond poorly to finding out I was the girl he creepily liked seemed beyond naïve.

The only thing Zachery cared about was himself, and getting what he wanted. And me being a werewolf was definitely *not* what he wanted. There was no telling what he’d do to me if I outed myself and made this even worse.

Even as I tried to figure out an escape plan and weighed the likelihood of him trying to kill me, he was muttering to himself.

“Can’t wait to see how the camp will react when I show them I’ve bagged a real-life werewolf… If that doesn’t make Daisy realize how amazing I am—well, obviously she’ll see how amazing I am. She’ll never look at anyone else except for me. I’ll be a hero to her and everyone else at camp, and they’ll forget all about fucking Charlie Kim. Maybe things got away from me back in the tunnel. They didn’t go according to plan. But now…” He tugged on the rope. “Now, there will be no doubt.”

*Oh my god! What is* wrong *with this guy? Who the heck risks getting a bunch of innocent people killed just so they have a chance to prove they’re a hero?*

Zachery was more dangerous than I ever would have given him credit for. I needed to get away from him—fast. Before he did something to make this awful situation even worse.

He glanced back at me, and his brow furrowed. He tugged the rope again. I could feel the worry radiating off of him just beneath that “heroic” veneer. He might’ve been playing the tough guy and taking every possible opportunity to remind me that I was under his control, but I knew better. He had no experience with werewolves. If it hadn’t been for my leg and the need to keep my cover intact in front of a whole camp of hunters, I already would have scared him off.

But now, all I could do was wait and hope my leg healed before this got any worse. If that was even possible at this point.

We reached a fork in the path, and Zachery paused, seemingly unsure of which way to go. He was pulling a compass out of his pocket when a chill crawled down my spine. A new scent slipped through the forest, one I knew all too well.

It was the scent of death. The scent of a vampire.

I jerked on the rope, pulling Zachery to the right. Judging by the putrid smell wafting through the forest, the vampire was somewhere off to the left.

He spun on me with a snarl, his silver-bladed knife in the hand that had been holding the compass. “Behave! Or I’ll use this on you. I’m a hunter, dog. Don’t you forget it.”

Then Zachery, of course, headed left. I dug my heels in, even as a white-hot burst of pain exploded up my broken leg.

*I’m trying to save you, you idiot!*

“I swear to god, I’ll use this!” He flashed the knife again, and I growled.

God, he was such an ass. He might have been a hunter in training, but he’d never been in a real battle. He’d never fought a coven of vampires like Charlie and I had. He hadn’t even graduated from camp yet! And now he dared to threaten me? If my leg hadn’t been in such bad shape, I would’ve been tempted to take off and let the vampires have him.

Zachery braced the rope over his shoulder and started literally dragging me along. I limped along as best I could. The pain in my leg was ever-present, but it slowly seemed to be getting less pronounced. Maybe it was finally healing, despite all the abuse it had received. If I could hold out a little longer, maybe I’d regain enough strength to fight back, or even just outrun him.

Bolstered by the thought of leaving this asshat behind, I limped along a little faster. He wanted to walk straight into a vampire den? Fine. Who was I to stop him?

We plodded along, and the vampire scent grew stronger with each step.

Suddenly, Zachery stopped. “What was that noise?” He turned to look around—and was promptly knocked down by a vampire revenant.

This would have been a beautiful moment of karma, if he hadn’t kept hold of the rope. I was jerked around roughly as Zachery struggled to his feet and scrambled to fight the vampire, the rope wrapped around his wrist. The vampire had him outmatched, and more than once it nearly lodged its fangs in Zachery’s throat.

“Help!” he cried. “Someone help me!” He grappled for his stake, and the vampire knocked it away with barely any effort.

Now faced with a real threat, Zachery’s bravado was fading, and real terror was taking its place. I tested my weight on my leg. It was still sore, but I’d have to deal with it. I couldn’t let Zachery die.

He might’ve been a fucking pain in the ass, but I had the power to help him. And if I didn’t use it, I’d regret it.

I leapt up and slammed into the vampire, dodging its claws and fangs as I sank my teeth into its throat. Its orange eyes flashed before I tore its head off and tossed it into Zachery’s lap.

I stepped away from the body, still favoring my leg. *There. I saved him. Now he’s going to let me go.*

I was turning to leave when Zachery grabbed the rope and jerked me back. He was absolutely *livid*.

“I’m the hero! I don’t need a dirty werewolf to save me!” He pulled the rope so tight I couldn’t breathe and stalked toward me with his silver knife. “The camp will believe I killed the vampire because no one will be around to dispute it. And just think how impressed they’ll be when I show up with a werewolf—dead or alive.”

*Oh my god. He’s going to kill me—after I just saved his life.*

I shifted back to human with a snarl. “Are you *kidding me*?”

**Episode 1815**

AVA

The revenant’s blood was still wet and tacky, matting into my fur as I raced through the woods. God, I hated that smell—a cloying combination of decomposing body and magic. Somehow it was so much worse than the run-of-the-mill vampire stench.

*The least they could do is pick up some tricks from Iñigo and cover up that nasty smell.*

I scanned the tree line for any sign of the revenants—or better yet, their leader. I’d lost York in the chaos of fighting and trees. One second, Rishika and I had teamed up to take him and his ragtag group of revenants down, and the next, there had been beheaded revenants everywhere and York had been nowhere to be found.

He couldn’t have gotten far—at least not so far that I couldn’t still catch up to him if I wanted to—and I knew he had to be the key to the revenant army. I wasn’t sure how, exactly, but my gut was telling me that once I took him down, others would follow.

Which would be amazing. Because, *fuck*, was I tired of fighting off these dead, smelly monsters.

But even as I brainstormed ways to find the lead pain in the ass and take him down, a voice in my head whispered to me that this was the perfect time to try to escape. I skidded to a halt in the middle of the forest, frozen by the realization.

I *could* escape now, if I wanted to.

Everyone else was busy with the battle, and the revenants themselves were focusing on the pack house and the surrounding areas. The pathway for me to get the hell out of here was wide open. I could literally run away *right now* and be safe, far away from the revenants and the Redwood pack and every heartbreaking piece of my past, and no one would be the wiser until I was long gone.

Automatically, I turned down another path, heading toward the town. I made it less than ten steps before coming to another abrupt stop.

*Go on*,that voice of self-preservation whispered. *Get out of here while you can. Save yourself.*

I could do it, too. I could leave the Redwood pack behind, once and for all

Even if that meant leaving Xavier behind with them.

*Xavier…*

I scoffed. I’d just stuck my neck out to save his precious Cali, and still he’d accused me of hurting her. I almost wished I had, so I could have at least gotten some enjoyment out of it, if he was going to accuse me and threaten me anyway.

*I should have just let her die. She was stupid enough to wander off into a forest teeming with revenants. That would have just been natural selection taking its course.*

Not to mention, her death would have solved so many problems.

God, why hadn’t I just let her *die*?

I turned around and looked back down the path to where I’d come from. Where I’d stayed to fight York and the revenants so Xavier and Big Mac could run off and find Cali.

Why had I done that for him? For her?

It wasn’t like me, to help someone without incentive. And there was truly *no* upside to helping either Cali or Xavier. They’d made that more than clear. No, what *was* like me was to make the best decision to ensure my own survival. Xavier and everyone else probably hated my skill for self-preservation, but screw them. None of them knew what it was like to be completely alone in the world. To have no backup, no one but yourself to depend on for your continued survival.

I chose myself because it wasn’t like anyone else wanted to do it for me.

But now… despite all those hard-earned instincts, despite the unerring logic of running *now* and leaving all of this behind, I couldn’t help my own urgent need to stay. To see this through. To help not only Xavier, but the rest of the pack too, because it mattered to him. And Cali mattered to him, probably more than the pack. A hell of a lot more than I ever would.

I hated to accept that, and there was always a chance that things might change in the future, but for now, it was the cold hard truth.

*Since when do I care about any of this?* For so long, I’d thought all my good deeds were acts of self-preservation, small offers of goodwill so Xavier and the pack wouldn’t kick me out of the house while the forest was swarming with revenants.

A breeze blew through the trees, carrying that pungent revenant scent with it. The same one that clung to my body.

And I made a decision. I turned around, heading in the opposite direction of town, chasing down that revenant scent.

*Stupid, stupid Ava. Caring about people isn’t going to keep you alive.*

I shoved that mean little voice down and burst into a clearing. Bingo.

I’d found York.

We circled each other slowly, sizing each other up. Here he was, that pain in the ass that just wouldn’t die, the revenant I was sure was the linchpin to taking down Letifer. And now he was all mine.

I bared my teeth, and York gave me a detached smile.

“Oh, Ava…” he crooned. “So lost. So lonely. So desperate for love. You’ll never be accepted by the pack. You don’t belong. You’re a freak, just like me. Fight me now, and you’ll die alongside the rest of the pack. But they still won’t see you as one of them. After everything you’ve done, you will always be an outsider. You should join me, join Letifer. It’s the only way you’ll survive.”

I blinked, and my steps stuttered a bit. How the hell did he know all that? Those were my deepest fears and darkest insecurities. The nagging sense that I didn’t belong, that I never *would* belong, because I was supposed to be dead. Because I’d been replaced. Because Xavier would never love me and my pack was gone and my brother was dead and—

*Enough! Don’t let him get to you!*

It shouldn’t have been such a surprise that York or Letifer or whoever was calling the shots knew all this about me. Who knew what Letifer was truly capable of? Getting inside my head was probably child’s play for someone like him.

“Ava…” York drawled my name, his voice caressing each syllable in a way that made my hair stand on end. “You know I’m right. You of all people know about that never-ending fight for survival. So stop fighting, and join me. I’ll show you what it means to truly thrive.”

This time, his words didn’t shock me. Because even if he was right about most of it, he was wrong about one very important thing: I wasn’t that person anymore. What York was saying was something I might have done in the past, but not anymore.

I groaned internally. *I can’t believe I actually grew a damn conscience during a battle.*

But there was no use fixating on it now. Not when I had an annoying revenant to kill.

I lunged at York and slammed him into the ground. It was the kind of blow that had incapacitated most of the other revenants, but York didn’t miss a beat before tossing me off him. He was so much stronger than the others. Perhaps because he’d been brought back so many times? Or maybe because he seemed to be Letifer’s lieutenant?

When he came at me so fast that I couldn’t dodge in time and my body went flying into a tree trunk with a *crunch*, I realized I might not make it out of this battle.

*Oh well. It’s not like I’ve got a lot to live for, anyway. If I can take this asshole down with me, it will have been worth it.*

I leapt to my feet, wincing at the telltale ache in my side. He’d broken a rib or two when he’d sent me flying.

“Come on, Ava,” he teased, and I launched myself at him again.

We fought in a flurry of limbs, all snarling teeth and sharp claws. My muscles burned and my ribs ached, but still we moved together, biting, clawing, punching, kicking, snarling, dodging, feinting. Finally, I managed to pin him to the forest floor. He punched my ribs—right where he’d broken them—and fire lit up my insides. But I pushed through the pain and sank my teeth into the soft, sinewy muscles of his neck.

For a single beat, his bright orange eyes widened with something like fear. “Av—”

I ripped his head from his body before he could say my name even one more time.

And then I lay on the ground for a long string of seconds, panting and willing the aches all over my body to heal.

*I’ve got to keep moving. Got to get rid of the body.*

I didn’t have matches to burn him, but I could take his head back to the pack house. They’d know what to do with it there. Carrying it delicately in my mouth, I limped back toward the house.

On my way, I came across a battle between three revenants, Jay, and Ravi. One of the revenants broke off from the pack and headed toward the house, and Jay shot off after it with his axe while Ravi took on the other two alone.

He was good, but he was also wounded. And like the magnanimous and selfless person I was pretending to be, I dropped York’s severed head and jumped in to help. We killed them with a few coordinated maneuvers, tired and wounded as we were. After facing York, regular revenants didn’t seem so bad anymore.

*Thank you*, Ravi said. *You saved my ass.*

*Don’t mention it.*

*We should get back to the house and protect it*,he suggested.

It wasn’t a bad idea, but I couldn’t stop worrying about Xavier. Had he found Cali? Or had the revenants found him instead? Before I could make any moves, Jay’s voice rang out.

“Get back now!”

Mace’s voice thundered through my mind next. *The revenants are attacking the house!*

**Episode 1816**

I couldn’t tear my eyes away from my sister’s face. She looked… *wrong*, somehow. Like a caricature of my sister who had her hair, her eyes, her leanly toned build. But the expression on her face, the glint in her eyes, the tilt of her lips as she’d said, “Artemis isn’t here”… It was all so, so wrong.

*What the hell is happening to Artemis?*

Instinctively, I took a step toward my sister, even though Xavier had already hauled me away from her once.

Big Mac grabbed my arm and pulled me back. “Your sister took the orb,” she repeated.

“N-No,” I whispered. “Artemis… couldn’t betray us.” Instantly, I rejected the idea. No, it wasn’t possible. Artemis wouldn’t do that to us. She was on our side! I shook my head. “I don’t believe it. I can’t believe it!”

Xavier put a comforting hand on my shoulder. “Big Mac tracked her here. Artemis took it. I’m sorry.”

Fury rushed through me. After all the times I’d defended her to Big Mac and the others, all the times I’d helped her through her transition to this world, through losing her magic and being possessed by the orb, and through her ups and downs with Rishika and everything else, she’d turned out to be the traitor all along?

I spun to face her. “How could you do this? I trusted you! I never doubted you. I have never *once* given up on you, despite everything! How dare you give up on yourself!”

My sister’s lips curved up into an elegant, detached smirk. Another expression that didn’t seem to fit on her face. “Oh, your sister has been my puppet for a long while now.”

“My…” I faltered. “My sister? You mean… you’re not Artemis?”

“You’re not a very bright one, are you?”

I ground my teeth together. “Who are you, and what have you done to my sister?”

“She’s still here.” The monster inhabiting my sister tapped a finger against her head, and her smirk widened into a feral grin. “All this time, she’s been locked inside, screaming to be let out, for someone to come and save her. And you know what the best part was? Nobody ever came. No one—not even you, Cali—figured it out.”

Big Mac stepped up, lifting her chin in defiance. “You may have fooled all the others, but I knew.”

I was absolutely crushed. Was this true? Had this monster really been possessing my sister all this time? I thought back over the last few weeks—it wasn’t as if the signs hadn’t been there. All the times Artemis had acted so erratic, so unlike herself. The random disappearances. The evidence had been pointing to something being very, very wrong with my sister for a long time now. I just hadn’t wanted to see it. I hadn’t wanted to believe it, because I’d been so desperate for things to just be easy for once. With all the attention and worry I gave my relationships with Xavier and Greyson, I hadn’t had anything left to spare for the one person who needed me most.

Tears spilled down my cheeks, and my chest hitched on a sob. “Oh my god.”

Xavier gathered me into his arms and mind linked, *Hey, it’s gonna be okay. We’ll figure this out, and we’ll get Artemis back.*

I just shook my head and sobbed into his chest. This was all my fault. I should have paid attention. I should have been there for her. And I should have listened to Big Mac all the times she told me something was wrong. If I’d just been a little less selfish, maybe none of this would have happened. This was my sister! How could I have failed her like this?

“Stand back,” Big Mac warned us as she raised her hands.

“Wait, why?” I pried myself out of Xavier’s arms.

“You know why.”

Oh god, she was going to attack Artemis! I dashed in front of Big Mac, shielding Artemis from the witch’s magic. “No! There must be some way to save her without hurting her!”

The witch sighed. “I’m sorry, Cali, but this is bigger than just Artemis. The fate of the entire pack is at stake. We can’t let her continue like this—not if we want to survive.”

“You think I don’t know that?” I looked desperately over at Xavier. “Please, just let me talk to her. Let me try. She’s still in there! Maybe we can help her find her way out!”

Before either Xavier or Big Mac could lecture me on the greater good, or all the reasons this was a dangerous and terrible idea, I turned to Artemis and stepped forward.

*Artemis is still in there*, I told myself again. *I just have to get through to her.*

Xavier and Big Mac were arguing behind me, now, but I tuned them out and focused on my sister. And instead of all the things that were wrong with the body in front of me, I focused on what the true Artemis looked like.

I met her eyes, and instead of the dark, empty voids that stared back at me, I thought of what they looked like when Artemis was in control. The mischievous twinkle when she was teasing me, or the determined set of her gaze when she was focused on something. The soft way she looked at me and our mom and my dad when we were together—as though the four of us together, being a family, was everything she’d never let herself hope for.

“*Artemis*.” My voice broke on her name, but I pressed on. “If you’re in there, you have to fight this, okay? I know I’ve screwed up, and I’m so, so sorry. I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you the way you deserved, but I’m here now, and I’m not leaving you again.” A fresh wave of tears slipped down my cheeks. “Come back to me. I can’t lose you. You’re part of our family. I love you.”

Suddenly, my sister’s face went slack, then it twisted with pain. Her eyes lit up with a flurry of emotion—hope and fear, love and grief.

“Artemis?” I gasped.

“I-I don’t know h-how long I can keep L-Letifer at bay,” she stammered, her face tightening with pain. Her gaze slipped from me to Big Mac. “Kill me, *please*. While you can. The dark magic is taking over, and I c-can’t stop it.”

“No!” I screamed, blocking my sister’s body again. “Xavier, don’t let Big Mac do this!”

My mate narrowed his gaze on the witch. “We don’t know if killing Artemis will stop Letifer.”

“We’re wasting time!” Big Mac snapped. “We know it was Artemis who took the orb. We know Letifer himself is possessing her.” Her eyes settled on me, determined and so sad it took my breath away. She raised her arms to conjure a spell. “And we know she doesn’t want to live like this anymore.”

And then my heart cracked in two. “No…”

Xavier raced toward me, apparently realizing that Big Mac wasn’t going to back down this time. He grabbed my arms, pulling me away from Artemis, who was still fighting tooth and nail to stay in control long enough for Big Mac to kill her.

“NO!” I shrieked. I broke away from Xavier’s grip and sent a blast of magic toward Big Mac. Energy exploded between our two spells, and we were all knocked back. I skidded across the ground and looked up as Artemis stumbled. The orb fell from her pocket. I grabbed it.

I remembered when I’d held the original orb during the battle with Silas. There had been a strange and depthless sense of power, of magic—but this orb felt like nothing more than a giant marble.

Big Mac groaned as she sat up, but Artemis was already sprinting away. I stumbled to my feet to race after her, and Xavier stepped into my path.

“I’ll get Artemis. You need to get back to the pack house where it’s safe,” he said.

I glanced over at Big Mac, who looked *pissed*. “What about her? She’s going to fillet my sister!”

“Oh my god, you stupid girl! I was only going to knock her out! If you had listened to me *for once in your life* instead of interfering—”

I cut her off. “You could have told me that in the first place, and I wouldn’t have interfered. Besides, I can’t just leave Artemis out here! I’m coming with you.”

I couldn’t go home without my sister, for a million reasons. Oh god, what was I going to tell my mom?

Xavier held tight to my shoulders. “I know you’re upset, but this doesn’t change anything. You need to go back to the house. I can’t allow anything to happen to you.”

“But—”

He silenced me with a finger pressed against my lips, then he cupped my chin. “I love you, Cali, but I’m not going to tell you again. I’ll bring Artemis back—I know what she means to you. And you know I can track her better than you can.”

I bit my lip, about to ask him to promise not to hurt my sister, but then I noticed his gaze shift to focus on something behind me.

I turned around as Greyson walked out of the woods.

*How did he get out of the basement? Is he better now?* I moved forward to hug him, but Xavier held me back.

“What are you doing here?” Xavier asked.

Greyson ignored him. His gaze was fixed on the orb in my hand.

“Cali, give it to me,” Greyson said.

I blinked. “Why?”

Suddenly, a wolf burst into the clearing after Greyson, shifting to human mid-run. It was Ava.

“Xavier!” she yelled. “Get away from him!”

**Episode 1817**

XAVIER

I looked back and forth between Ava and Greyson, and then casually stepped in front of Cali. “What the hell is going on here?”

Greyson shouldn’t even be here. He’d been compromised by god only knew what kind of dark magic, and I didn’t like the way he was looking at the orb in Cali’s hand. Especially since it had only been a few hours since he’d tried to kill Cali while he’d been out of his mind.

Greyson himself had admitted he was dangerous and couldn’t be trusted, and now he’d escaped from the confinement we’d placed him in. I couldn’t imagine he was here because he’d been magically cured and wanted to pitch in and fight against Letifer.

As for Ava, I was never going to trust her. She’d betrayed me too many times in order to save her own skin. It didn’t matter that she’d allegedly protected Cali from the revenants, or that she was charging in here now to protect me from Greyson. I still didn’t think I could trust her.

Big Mac stood and brushed herself off before walking forward with a scowl. “Someone tell me what’s going *right now*, or I swear to Hecate I will hex every last one of you!”

Ava inched closer to me, still nervously eyeing Greyson. “I was looking for you, wanting to warn you about what’s happening back at the pack house, and I came across Greyson on my way. He’s got the revenant aura around him right now, but it’s mixed with something else. You can’t trust him.”

I looked my brother up and down. As usual, I couldn’t see the auras that Ava claimed to be able to see, so I had no idea if she was telling the truth. She *had* helped me find Cali, and the timelines seemed to match up, which meant she probably wasn’t lying right now, even if it didn’t move the needle on my ultimately trusting her as a person. Plus, with what I knew of Greyson’s current status, he wasn’t high on my trustworthy list either.

But was that enough to give Ava’s claim credibility?

“How did you get out of the basement?” I asked my brother. “You were supposed to stay down there, remember? We agreed it was the safest place for you.”

My brother’s eyes didn’t move from the orb in Cali’s hands. “I couldn’t stay in that cage any longer. I had to come and get what’s mine.”

My brows raised. *Is Greyson talking about the orb, or Cali?*

Admittedly, neither explanation boded well for my brother. But if he was referring to the latter, then he’d just made a grave mistake.

Except… he wasn’t looking at Cali. He was looking at the object in her hand, and he’d barely even acknowledged her outside of telling her to give him the orb. No, something wasn’t right with him. As much as it pained me to acknowledge it, Greyson was deeply in love with Cali, and it showed every time they were together. The fact that he could have been staring at a blank wall right now, so long as the orb hung on it, showed just how wrong this situation was.

*Something’s not right. Is the orb doing this to him? It affected him at the pack house before. Or has the witch mark made him even more vulnerable to the orb’s power?*

“Greyson,” Big Mac said, her tone careful. “Why do you think the orb is yours?”

“I have a better hiding place for it than you do. Clearly your attempt to safeguard it has already failed.” Then he turned to me. “And last time, you and Colton failed to protect it. I can do better.”

To my immense surprise, Big Mac nodded. “That actually makes a lot of sense. I can tell you’ve truly thought this through. Cali.” She looked at my mate. “Give the orb to Greyson.”

Cali’s eyes widened. She was clearly just as surprised by Big Mac’s quick agreement as I was. She looked to me for guidance. “Should I?”

I glared at Big Mac. “Why should we give him the orb? He’s not well right now. He can’t be trusted. He’s supposed to be locked up in the fucking basement, behind your so-called impenetrable barrier, so why on earth would we give him the orb?”

The witch shrugged. “He can hide it. It’s better this way.”

Ava snarled. “Don’t do it! Giving him the orb would be a serious mistake. He’s not who he says he is. He’s one of them!”

I blinked. Honestly, I had no idea who to believe. What Ava was saying seemed to match up with my own assessment of Greyson, but Ava was a snake who would do anything to get what she wanted. Big Mac, on the other hand, *wanted* Greyson to have the orb. And while she was pretty self-serving too, when it came to serious matters like this, she could usually be trusted to work in the pack’s best interest.

“You’re the Alpha,” Greyson drawled. “How about you act like one? Make a decision, dear brother, or I’ll make it for you.”

“Back. *Off*,” I snarled.

He rolled his eyes. “Fine, I’ll do it myself.” He strode toward Cali. “Give it to me. Now.”

My mate stiffened, her eyes widening. Suddenly, I realized I’d never once heard Greyson speak to her like that. Something was definitely wrong.

I leapt between Greyson and Cali. “Don’t you fucking touch her.”

“I’m not interested in Cali. I just want the orb.”

And that was the final nail in the coffin. *What’s wrong with him? Since when is he not interested in Cali?*

Under any other circumstances, this would’ve been amazing news. But as it was, this wasn’t a good thing at all, because the Greyson I knew would walk through fire for our mate. And this guy in front of us who looked like Greyson? He wasn’t my brother.

I took a deep breath and then gently plucked the orb from Cali’s grip. “If you want the orb so badly, you can come and get it.”

He laughed, and the sound sent chills down my spine. “Really? You want to fight this out? Have you already forgotten how I defeated you in the Lupo Finale? You’re *weak*, Xavier. You’ve always been weak. You even had to beg to become Alpha.” Dark amusement danced in his eyes. “But a true Alpha never begs.”

Even though I *knew* this wasn’t Greyson, his words were still a punch right to all my most vulnerable places. How this guy who wasn’t my brother knew exactly which buttons to push, I had no idea. But I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of making me lose control. One of us had to be in control here. After all, it seemed like Greyson was just as present now as Artemis had been.

“Back off,” I snarled. With the orb clutched tight in one hand, I moved Cali behind me, out of Greyson’s line of sight.

Greyson sighed. “I really only want the orb, but if you’re determined to make this difficult—”

He shifted and stepped forward with a low growl. His fur was different, like the color had changed just enough to look… *off*.

“MacKenzie,” I said, tossing it to the witch.

“*Big Mac*,” she called back, catching it with one hand.

“Get past me first, brother.” I shifted but didn’t attack. I wasn’t going to back down. Not now. Not ever.

Behind me, Cali screamed. I risked a glance over my shoulder and was glad to see Big Mac shoving Cali behind her. Apparently Big Mac wasn’t so angry at Cali that she was refusing to protect her. Ava stood a few paces away from all of us. Her face was lined with anxiety as she watched my brother and me circle each other.

Then, just moments after we’d both shifted, Greyson snarled and lunged at me, and the fight began. He slammed into me, scratching up my side, but I didn’t let him keep me down. We wove around each other, both landing some blows and both dodging a few as well.

An immediate inequality became apparent, though—while Greyson was aiming to kill, I wasn’t. I wanted to put him in his place, and hopefully knock his brain around enough for him to come back to himself, but I didn’t want to badly wound him, which was surprising, really.

As much as I wished my brother would go away and never come back, and that I’d *finally* be able to lead the life I’d wanted for so long—as Alpha of the Redwood pack, with Cali by my side as my Luna—I couldn’t kill him. Not like this.

Suddenly, I understood how Cali must have felt when she’d seen Artemis earlier—knowing the real person was inside somewhere while you fought the dark force controlling them. As messed up as it was, I didn’t want to hurt Greyson unless I was hurting the real him, for something *he* had done. He didn’t deserve it, otherwise.

But Greyson seemed to have other thoughts. More than once, he’d tried to bite down on my throat—a blow that would’ve been fatal if I hadn’t protected myself. The deep bite marks on my shoulders were a testament to the fact that he wasn’t moderating his strength.

I didn’t want to kill Greyson, but he sure wanted to kill me. And what would Cali do if I *did* kill Greyson, even out of self-defense?

“Guys, stop!” Cali pleaded. “That’s enough! We don’t have to fight!”

Greyson wasn’t getting the message. He slammed me into the ground hard enough to make stars burst behind my eyes. And then he reared back to deliver a killing blow—

A dark shape blurred in front of my eyes, and then there was a terrible *crunch* and a whimper, and a large, heavy shape fell on top of me.

I blinked and staggered back.

Ava was lying on the ground in front of me.

**Episode 1818**

I watched in complete horror as Ava fell to the ground. *Why did she jump between Xavier and Greyson like that? Did she do it to protect Xavier?* I didn’t know why she’d done it, butregardless, I couldn’t believe my eyes. Greyson had wounded her badly, and now she lay whimpering and bleeding on the ground. My stomach twisted as I fully realized what bad shape she was in. She could barely move!

Why was Greyson doing this? What was wrong with him? And how could I stop it?

I turned at the sound of Greyson’s savage growl. His snout was covered in Ava’s blood. He barely stopped to react to what he’d done to her before leaping over her body, digging his teeth into Xavier’s side and tossing him against a tree. Xavier hit the tree with a sickening crack and crumpled to the ground, howling in pain. He didn’t look like he could get up.

*Greyson’s going to kill him!*

“Stop it!” I cried out.

Greyson didn’t even look at me. He was relentless. He sprinted at Xavier, his mouth open and ready to tear his brother to shreds. Panicking, I let loose a flare of Fae magic, blasting Greyson back. It was the only way to stop this madness. He landed a ways off, hitting the ground with a loud thud and lying there, the wind knocked out of him.

Greyson roared in anger. He was streaked with cuts and blood and looked an all-around banged-up mess, but he got back to his feet immediately, his eyes wild with rage as he looked right at me and howled. In a flash, he lunged at Xavier again, but this time Big Mac blasted him and he flew into a tangle of brush and lay there, clearly disoriented.

I rushed over to him. “Greyson, what’s wrong with you?”

Greyson snarled at me, but I held firm. I knew that this wasn’t Greyson, and that something was very wrong. I just had to get through to him.

“If you love me, you’ll stop!”

*Get away from him, Cali!* Xavier told me. I took a quick look back at Xavier, where he lay on the ground, also cut and bloody, his eyes trained on me. I knew he was afraid for my safety, but I stood my ground. I just couldn’t believe this side of Greyson. He was acting just like I’d imagined his wolf would be before I’d met him. I’d heard so many horrible stories about him, which had all turned out to be false. I knew that beneath this snarling wolf in front of me, the Greyson that I had come to adore was there. This wasn’t my Alpha.

*It’s not safe! You saw what he did to me and Ava! Get away from him—he’s dangerous!* Xavier said again, his voice deep and commanding.

I ignored Xavier and reached out and put my hand on Greyson’s neck, hoping that my touch would calm him down like it always had in the past. I stroked his fur, noticing how different his wolf looked today. There was definitely something strange going on with him.

“It’s okay, Greyson. I’m here. I’m right here, and I’m not going anywhere. It’s okay. Whatever’s wrong, we can fix it, trust me. We’ll do it together.”

I closed my eyes. *I love you, Greyson*, I mind linked, hoping I could get inside his head where the real Greyson had to still be alive, waiting, trying to claw his way back to reality. I waited, but he didn’t reply, and that terrified me more than anything.

Ava groaned behind me, pulling me back into the moment. I glanced back at her, shocked at how badly Greyson had hurt her. She was covered almost head to toe in blood, and she was whimpering in pain. How could Greyson do that to her? I definitely wasn’t Ava’s biggest fan, but she’d helped me and may have even saved my life. She didn’t deserve what Greyson had done.

“Give him the damn orb!” Big Mac shouted. “We’re wasting time. If we don’t get Ava back to the house right now, she’ll die, and it won’t even matter because the revenants will have taken over. Look at her! She’s losing too much blood!” Big Mac rushed to Ava’s side, looking up at me with frantic eyes.

“Are you sure?” I didn’t know what Big Mac was up to, but handing Greyson the orb while he was in this state seemed like the exact opposite of what we should be doing.

“Yes, I’m sure. Hand it to him, and let’s get the hell out of here!” Big Mac shouted.

Xavier snarled as I held the orb up toward Greyson, and I hesitated. *Should I give it to him?*

“Stop!” Ava moaned, reaching her hand out as if to stop me, just as Greyson leapt up from the ground, knocking me down and pinning my arms to the dirt. He snarled over me as if he hated me, his snapping jaw inches from my throat. I was stunned, so afraid that I was about to be killed—by my mate, no less.

“Greyson!” I wailed. “Don’t do this! It’s me! Please!” I twisted and bucked, trying to get free of his hold, but he was too strong, and before long, I grew tired of struggling.

Xavier growled again. He was finally back on his feet and moving toward us, his eyes trained on Greyson.

Big Mac yanked him back. “Don’t! Greyson could injure Cali if we’re not careful!”

Greyson, my love, my mate, had me on the ground with his sharp teeth inches from my neck, snarling like he couldn’t wait to devour me, and I still couldn’t believe that he would actually hurt me. I took a deep breath, trying to calm down just as Greyson locked eyes with me. Finally. Was he recognizing me? Was he coming back to us?Greyson snarled again and then snatched the orb from my hands before racing away with it clamped in his jaws.

I scrambled to my feet and bounded after him, my knees still shaking with fear.

“Let him go!” Big Mac shouted.

“Why?” I stopped and turned to Big Mac. “I don’t understand! We went to so much trouble to create the orb!”

Tears tingled in my eyes as I pictured Astrid and what she’d sacrificed for the orb, and Didi, who’d died trying to help us. We’d just said our goodbyes, and I’d vowed to stop Letifer using the orb—we’d promised Astrid—and now Big Mac was just going to let Greyson take off with it?

“I-I don’t know why Greyson would take it, why he’s acting this way! There’s clearly something horribly wrong with him! He didn’t know what he was doing!”

Xavier shifted back to human, his face twisted in anger as he looked me straight in the eye. “Do *not* take Greyson’s side on this!” he shouted.

“Let it go, both of you!” Big Mac yelled to be heard over us, her eyes flashing.

“*Let it* *go?*” Xavier snarled. “He just took off with the only thing we had in our possession with the ability to stop Letifer, and you want to let him go?”

“Of course not. You really think that I would have let him get away if I didn’t have something up my sleeve?” Big Mac gave a dry, incredulous chuckle and rolled her eyes. “Greyson doesn’t have the orb. He has the fake decoy orb that I created to find out who the traitor was in the pack house.”

I was stunned. A *fake* orb? I’d known something had felt off about it when I’d touched it… I glanced at Xavier.

“I’m not stupid enough to just leave the real orb lying around somewhere where it could be stolen.” Big Mac looked down at Ava. “We need to get her back home to Torin, or she’ll bleed to death. Xavier, it’s probably best for you to take Ava and run—you can go a lot faster without me and Cali slowing you down. We’ll catch up.”

Xavier hesitated, looking at me with a concerned look on his face.

“Come on, what are you waiting for? What part of ‘she’s dying’ don’t you two understand? We have to hurry!” Big Mac yelled.

“I will *not* leave Cali!” he said, growling.

“No, Xavier, Big Mac is right—save Ava,” I said. “We’ll be okay. We have our magic to protect us. I promise. *Save her.*”

They weren’t words I ever thought I would utter, but I’d never thought Ava would save my life either.

Reluctantly, and with his eyes on me the whole time, Xavier scooped up Ava’s limp body. “You two had better be right behind me! Don’t fuck around, Cali. I need you safe!”

“I’m right behind you, Xavier,” I promised.

Xavier nodded at me, then took off into the woods. Big Mac started to follow right after him, but I stopped her and whispered, “I’m going to look for Greyson. Are you with me?”

**Episode 1819**

XAVIER

I raced as fast as I could toward the pack house, spotting and avoiding revenants as I went. Normally, I would’ve jumped at the chance to engage and tear those fuckers apart, but I had Ava’s life in my hands—though not in the way that it had been in the past. If I stopped now and took time out to fight, she would die—Big Mac had made that more than clear.

From the way Ava looked, Big Mac was right. It still bothered me that I’d had to leave Cali behind, especially to save Ava of all people. The only thing that calmed me was the knowledge that Cali was strong and could take care of herself if push came to shove. She had her Fae magic and Big Mac at her side, so I knew that she would be okay.

I bounded through a thick tangle of trees, narrowly avoiding bursting through a crowd of revenants who were milling around in the forest, their orange eyes glowing. I just needed to get Ava back to the pack house and safely into Torin’s capable hands, and then I’d turn right around and head back to Cali to make sure she was safe.

With my brother on the loose, who knew how much danger Cali was really in? As for Greyson, I still didn’t quite know what to make of his strange, violent state. Ava had warned us that Greyson wasn’t himself. What had she meant?

I tried to mind link with Ava. *Ava, can you hear me? What did you mean when you said that Greyson wasn’t himself?*

I waited for a response, but she was silent, too out of it to reply. Ava had claimed that she was able to see revenant auras. I was still skeptical, but there was a chance that she was telling the truth. Lately, she’d really been trying to help the pack. She’d even taken down more than her share of revenants during the battle. I shook my head, still trying to wrap my head around everything that had taken place. Was Greyson really a revenant? I thought back to when I’d seen the orange gleam in his eyes. That weird vamp professor had used the same serum on Greyson that had saved me after I’d been bitten during the first battle with Letifer. Why had it worked for me, but not for Greyson? Then a thought hit me—what if the serum *hadn’t* actually worked? *Am I going to become like Greyson and turn against the pack? Am I on borrowed time?*

As I neared the pack house, I heard the yells, screams, and overall confusion of the ongoing battle. I shot through the turmoil on the lawn and leapt over the trench, landing as softly as I could so as not to drop Ava and injure her further. Up ahead, I spotted Mace and some of the others. They were holding their own, tearing into revenants and leaving them bleeding on the ground before pouncing onto the next orange-eyed freak.

*Xavier!* Mace mind linked as he ripped a revenant’s throat out. *We could really use some help here!*

From the looks of things, I knew that my help would be a big relief to Mace and the others, but I had to get Ava inside and get back to Cali as soon as I could.

*You got this man!* I mind linked back as I bounded past him and into the house. Mace was strong and capable, and I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he would be able to hold his own, though I knew that things could take a bad turn quickly.

“Torin!” I called out, gently laying Ava down on the couch. “Torin! I need you!” A few seconds later, Torin rushed in and knelt at Ava’s side.

“What happened? Did a revenant get her?” Torin asked as he immediately went to work on Ava, his brow knitted in concentration as he ran his hands over her body, identifying where she was wounded.

“Something like that,” I replied, deciding not to tell Torin that Greyson—my brother and his former pack leader—had gone off the rails and almost ripped Ava apart. “Do what you can. I’m going to head back out to get Cali.”

Zainab and Sage stopped me as I bounded through the house on my way to the back door. “Xavier! It’s Greyson! He escaped and attacked us!”

“I know, there’s something going on with him—something bad. He attacked me, too, but we can’t worry about that right now; Mace and the others need your help fighting—hurry up and get out there!”

“On it!” Sage and Zainab called out as they ran out the door.

Orla and Tom appeared beside me.

“Xavier! Where are our daughters? Have you seen them?” Orla asked. I could see the worry on her face, and I thought back to our run-in with Artemis.

“Cali is safe. I’m on my way to meet her and Big Mac in the woods and make sure she stays that way.” I paused, trying to think of the best way to deliver the rest of the news. “As for Artemis, I’m sorry, but I don’t know where she is. You two stay safe inside; I have to get back to Cali!” I called out, not waiting for their reaction to the news about Artemis. I felt for them, but Cali was my priority right now.

I bounded down the porch stairs and came face to face with Mrs. Smith, who looked as nervous and concerned as Tom and Orla. “Xavier, have you seen Greyson? I’ve been looking and I haven’t seen him anywhere.”

*Cali, I’m coming back for you!* I was getting stopped by everyone who saw me, and it was starting to annoy me—I understood what they were going through, but it was dangerous out there, and I needed to get back to Cali.

“Greyson…” I said. “He seems to have turned against the pack. He attacked me—and he even attacked Cali.”

Mrs. Smith gasped, splaying a hand across her chest. “I know. I saw him myself. There’s something wrong with him, Xavier. He’s not himself.” She tugged on my arm. “Don’t hurt him, Xavier, please, just please don’t harm him. There has to be some explanation for all of this.”

I covered Mrs. Smith’s hand with my own. It hurt me to see her so upset.

“I’ll do what I can, Mrs. Smith, but I can’t make any promises.” I knew that this was hard for her to hear, and I felt really bad, but not bad enough to risk the pack and lose Cali in order to save Greyson. “Stay safe,” I said, bounding back out into the yard.

I took a quick survey of the situation. Mace and the others seemed to be winning the battle. Sage mowed through a bunch of revenants like a cannon ball. Zainab was tearing another revenant limb from limb, literally, and Ravi was snapping his teeth at another group of revenants and backing them toward the trench.

Surely they could survive a few minutes more without me. I just needed enough time to go bring Cali back. As I bounded toward the woods, I heard Torin calling out to me from the porch.

“Xavier! Come here! Ava’s asking for you.”

“And?” I asked. Cali was more important.

“It’s not… looking good.”

*Fuck*. Clenching my fist, I told myself five minutes. Only five fucking minutes for this shit. I followed him back into the house, noticing the sad look on his face.

“I did what I could,” Torin said, tears puddling in his eyes. “But it wasn’t enough. I don’t think she’s going to make it.”

I squeezed his shoulder. “I know that you’ve done all you can. Don’t beat yourself up.” I really felt bad for the guy.

I raced up to Ava’s room, where Torin had laid her out in the bed, ensuring that she was comfortable at the very least. I hesitated in the doorway, a rush of feelings taking me by surprise. Things between Ava and me had only grown more complicated since she’d come back from the dead. I used to dream of her death, and had wished so many times that she would just go away and get out of my life, but I’d never imagined that Greyson would be responsible for her death. Now, I wasn’t so sure how I felt anymore.

I slowly entered the room, shocked by how pale and lifeless Ava looked. Her breathing was faint and shallow and coming in short bursts. Her eyes fluttered open, and a weak smile appeared on her lips. “You came. I didn’t think you would.”

Suddenly, I was hit by a memory of when we’d been mates, and in love. We used to be able to stare into each other’s eyes for hours. We’d been inseparable. The perfect match—or at least I’d thought so back then. Feelings I’d thought were dead welled up in my chest, surprising me.

“Take my hand,” Ava said, weakly reaching for me. I took her hand in mine, unnerved by how cold it was.

“I’m sorry for what happened,” I said.

“I know,” Ava whispered. “I’m sorry, too. I know I’m dying… and I know that things between us aren’t what they once were. But before I die—Xavier—could you give me one last kiss? A goodbye kiss?”

*Shit.* How could I refuse her? She’d literally put herself in harm’s way to protect me from Greyson, and she’d done her best to fight for the pack—maybe she really had changed. She deserved this last thing, didn’t she? We used to be in love, after all. Maybe, just maybe, I could finally forgive her for everything she’d done and leave the past behind me.

I leaned in and softly pressed my lips to hers. *Goodbye, Ava.*

**Episode 1820**

LOLA

“Watch out!” I called out to Jay as I moved super-fast to strike out hard at a revenant, catching it in the stomach just before it could dig its teeth into Jay’s neck. Its flesh was so disgusting and rotten that I felt like my hand was going to plow straight through it. The revenant hissed and fell to the ground, its gross blood spraying across the grass. Before it could recover, I leapt on top of it, possibly enjoying my vamp powers a little too much as I ripped its head off with ease and tossed it into the trench like a disgusting basketball.

“Thanks for having my back!” Jay called out with a wink and a smile. Then his eye went wide. “Lola, look out!”

I screamed as a revenant grabbed me and tossed me to the ground. Its orange eyes glowed brightly as it leapt on top of me, its disgusting mouth inches from my face as it practically drooled in anticipation of taking a bite. I struggled, twisting and turning in its grasp and using every bit of my vamp strength to try and get away, but it was too strong.

“Get off my mate!” Jay yelled as he launched toward us and skewered the revenant through the chest with a stake.

The revenant hissed and reared back in pain, and I wasted no time reaching up and ripping its head off. Jay gave me another wink and turned to strike another revenant that had come up to flank him. My worry that Jay wouldn’t be able to hold his own without his wolf seemed foolish now—he wasn’t letting it slow him down at all. He was using every weapon he had at his disposal—brass knuckles, stakes, chains, daggers, an ax—and taking them out almost as quickly as the werewolves. It was impressive.

A pained howl cut through the air, and I turned to see Ravi’s wolf being taken down by a hissing revenant. Jay and I rushed over as Ravi tried to fight off the revenant’s attempts to bite him in the neck. I reached Ravi first, my fangs out and ready to strike, but I hesitated. I wasn’t quite in the mood to taste revenant blood, so I reached out with a quick movement and ripped the revenant’s head straight off. I was getting good at that.

“I think the revenant knocked him unconscious!” Jay yelled, hovering over Ravi.

“Was he bitten? Can you tell?”

“I don’t know. I think we should get him inside to Torin!” Jay shouted, dodging a revenant attack and countering with a stake straight to the creature’s face.

Deep down, a chill raced through me. Jay was getting really good with that stake, and the vampire in me didn’t love the sight of the pointed wooden weapon being handled so easily in Jay’s hands. Good thing I would never be on Jay’s bad side.

We picked Ravi up and carried him inside, fighting off relentless revenant attacks as we went. Mace trotted alongside us to run interference. He looked totally in his element as he hurtled toward a revenant that was trying to attack Jay, clamping his jaws around one of the revenant’s legs and ripping it off with a spray of revenant blood. The revenant crumpled to the ground, a garbled scream escaping its decaying mouth.

Finally, and after way too many close calls for my taste, we made it to the house just in time to see Xavier bounding out the door, scanning the yard as if he were looking for someone or something.

“Hey, you two, have either of you seen Cali?” Xavier asked us. “She was supposed to be back by now.”

Of course he was looking for Cali. When wasn’t he?

“No,” I replied. “We were too busy fighting. Ravi’s hurt, and we’re trying to get him inside. Is Cali all right?” I searched my memory banks, trying to think of the last time I’d seen her. “Now that I think about it, I haven’t seen her in a while—what trouble has she gotten herself into now?”

“You know Cali. You guys get Ravi inside—I have to go find her!” Xavier rushed off toward the forest.

Jay and I managed to get Ravi into the house just as Jacqueline came barreling toward the door, Emmett on her heels. They were arguing about something, and Jacqueline had a determined look on her face.

“I’ve had enough of this revenant bullshit,” she said. “The only reason I came to this den of wolves was to escape all of that, and now I’m stuck in the middle of it!”

“Jacqueline, this isn’t the best time,” I said, looking down at Ravi’s limp form. “Can’t you see that we’re surrounded and fighting for our lives? What, do you think that you’re just going to stroll out of here?”

“I told her that I needed her help in the lab, and she lost it. I just needed an extra pair of hands—I’m right on the verge of a great discovery,” Emmett explained, his eyes dancing with excitement. He looked every bit the mad scientist that he was.

Jacqueline rolled her eyes. “He keeps saying that, but seriously, I’ve lost faith—especially after seeing Irma bite the dust like that.”

“Ravi needs help, we can argue about this later!” Jay snapped.

“See, Jacqueline! Ravi, a skilled fighter, just got hurt out there! Who knows what will happen to you if you just go running out into this madness? You need to stay inside, where it’s safer,” Emmett reasoned.

“*Fine*,” Jacqueline groaned as she turned and stomped off.

“Emmett, we might need your help. We’re not quite sure, but we’re think that Ravi may have been bitten by a revenant,” I explained as we hustled Ravi through the house.

Emmett’s eyes lit up. “I have a new formulation that I could try on him!”

“I got hit, but I’m not bit,” Ravi murmured, coming to. I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw that the fighting fire was still burning in his eyes. “Keep that serum far away from me. I just need a few minutes to recover, then I’m going back out there—the pack needs me.”

“Let’s take him upstairs to his room where he can get some rest,” Jay suggested.

“That’s a good idea.”

As we maneuvered Ravi up the stairs, a wave of vampire heat raced through me. I couldn’t help but think about how sexy Jay had been out there in the heat of battle. He’d been confident and deadly, taking those revenants out one by one. It was sexy that he could hold his own, even in human form. I couldn’t wait until this battle was over—he and I had some serious catching up to do.

We passed Ava’s room and saw Torin struggling to treat her. She looked like she was having a seizure. I was no fan of Ava’s, but she seemed to be in serious trouble. Emmett was right on our heels, and he thrust his head into Ava’s room as we hustled Ravi inside and laid him down beside Ava on the bed.

“I heard that Ava’s seriously injured. Maybe I can help?” Emmett said to Torin. “I’ve been studying werewolf anatomy.”

“That sounds great, Emmett, but I don’t know if it will work. She’s lost so much blood already, and I don’t know how much longer she’ll survive.” Torin cast a worried glance down at Ava and smoothed his hand over her brow as she continued to writhe on the bed, her eyes shut as she moaned in pain.

“Have you tried a blood transfusion?” Emmett asked.

“That’s a little outside my area of expertise.”

“Does anyone know Ava’s blood type?” I asked.

Everyone shook their heads.

We all turned to look at Ravi when he spoke.

“I’m O negative,” he said, holding out his arm. “You might as well use me. I’m going to be stuck here for now.”

“Okay, I think we’ve done what we can here. Torin, Emmett, you work on these two—we have to head back out to protect the perimeter. We can’t let them win now. We’ve come too far and lost too much to let it be for nothing,” I said, taking Jay’s hand as we left the room.

We ran downstairs in time to see Jacqueline sprinting out of the house. She’d decided to sneak out while everyone was distracted upstairs—clearly she’d never intended to stay with the pack like she’d told Emmett. She was a liar on top of everything else.

“Shit! Jay, she’s trying to escape, but she’ll never make it! I have to get her!” I said to Jay as I sprinted after her.

I had just gotten out into the yard when a revenant sprang at me and staked me through the shoulder, pinning me to a tree.

The pain was unlike anything I’d ever felt before—a combination of aching and burning and searing. I screamed and tried to pull the stake out, but I couldn’t—I only managed to get a hand full of splinters, which almost hurt as badly as the pain in my shoulder. The revenant closed in fast, preparing to bite me.

“Jacqueline, *help*!” I screamed.

**Episode 1821**

I stared at Big Mac, waiting to see what she was going to say. Would she come with me to find Greyson? There was no question that it was a long shot. I knew Big Mac pretty well at this point—at least, I felt like I did. To say that she was prickly around the edges was an understatement. She did what she could to help others—sometimes—but she prioritized helping herself above all else.

She *would*, however, do anything for Mrs. Smith—and finding her son would definitely help her—so perhaps that would be enough to make her agree. In a way, I kind of felt similar to Big Mac. We were both non-wolves who were in relationships with someone in the pack (in my case, someones). It was weird to admit that I had anything in common with the cold witch.

“Please, Big Mac. We have to go after Greyson. He needs us,” I pleaded, hoping that she would agree. I didn’t know if I could do it on my own, and having someone as powerful as Big Mac by my side would make all the difference. “Greyson clearly isn’t himself, and no matter what he’s done, he’s still a member of the pack.” I stared at her, on edge as I waited for her answer. Her expression was unreadable, and I guessed that she could go either way. Truthfully, I was expecting a no and potentially a fight since I knew that she wouldn’t waste the chance to tell me all the reasons why going after Greyson was a bad idea. I’d never been on the winning side of a fight with Big Mac, so I hoped that it wouldn’t come to that.

“Yes, I’ll come with you.”

I did a double take. “Wait—*yes*? Did you just agree to come with me? Are you joking? Don’t play with my emotions like that—”

Big Mac glared at me. “I said yes, but don’t make me regret it. Yes, dammit. I’ll come with you. Greyson is Sabine’s son, and it’s not a good sign that he wanted the orb so badly. The orb was a lure for Letifer, so if Greyson wanted it… Well, it’s a sign that he’s been compromised.”

“Compromised? What does that mean? Has he been possessed? Is his spirit gone? Is Artemis’s gone, too?”

Big Mac rolled her eyes, clearly already exasperated, and we hadn’t begun our journey yet. “Okay, if I’m going to do this, there are going to be rules. I don’t want you pulling any of that crap you do with Xavier and Greyson, arguing with them if they give you directions. What I say goes—listen to me, and don’t do anything ridiculous.”

“Fine,” I mumbled. What did she mean, “the crap I do with Xavier and Greyson”? They deserved whatever guff I gave them since they were always so overprotective even though I’d shown, time and time again, that I could handle myself. I wouldn’t have to argue with them if they realized what a great resource I was. “Any clue where Greyson could have gone? And what about Artemis? I’m really worried about her—with everything that happened with Greyson I’ve been distracted, but it seems like Artemis is in a lot of trouble.”

“She is, there’s no doubt about it. And so is Greyson. I suspect that they’re both being affected by Letifer right now. Our best bet is to use the real orb to stop Letifer.”

“That works for me,” I said. I didn’t have any better ideas, and Letifer was at the root of all of this trouble. If we got rid of him, then maybe everything else would fall into place—at least I hoped so. But when it came to Letifer—and Silas, for that matter—who knew what to expect?

“Watch out!” Big Mac called, shoving me out of the way as a revenant came running up behind me. Big Mac unleashed a wave of magic, blasting the revenant to bits before turning and hitting another one that came running at us, holding its hands straight out as if to tackle Big Mac to the ground. Without a moment’s hesitation, she shot a bolt of magic at it and sent it flying into a tree and crumbling to the dirt in a pile of dismembered, decayed flesh.

Another one came vaulting through the trees, its orange eyes riveted right to me. I raised my hand and shot a bolt of Fae magic at it, throwing it against a tree. It got to its feet instantly and came at me again, its mouth open and ready to pounce. Before I could release another shot, Big Mac shot it with a bolt of magic and destroyed it. Big Mac was taking on the revenants like they were nothing and barely breaking a sweat. She was almost nonchalant about it. It was impressive, how easily she wielded such great power.

“We’re still very much in danger,” Big Mac said, her eyes darting around to catch any other sneaky revenants that might be approaching. “This is the perfect time to remind you about listening to me and not doing anything impulsive. Our lives might depend on it.”

I glanced around at the remains of the revenants that Big Mac had hit with her magic bolts, and they burst into flames with another effortless flick of Big Mac’s wrist.

Big Mac turned to me. “I suspect that we’re going to find Greyson with Artemis—are you prepared for that, Cali?”

Unsettled, I considered what Big Mac was saying. Everything felt so out of control, and it had been that way for a long while. I was tired of it, but it didn’t seem to be letting up. If anything, things were only getting worse. *How is it that two people I love have been corrupted by this evil force?* I nodded at Big Mac. “I’ll be prepared when the time comes to face them.”

“Okay. I’m going to cast my tracking spell so that we can locate the fake orb. Stay close, and do *not* wander off, I mean it.” Big Mac closed her eyes and drew strange symbols in the air that hovered for a moment in front of her fingers before disappearing. “There, we should be on their trail now. Let’s go.”

We moved through the woods, not talking, keeping our ears tuned to any sound around us that didn’t seem right. The revenants were good at sneaking up and catching you by surprise, so neither of us let our guard down for even a moment. Occasionally, we paused to let a revenant or two stalk by while we hid in the shadows. We’d decided not to engage unless absolutely necessary, since the revenants were so unpredictable. One or two at a time were easy to take down, but we’d already seen groups of ten or more, and clusters that size would easily overwhelm us.

*How can there be so many of these things?* I wondered as we made our way through the woods. It was like we saw a mass of them every few yards or so. But when I really thought about it, it made sense that there were so many. If they had truly risen from the dead, then Letifer had an endless supply. The thought of millions of these deadly, rotting monsters stalking the earth made me shudder.

“Do you think that we’ll actually be able to save Greyson and Artemis?” I whispered to Big Mac.

She shrugged. “I don’t know, but what I do know is that if I don’t at least try, Sabine will never forgive me.” Big Mac stopped short and put her arm out to hold me back. “I’m getting mixed signals from my spell. I need to re-conjure it. There’s so much damn dark magic snapping through these woods that it’s interfering. Stay close.”

As Big Mac closed her eyes and started to cast her spell again, I wondered how—and if—we would be able to bring Greyson and Artemis back from this. I trembled at the memory of Greyson turning on me so suddenly and with so much hatred in his eyes. It had seemed like he truly wanted to harm me.

“Get down!” Big Mac hissed, grabbing me by the arm and pulling me behind a tree. “Someone’s coming.”

I stooped down next to Big Mac, trying not to make a sound, barely even breathing for fear that we would be found out. My heart was racing a mile a minute. *Is it a revenant? Greyson? Artemis?* We waited, peering out into the woods. A few seconds later, Rishika appeared from behind a thick tangle of trees. Rishika’s keen werewolf senses allowed her to spot us immediately.

“Hey, you guys okay?” she asked after shifting, relief spreading across her face as she came to join us.

“Yes, we’re good. How are you?” I asked.

“I’m fine—I was just worried about Artemis, so I decided to slip away to go looking for her. I’m following her scent.”

“Great, you can come along with us,” Big Mac said. “But I’m going to tell you the same thing I told Cali—I’m running the show here. Do not do anything without my permission. Just follow my lead, and we’ll get out of this alive.”

“You got it,” Rishika said, falling into step behind us as we continued our silent trek through the trees.

Suddenly, I recognized exactly where we were—the ghost pond. A chill raced through my body. I wished that we could just turn back. This place gave me the creeps, and it had been proven time and time again that it was a dangerous place to be. As we came upon the still, dark waters of the pond, Rishika gasped.

“Look!” she whispered, pointing.

I followed her gaze and gasped, too. Standing right at the edge of the pond were none other than Artemis and Greyson, and my heart sank as Greyson pulled Artemis into a kiss.

**Episode 1822**

VIOLET

Zachery stared at me in shock, the silver knife still in his hand and suspended above his head. I’d shifted back to human just in time—he’d been ready to stab me without a second thought. He slowly lowered the knife to his side. His eyes were wide as saucers as he said, “I can’t believe *my* Daisy is a werewolf—and totally naked!”

I sighed and covered myself up as best as I could with my hands, but sadly, I didn’t have enough hands to do the job properly. “My name is actually Violet, and I’ll explain everything—if you let me.”

Zachery just stood there and stared at me, clearly enjoying the view but looking very confused at the same time.

“Grow up! Haven’t you seen a naked person before?” I snapped. He could at least pretend not to be a creep at an intense moment like this. He’d been about to kill me, for goodness sake.

“Oh—sorry,” he exclaimed, his gaze snapping up to rest on my face. “I can’t believe you lied to me this whole time. And now you expect me to believe anything you say? Why would I?”

“Why should you? Well for starters, you owe me one for this!” I slid the rope from around my neck and threw it to the ground. “You made me feel like a dog, putting that thing on me. Don’t ever do that again,” I growled. I took a few steps toward him, and he stepped back, holding his knife up again.

“Stay back, wolf! I’ll use this thing if I have to!” He made a few stabbing motions with it, as if demonstrating how it worked.

I rolled my eyes. If he even tried to come at me with that thing, I’d have him on the ground in seconds and wouldn’t hesitate to tear him apart. “Listen, I didn’t come here to hurt anyone. I came here to protect someone.” I didn’t go as far as telling him that that someone was Charlie—I didn’t want to drag him into my mess. After all, Charlie’s own mother had tried to kill him when she’d found out he was a werewolf, so there was no telling what Zachery would be capable of if he found out what Charlie truly was. Given that he was still pointing his knife at me, it wasn’t too hard to picture how that would go.

“You must be protecting Charlie. But from what?” Well there went that.

“It’s not important.” I wondered where Charlie was, and I hoped that he was in a better situation than I was.

“It’s important to me! If you want me to understand, you need to tell me everything and stop the lies!” Zachery shouted.

I thought back to the first time I’d met Zachery, and how mild and goofy he’d seemed. Now, the look in his eyes made it clear that he was nowhere near as harmless as I’d thought. Seeing how on edge he was only confirmed that he was unpredictable and definitely not to be trusted, so I decided that it might be best to try a different approach.

“I’m so sorry that I had to lie,” I said sweetly, fluttering my lashes at him. “But I was trying to protect you, too.” I leaned in close. “I came here to help protect the hunters from the revenants.”

Zachery flashed me a skeptical look. He didn’t know me very well, and even *he* could see straight through that lie—but I couldn’t give up now. The only way this wouldn’t get real violent real fast would be if I could get him to calm down and trust me.

“I used to be just like you,” I said quickly, “hunting all the dirty supernaturals to make the world a safer place for the unsuspecting human population—until I was turned by a werewolf. But my loyalty still lies with the hunters, with you. Being a hunter is in my blood, and I’m proud of that.” That sounded a bit more believable, and I prayed that Zachery thought so, too.

“So does that mean that you and Charlie aren’t…?”

I shook my head quickly. “No, not even a little.”

“But… But what about that time I saw you two kissing?”

I put my weight on my injured leg, testing it. A dull ache shot through it, but it was nowhere near as bad as before and seemed nearly back to normal. I just needed to buy myself a little more time to let it heal completely, and then I could get the fuck out of here and far, far away from Zachery.

“Oh, that? It was just a kiss. It didn’t mean a thing—but you got so upset with me and said such nasty things! You never even gave me an opportunity to explain.” I pouted. “The truth is, I think you’re a nice guy.”

Zachery’s eyes lit up, and he smiled. “You really think I’m nice? You like me?” He moved toward me, his patented silly smile widening even more in excitement. It looked like he wanted to kiss me.

*Ugh. Give me break.* I forced myself to smile. “Of course, Zachery! What’s not to like?” I widened my smile. The list of things I didn’t like about this guy was growing by the second, but of course, I couldn’t let him know that.

“I knew it. How could you *not* like Zachery?” He stepped closer, finally lowering his knife. “So… does that mean that you’ll go on a date with me? A real date? Just the two of us?”

I had to work overtime to keep from cringing as I shook my head at him, remembering how he’d grabbed me in the tunnel and tried to take off with me—and that awkward mess of a “date” we’d had before. I almost cringed at the memory, but I stopped myself. “No, Zachery. You’re a great guy, but I don’t think that we should date—it would ruin our friendship, and I really, really value you as a friend.”

The smile fell from Zachery’s lips, and his eyes turned cold. “You think I’m stupid?” He raised the knife again and stepped toward me.

“No, I don’t think…” I tested my leg again. It was healed up enough. It was time to go before things got any worse. “I *know* you’re stupid!”

Then I shoved him with all of my might, sending him stumbling backward. I shifted and growled at him, ready to strike or at least intimidate him—but he recovered faster than I’d expected.

In an instant, he was on his feet again, and in a fluid movement that I barely saw coming, Zachery slashed me with the knife. I howled. The pain was excruciating, blinding. I took off wildly into the woods, hoping to put as much distance between us as I could. As I ran, the pain in my arm grew and I started to feel dizzy. I slowed as my energy level plummeted.

The silver knife had poisoned me, and I was fading fast. I had no idea how long I had before it overwhelmed me, and I wouldn’t be able to move—or worse. All I knew was that I had to get as far away from Zachery as I could. He would kill me if he got the chance. His ego had been bruised—by a werewolf, at that—and I was in grave danger.

I kept running, trying to fight the urge to fall to the ground. My strength was steadily waning, and my vision began to blur around the edges. I stumbled and nearly fell, but I somehow managed to regain my footing and kept running—but I wasn’t moving nearly fast enough.

All I needed was to find Charlie. I knew that he was probably looking for me. I tried to reach out to him via mind link.

*Charlie! Charlie! Can you hear me? I’ve been slashed with a silver knife, and Zachery’s chasing me! I need you!*

No reply.

I turned at the sound of branches snapping behind me. Zachery was gaining on me fast, his knife raised and ready to strike. I tried to pick up speed, but it was no use. I didn’t have enough power to run any faster, and soon, I wouldn’t be able to run at all.

*Ack!* I tripped on a raised tree root and tumbled down an embankment, slamming into a rock on my way down. Pain shot through my body, and I barely clung to consciousness as I sprawled out onto my back. I couldn’t move. I was completely stunned, and my vision was getting blurrier by the second.

Bruised, bleeding, and in excruciating pain, I heard a gasp as Chad knelt down next to me. *Where did he come from? Is everyone here trying to kill me?* I went limp in his hold. I didn’t even have enough strength to struggle.

Chad leered at me as he held a knife to my throat. “Time to die, wolf.”

**Episode 1823**

MARTA

Torin burst into my room, nearly scaring me out of my skin.

“Oh my god, Torin, you scared the hell out of me! What is it?”

With everything going on—including the actual battle raging on the lawn—I was beyond jumpy, and Torin’s surprise entrance wasn’t doing me any favors.

“It’s Emmett, he needs your help!”

*Emmett? Ugh, no thanks.* “Sorry, not interested. That guy gives me the creeps. Can’t someone else handle this one?”

“No, Marta, we need you. It’s to save Ava’s life!”

“I’m not a doctor—or do you people around here think that a medium is a master at medicine on top of everything else?” I said as Torin grabbed my hand and yanked me down the hall to Ava’s room, not bothering to listen to me.

I was shocked when I saw her. Ava looked like death personified. She was sprawled out on her bed next to Ravi, an IV tube running between them.

“Marta! Can you help with the IV for a second?” Emmett shouted.

I shuddered. He was just as weird as I remembered, and he actually looked even creepier now. His pale skin seemed to glow in the bright lighting, and his eyes were wide and wild.

I took a few steps back. “I don’t think I’m the right person for this—blood makes me woozy. I wouldn’t want to pass out on top of the patient.”

“You’re strong, Marta, you can do it,” Lilac chimed in.

“Okay fine, since you’re twisting my arm and guilting me into it!” I shouted, causing everyone to look at me strangely. I sometimes forgot that they couldn’t hear Lilac. “What do you need me to do?”

“Take this,” Emmet said, gently passing me the IV tube.

I took it and held it like it was a bomb that would self-destruct if I mishandled it. I glanced at Ravi. Another naked werewolf. I wondered if I would ever get used to seeing all of their nether regions all the time. I turned away to see Lilac frowning at me.

“You know I get jealous when you look at other werewolves.”

I rolled my eyes. Blood began to flow through the IV tube, and I cringed as I felt the warmth of it passing across my fingers. Ava moaned softly and stirred a little—which was a good sign, since she hadn’t moved an inch since I’d arrived. I stared down at the IV and then looked away quickly. I wished this would go a little faster. There was a reason why I’d never even considered going to medical school.

“It’ll be okay, Marta. If you can handle a house full of poltergeists and vampires, you can handle this,” Lilac said as he placed a ghostly hand on my shoulder.

I turned to look at him, and for a moment, he pulsed and flickered before my eyes. When he was solid again—well, as solid as a ghost could be, anyway—he had a confused look on his face.

“What’s wrong?” I mouthed.

“I feel like something’s pulling me away, trying to return me to the spirit world. It’s like the same thing that happens when you’re sleeping.”

“Strange. I wonder if it has something to do with the portal being opened?”

*Am I responsible for this? Did I put him in danger?*

“Marta, I need you to grab more gauze from my lab in the basement,” Emmett said, gently taking the blood-filled IV tube from me. “I’ve got this.”

Happy to be out of there, I went downstairs quickly and nearly jumped out of my skin again when the front door slammed open. It was Kira.

“We’re in trouble, Marta. Our witch defenses aren’t holding, and revenants are coming toward the house. Where’s the Alpha?” Kira shut and locked the door behind her and leaned back against it, like she was trying to bar the revenants from entering.

“I—I haven’t seen him. I don’t think he’s here—but there are injured people upstairs!”

“Okay, I have to warn them!” Kira said as she bounded up the stairs.

I turned as something banged against the door. I watched, frozen with fear, as a revenant with only one arm came smashing through the door, sending splinters of wood everywhere. I screamed.

“Run!” Lilac shouted.

I raced away and locked myself in one of the large studies. The revenant was right behind me and pounded on the door, shaking it on its hinges. If his last stunt was any indication, he was going to barrel straight through the door any second now. I was more scared that I’d ever been.

*I did NOT sign up for this!*

“I can help fight the revenant, but I need to kiss you first!”

He wanted to *what* right now?

“Lilac, how could you be thinking about making out at a time like this?!”

Lilac grinned. “Well, truth be told, I think about it all the time, so right now’s no exception—but I want you to kiss me so that I can become corporeal and help fight the revenant.”

“Lilac, I don’t know… What if something happens to you?”

“I’ll be fine, Marta. I’m tougher than you think. I can handle a mindless ghoul—no problem. I want to do this—I don’t know what I would do if anything happened to you, and that’s the only thing I’m worried about. Do it!”

I turned to him as the door began to give way to the revenant’s pounding, and pecked him on the lips, but my heart wasn’t in it. I was too afraid—too shaken up by this whole thing—and I didn’t want to risk Lilac’s safety for any reason. More and more, I was getting attached to him—in more ways than one.

“Nothing’s happening!” Lilac looked down at his still ghostly hands. “Come on, Marta. I know things are weird right now, but you have to want to kiss me in order for it to work. So concentrate and do it right this time!” Lilac demanded, his expression dead serious.

“But Lilac, I don’t want you to fight! I’m worried about you!”

I was also worried about the door, which was seconds from caving in, but there had to be another way, something we could do that wouldn’t involve Lilac and put him in danger.

Lilac took my hand in his ghostly hold. “You have to trust me, Marta.”

I trusted him, but it was still the last thing I wanted to do. Still, I closed my eyes and kissed him, mustering up every bit of passion that I felt for him as his lips slid against mine. Hot tears made their way through my eyelids and fell to my cheeks.

I would never forgive myself if Lilac got hurt. I linked my arms around his neck and deepened the kiss, not wanting to let him go as his body filled in more and more. He wrapped his hands around me, and the feel of his solid touch sent bolts of desire rushing through me. We stayed that way until the door crashed open.

“Lilac!” I screamed as the revenant grabbed me around the neck and tried to pull me out of the study and into the hallway.

He lunged forward, grabbed the revenant by the neck, and yanked him back into the room while I braced my feet on the floor and reared back, trying to help Lilac get control of the hissing monster. I fell to the floor, but the revenant wouldn’t let go, his one disgusting hand still latched onto my shoulder. I screamed and screamed as I watched Lilac and the revenant fighting.

Luckily, Lilac was able to get a lot of punches in, since the revenant’s one hand was occupied with holding me down. Still, the revenant was holding his own, dodging a lot of Lilac’s attacks and countering with kicks and headbutts that caught Lilac by surprise. Lilac kept jumping out of the way of the revenant’s snapping mouth, narrowly missing a few attempts that would have taken him down for sure.

I tried to pry the revenant’s hand off me by yanking at his gross, bony fingers, but then with one fast movement, he hurled me against the fireplace. I fell to the ground, stunned and moaning in pain. Once I recovered, I grabbed a poker and lunged at the revenant. I missed and tripped over the large rug, which had gotten crumpled up in the confusion. I crashed through a table, and this time I stayed down. Dazed, I watched the fight continue. Now that the revenant could use his free hand, Lilac was struggling against him, and I was worried that he wasn’t going to make it out of this unharmed.

Without warning, the revenant grabbed Lilac by the neck and crashed through the window. Even though it hurt to move even an inch, I got up and tried to follow, but I didn’t move fast enough. All I could do was watch in horror as the revenant dragged Lilac away.

**Episode 1824**

I stood there, frozen in place as I watched Artemis and Greyson kiss. I had seen a lot of horrible, shocking things in my life, but this took the cake. The kiss was deep, passionate, and full of hunger and longing and desire. As I watched them share such an intimate, charged moment, I felt like I was having an out-of-body experience.

I wanted to look away, but I couldn’t. It would have been completely different if it were just a dry, quick kiss—but this wasn’t that at all. Their hands were moving all over each other’s bodies. Occasionally, they broke the kiss for a quick moment to caress each other’s faces and gaze into each other’s eyes before they dove back in, their lips twisting together and making wet, smacking noises.

“What the *fuck* is happening?” I asked. Seeing my mate and my sister kiss felt like a punch in the gut that wouldn’t quit. How was this possible? How was this happening? *I’m hallucinating. That’s right—none of this is real. Or I’m dreaming. I’m probably asleep in bed right now! Or… am I dead? Yes, that’s it, I’m dead!*

“Look at me, Cali! Calm down, this isn’t real!” Big Mac said, grabbing my shoulders and looking me in the eyes.

“It looks real as hell to me!” Rishika snapped.

Rishika winced at the passionate scene before us. I could tell that she was hurting just as badly as me, trying to convince herself that we somehow weren’t seeing what we were seeing.

“It’s not real,” Big Mac reiterated. “They’re both under a spell or something stronger. Don’t give in to it—that’s what that evil asshole inside them wants you to do.”

I nodded, still feeling like my entire world was crashing down around me. Big Mac was probably right, though—they had to be possessed. I remembered my interactions with both of them over the last few hours. They hadn’t been themselves at all. It was painful as hell to watch them doing this, and I didn’t think I’d ever forget the image, but under the circumstances, I had no choice but to give them the benefit of the doubt.

Right then, as if he could sense my anguish, Greyson turned, looked me in the eye, and flashed me a chilling smile. I’d never seen him smile like that, and I never wanted to see it again. *He’s taking pleasure in this!* Artemis laughed, throwing her head back as she cackled loudly at the sky. *Well, at least they aren’t kissing anymore?*

“Our pain… It’s only fueling Letifer!” I said to Rishika as their lips connected again and they kissed with even more fervor than before.

I scrunched my eyes shut and then opened them, hoping that I could blink them away. My mind replayed the phrase over and over in my head, *This isn’t real. This isn’t real.* I had to keep telling myself that this wasn’t them—this wasn’t the real Greyson and Artemis. They would never do this to me, ever.

It *was* Letifer. He was using them like puppets for his own plans. Rage swelled inside me, and before I knew it, I blasted them with my Fae power. It wasn’t nearly strong enough to knock them down—they barely flinched—but it did push them back a step, into the ghost pond.

“Stop, Cali, remember what I said! I’m calling the shots here, and I did *not* tell you to send a jealous Fae blast at them!” Big Mac yelled, grabbing my arm and pulling me back.

“Artemis! Stop this! What are you doing? This isn’t you!” Rishika pleaded. Artemis responded with a sneer.

“Cali, stop!” Big Mac yelled as I broke away from her and ran toward Greyson.

Artemis lunged at me, and then Xavier was there, his wolf snarling as he intercepted Artemis and they both crashed to the ground in a tangled, thrashing mess. They tussled on the ground, rolling over and over on the muddy banks of the ghost pond, coming close to splashing into it a couple of times.

“Don’t hurt her, Xavier!” I called out. Even though she was being controlled and the thing controlling her obviously wished me harm, that body still belonged to my sister, and I didn’t want her to get it back covered in Xavier’s claw and teeth marks.

Rishika shifted and rushed toward Xavier, and then everything fell further into chaos. I could barely keep track of what was happening, or who was scratching, biting, and hitting who. The three of them rolled around, scrapping ferociously and fighting for control before Artemis managed to break free and scramble out of their reach.

“Xavier!” I called out as I ran to his side. At the same time, Greyson stepped forward to shield Artemis, protecting her just like he used to protect me. The sight of it hurt me almost as deeply as watching them kiss.

Xavier stood in front of me, growling a fearsome warning. The hair on his back was standing on end, and he was showing his fangs as if to demonstrate what awaited them if they dared to cross him.

*Are you okay?* Xavier asked me.

I didn’t know how to answer. I’d just seen one of the most horrible things ever, and I didn’t know what to think. My heart felt like it was breaking into pieces. Once again, my mates were ready to kill each other—but it certainly felt different this time. Greyson wasn’t himself—he and Artemis were under a spell, for sure.

Greyson looked like a total stranger. There didn’t seem to be a shred of the man I loved inside him, and Artemis didn’t look like my sister, either. It was a lot to take in.

Greyson lunged at Xavier, but I blasted him back with my Fae magic. I hated to turn my powers on Greyson, but he wasn’t leaving me any choice in his present state.

“No, Greyson. You’re not going to hurt Xavier! This isn’t you! Can’t you see us? We’re your pack. Your family.”

Greyson just looked at me, not bothering to respond, a vacant look in his eyes.

I was starting to get choked up. “Don’t you see me, Greyson? Can’t you see your mate, standing right here in front of you? Your mate who loves you so very much.”

It didn’t escape me that Xavier was there and that this was probably the last thing he wanted to hear, but I had to tell Greyson what was in my heart—I only hoped that I could get through to him and stop this.

“I don’t know what’s happening, Artemis, but I know you’re good. You’re the best person I know. I know you’re being tricked into this. Let us help you—let me help you!” Rishika cried.

I stepped toward Greyson. “Come on, Greyson, come back to us. I know you’re in there somewhere.” I held out my hand as Xavier came up beside me.

*Leave Greyson to me, Cali*, Xavier said.

“I won’t. I saw you fighting, and I’ve seen it so many times before. If it keeps going like this, I could lose both my mates.”

My breath caught as Greyson looked down at my hand. *Yes, Greyson, it’s me!* I held my breath. Finally, he was going to break free of this spell. I stretched my hand closer, willing him to take it, but he didn’t. With a sinister look in his eyes, he took Artemis’s hand, instead.

Then they both looked at me and spoke in unison. “We are immune to your magic, Cali.” The voice was strange and distant, and it sent a chill racing down my spine. “Now that we have the orb, we will not be stopped by your futile efforts.”

Greyson held up the orb, and I spun to look at Big Mac.

“Tell them,” I urged. “Tell them the truth!”

Big Mac smirked as she stepped up to Greyson and Artemis. “You’re both fooling yourselves. The orb is fake. There’s nothing in it that will protect you from anything. You’re being used—Letifer is using you. He doesn’t care about you one bit. Fight it—fight him off and come back to us so we can finish him off for good.”

My heart leapt up to my throat as I watched for Greyson’s reaction. I concentrated and tried to mind link with him. *Come back to me, Greyson. Come back and we’ll fix this together. Xavier wants to help you, I want to help you, and so do Big Mac and Rishika. We’re here for you. Please, come back to us.*

Greyson didn’t even look at me. He kept his eyes on Big Mac, glaring at her like he absolutely hated her guts. “*You* are the fool, witch. You can’t defeat me!” he said, crushing the orb to dust in his hand.

Then, in a lightning-fast move, he grabbed Big Mac by the neck.

**Episode 1825**

VIOLET

I yelped as Chad pressed the knife harder against my throat. One false move, and he would break the skin. Maybe this was it. I’d had a good run, but I was still so young and I had a lot of life left in front of me. I whimpered. I couldn’t believe it was ending like this. Killed by a stupid hunter. I thought of Charlie and reached out again to try to mind link.

*Charlie. This is goodbye. I love you.*

I closed my eyes and waited. My eyes shot back open and I gasped in surprise as Chad released me. He leaned close as if examining me, a strange look on his face.

With considerable effort, I hoisted my aching, bruised body upright. I knew that I should probably take advantage of this moment and run, but I was so badly hurt, there was no way I’d make it even a few steps before collapsing again. The silver was beginning to take its toll.

“You’re really a wolf, aren’t you?” Chad asked, his eyes narrowed as he stroked his chin.

I wasn’t sure what kind of response he was looking for—he was literally looking at me in wolf form—so I just stared at him, waiting.

“A wolf saved my life before,” Chad continued, his expression softening. “The least I could do is return the favor to another one.”

I nodded, noting how conflicted Chad looked. I realized then that he might not actually kill me. Finally, a stroke of luck! We both turned at the sound of Zachery crashing through the woods after me. Chad grabbed me and dragged me away as my strength waned to almost nothing. He pulled me into a narrow crack of an opening in the face of the cliff that I’d toppled over only a few minutes ago. My back hurt again at the memory of hitting the rock on my way down. I only hoped that I hadn’t broken anything—especially when all the bones in my body *felt* like they’d been shattered into pieces.

“Stay quiet,” Chad said, crouching down and pulling branches and leaves in closer to us as we hunkered down inside.

*He’s hiding us from Zachery!*

I kept quiet, every inch of my body throbbing in sharp pain as we waited for Zachery to move on. I could hear him calling out for me. “Come out, come out wherever you are! I’m a nice guy, remember? I’m not going to hurt you. Come out so we can clear this up!” I closed my eyes and held my breath until his voice and the sound of his footsteps got farther and farther away, until they faded away completely.

“I think he’s gone,” Chad said, cocking his head to the side to listen. “Come on.”

He got to his feet and led me out of the narrow cave.

I collapsed to the ground as soon as we cleared the entrance. My throat felt tight and my head was throbbing so badly, I knew that it wouldn’t be too long before I passed out. *Shit!* I’d escaped Zachery only to die by silver poisoning. What a stupid ending.

Chad started walking and was a few feet away before he realized that I wasn’t following. “Hey, you coming, or not?”

I could barely lift my head. *Should I trust him?* I didn’t have any better alternatives, and there was no way I’d be able to find my way back to Charlie in the state I was in. If I ran into Zachery while I was weakened like this, he’d have a field day with me, so staying with Chad was the best option—but I wasn’t sure if I could go much farther. I struggled to my feet, my legs threatening to give out the entire time. I walked a few steps before I crumpled to a heap on the ground again.

“Wow, you’re really hurt,” Chad remarked, standing over me. He bent down and lifted me up and helped to guide me forward. “Just so you know, I’m not doing this because I care about you. Not by a long shot. But fair is fair. I’m paying off a debt to your kind. Nothing more, nothing less, so don’t read too much into this.”

I fell to the ground again, and Chad coaxed me back to my feet. I couldn’t help but think how lucky I was to have run into him and not any of the other hunters. Zachery had a personal vendetta against me, for sure—but the others probably would have killed me on sight. I trembled as I remembered the room that we’d gone into when we’d come out of the tunnel. The room had been a horror show, its walls lined with trophies—the heads of shifters and other supernatural creatures. I’d never seen anything so gruesome. And they thought *we* were the monsters.

“Next time we meet,” Chad continued, “things might be different. I’ve tracked down a few werewolves in my day, never met one I liked. But again, if someone—or something—saves your life, you have to return the favor however you can. It’s the only way to balance things out.”

Chad kept talking, but I was only half listening as my mind faded in and out. All of my strength was concentrated on keeping myself walking, and it was a slow, shuffling walk at that. The only clear thoughts I had were of Charlie. I would give my last breath, right here and right now, if I could just see him one last time.

Chad stopped short and put his hand out to stop me. “Be quiet,” he said, listening.

We waited.

*Oh no, are there revenants out there?* If so, we were both goners. Chad lifted me up and sat me down to rest against a fence overgrown with vines. *Wait a minute!* I looked around. I remembered that fence, and the look and smell of the forest around us. We were right outside Mrs. Riggins’s B and B. She’d helped me before—maybe she would do it again? There was no way to know whether she would be willing to stick her neck out for me this time, but it was the only hope I had of making it through this alive. She’d told me that her home was a safe zone. I would have to believe that that was true.

Chad grabbed me and started to lead me away, but I dug my claws into the dirt and snarled as I held my ground. He paused and considered me closely. Knowing that I needed to be able to communicate, I shifted.

Chad stumbled back in shock. “Shit! Daisy?!”

I opened my mouth, trying to figure out a response.

“I fucking *knew it*! The Chadster is never wrong!” Chad said, pumping his fist in the air and grinning like a maniac. “I knew from the moment I laid eyes on you that you were a werewolf! Hell yeah! My tracking senses are on point!”

I almost rolled my eyes, but I was too tired, and too in his debt. So I smiled slightly instead. “Right, you were right. I’m a werewolf. Um… so are you still willing to help me?”

“I’m this far, aren’t I? I never half-ass anything,” Chad said, peeling off his jacket. His eyes caught sight of the dark purple silver wound on my arm as he reached to place the jacket over my shoulders. “Whoa. Did Zachery do that to you?”

I nodded as I coughed and leaned against the fence, still feeling like I might pass out at any moment. I threaded my arms into the jacket sleeves, thankful for the warmth, and the modesty it offered.

“I—I really need to get some help or I’m going to die from the silver poisoning. I’m starting to lose consciousness.” I pointed at the house behind us. “The lady who lives in this B and B might be able to help.”

“Okay, well let’s go.” Chad helped me over the fence. I could tell that he was being careful not to bump against my wound.

He helped me up the stairs to the porch, and we knocked on the door. I could hear Mrs. Riggins’s dog barking loudly from somewhere inside. Hopefully she had that little monster chained away, since I was in no state to face him at the moment. After a few seconds, Mrs. Riggins came to the door, opening it a crack, keeping the chain lock on.

“What do you want?” Her eyes widened once she realized it was me. She didn’t look particularly happy to see me, but she didn’t look unhappy, either. “What are you doing here, Violet?”

“She’s hurt,” Chad said, glancing at me, but saying nothing about my name. “She needs help.”

“Of course, bring her inside!” Mrs. Riggins unchained the door and opened it up wider to let us in.

“I was attacked with a silver blade,” I wheezed, relying on Chad as he helped me over to a seat at the kitchen table. I folded my arms on the table and laid my head on them, trying to stop the room from spinning. “It’s poisoning me.”

Someone started pounding on the door. Mrs. Riggins went to look through the peephole, her brow furrowed in concern. I was too weak to even get up and try to hide.

Chad and I exchanged a look. Shit. Had the hunters found us?

**Episode 1826**

MARTA

“Lilac, no!” I screamed, completely freaking as I watched the revenant pulling Lilac away through the grass. Every inch of my body hurt, but I shook it off and crawled through the shattered window with the fireplace poker in my hand, taking care not to cut myself on any of the jagged glass.

I landed awkwardly on the ground, nearly skewering myself with the poker in the process. *Wow. Death is around every corner for me tonight.*

“Lilac, don’t let that asshole take you!” I screamed as I started running after them.

This was really bad. Lilac was corporeal right now, so if the revenant hurt him… what would happen to him? I didn’t want to wait to find out, and I was certain that Lilac didn’t want to know, either.

I picked up my pace. “Lilac! I’m coming for you, hold on!”

Lilac was trying to twist out of the revenant’s hold, but he wasn’t having much luck. A howl cut through the air, and a wolf appeared and tackled the revenant from behind, dragging the hissing creature down to the ground. The wolf snarled and tore savagely into the revenant’s belly, ripping him apart before our eyes. *Damn! That wolf means business.* Lilac and I ran to each other and embraced. It felt so good to be back in his arms, and it felt even better to know that he was safe, all thanks to—who? Who was the wolf who’d helped us?

“What—who was that wolf, Lilac?”

“It’s my wolf,” Lilac said with a grin.

I hugged Lilac again, noticing that he was already starting to fade. I wasted no time kissing him again, wanting to feel his real, warm lips on mine again before it was too late. This time, I didn’t have to work to build up the passion. We kissed deeply, our arms wrapped tightly around each other as we explored each other’s mouths, forgetting where we were for a moment.

Lilac broke away and glanced around. “We need to get back inside, quick!”

But it was too late. We were already surrounded by revenants, their glowing orange eyes locked on to us as they approached. Lilac’s wolf paced back and forth in front of us, growling ferociously. His wolf had proven himself to be a force to be reckoned with, but there were way too many revenants for him to take on, even if we tried to help, and more were appearing by the second.

*Why are there so many of these things?*

“Lilac—there’s got to be nearly a hundred of them, and they just keep coming. We can’t take them all on!” I’d never even fought one before, and the last time I’d tried, I’d missed and gone crashing through a table.

“Calm down,” Lilac said, arching an eyebrow. “Wait, hold on—it looks like the revenants are turning away from the house. And… following us? But why would they?”

I saw what Lilac meant. It was uncanny, the way they had all shifted their attention away from the pack house—but why were they changing direction like that, all at once? Lilac didn’t seem wrong either—they were coming right for us.

“We need to make a break for it, *now*!” I screamed.

We took off into the night, not sure exactly where we were headed at this point. I hazarded a glance behind me. “Oh no they *are* following us!”

They were right on our heels. Though they weren’t quite as fast as we were, it was still an intimidating sight—especially since they were gaining momentum and picking up speed by the second. I turned to see that we were nearing the trench.

“Lilac, the trench! How are we going to get across that?”

“Get on!” Lilac shouted. He’d already swung himself up onto his wolf’s back, and he reached for me, yanking me up behind him. He gave me a quick kiss. “For insurance!” he said with a wink.

Effortlessly, Lilac’s wolf leapt over the trench and stuck a perfect landing on the other side. Still, we hadn’t gotten rid of the revenants. They were quickening their pace, and there was no mistaking the fact that they were following us.

“But why are they following us? Is it because I’m a bridge? How are we supposed to get rid of them?”

Lilac’s wolf was still running, and we didn’t make it that far before another stream of revenants poured out of the forest and headed straight for us. Lilac’s wolf made a swift change of direction, only to run toward another group of approaching revenants. We were surrounded.

Cold, liquid fear raced through my body. “Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god. What are we going to do? There are ten times as many as there were before! They’re going to eat us!”

Lilac’s wolf howled, and a chorus of other wolf howls called back. It had to be the Redwoods and the Blue Bloods. Would they come to help us?More than that, would they be able to make it in time?

I shut my eyes and buried my face in Lilac’s back. I could hear the moans and hisses of the revenants as they closed in. I wondered how bad it hurt to be gnawed on by revenant teeth. Maybe it wouldn’t be as painful as I imagined, since some of them were missing teeth? All I could think was that I would’ve done anything to be back in Bert’s house right now. Thinking about it now—especially compared to all this—it didn’t seem so bad at all. At least I’d been alive and not about to be torn to bits by murderous revenants. Stuck in time, never aging, not having a whole lot of fun, yes—but alive.

“Hold on!” Lilac yelled. His wolf launched forward, heading straight for a mass of revenants. He dove into the mess of them, trying to break through to the other side. I swung my poker to and fro as we went, and even managed to hack at a few of them as we whizzed by. I swung and hit a revenant in the ribs, and the poker got lodged in its rotten rib cage, causing it to slip out of my grasp. I looked back; the revenant was still ambling toward us with the poker sticking out of its stomach. It hadn’t even missed a step.

Suddenly, a huge wolf appeared in front of us.

“That’s Mace!” Lilac called back, his voice quaking with excitement.

The massive Alpha wasted no time tearing into the group of revenants, ripping them apart as he raced out of their reach. We continued our charge, zigzagging through the throng until I slipped off the wolf’s back and hit the ground hard.

“Ow,” I wheezed, rolling over onto my back as the revenants closed in on me. I could see Lilac—he’d stopped right after I fell off, but he was still a few paces ahead. He was trying to circle back to get me, but there were so many revenants between us that he and his wolf were having a hard time pushing through.

My panic ratcheted up a notch as I jumped to my feet and took off running. I didn’t have anything to defend myself with, and the revenants were literally so close I could smell their rotting, decaying flesh. The ground was soft and muddy, and despite my best efforts to stay upright, I slipped and fell over and over again as I tried to put as much distance as I could between myself and the revenants.

“Marta!” Lilac called.

I looked back at him and saw that he was fading fast. Soon, he would lose all corporeality and he wouldn’t be able to help at all—he and his wolf would start going straight through the revenants like they weren’t even there.

“Lilac!” I called out, terror seizing my body.

I screamed when I saw something out of the corner of my eye. Spirits! They were materializing all around me in the forest. *Are they saying my name?*

“Help me!” I called out to them—since they seemed to know me and all. “Help us! We need your help!”

Suddenly, I tripped over a gnarled branch on the ground and landed face down in the dirt. Once again, I was immobilized as pain shot through my already bruised and battered body. I rolled over onto my back, literally seeing stars floating in front of my eyes, along with all the spirits and fast approaching revenants. *This is it. Finally, my time is up.*

“Marta! Can you hear me?”

It was Lilac. He was coming toward me, a shimmering beacon in the night. I could feel the energy of the ghosts all around me, swooping close and still calling out my name in the darkness. I closed my eyes and started to harness their energy, letting it fill me until I felt like I might burst. I got to my feet just as the revenants started to descend on me, their orange eyes glowing like blazing fire everywhere I turned.

With a scream, I released the energy, and it exploded in a flash of blinding light, ripping through the revenants and making them all collapse to the ground.

**Episode 1827**

XAVIER

I kept my eyes riveted to Greyson, knowing that if I moved too quickly, he would snap Big Mac’s neck like a toothpick. No sudden moves. I couldn’t risk it. It wasn’t that I was at all fond of the witch, but she’d proven her worth to the pack a million times over. I owed her. If Greyson was thinking clearly, if any shred of the real him was active inside him right now, he wouldn’t dare hurt his mother’s fiancée. I could only hope that there was some part of him that would hear me if I called out to him to stop this bullshit and quit messing around.

I sent a cautious mind link out to Greyson. *Are you in there, brother? If so, put the witch down. You don’t want to harm her.*

Greyson didn’t answer, but he had a confused look on his face as he continued to lift Big Mac higher and higher above him, his grip tightening around her neck.

“Put her down! Oh my god, Greyson, don’t do this! Put her down!” Cali screamed. She turned to Artemis. “Stop him! Why won’t you stop him!”

*Probably because she’s just as possessed as he is.*

I inched a bit closer to Greyson, trying to determine if I could move quickly enough to get to Big Mac before Greyson did any damage. Suddenly, Big Mac’s eyes rolled to the whites, and Greyson released her.

“Ah!” he moaned, clutching his hands in pain and waving them around like he was trying to put a fire out.

*What the…?* I couldn’t believe it. Both of Greyson’s hands were smoking, like they were burning. I dove to catch Big Mac before she hit the ground, but she wasn’t falling—in fact—she was hovering in the air. Cali gasped as Big Mac drifted slowly toward the ground, making a soft landing on her feet and rubbing her neck with a wince.

Big Mac turned to look at Greyson. “I’ll tell you this one time, Letifer. Don’t you lay a finger on me again!” Big Mac turned to look at Cali. “I hope you appreciate that I didn’t just turn your precious mate to ash, because I could have.”

Still clutching his hand, Greyson shoved past me to plunge his burning hands into the ghost pond. They sizzled loudly as soon as they made contact with the water, but he still seemed to be in pain. I made a mental note—one of the many that I’d made since I’d known her—to never get on Big Mac’s bad side. She was nothing if not a powerful force that was not to be underestimated.

Cali rushed to Greyson’s side, but Artemis stopped her, grabbing her by her shirt collar and holding her back while Cali windmilled her arms in a wild attempt to get away and run to Greyson’s side. Cali and Artemis struggled for a few moments before Rishika dove into the mix, pulling at Artemis and trying to get her to stop.

“Don’t do this, Artemis! Please stop! Come back to your fucking senses, Artemis!” Rishika was shaking her as if hoping that the real Artemis might be jogged back into reality.

I watched it all, weighing my options. *How can I stop this? I don’t even fucking know what I’m fighting. How can I fight something that’s hiding inside my brother? Or Artemis?*

I knew that Cali was expecting me to do something—to save Greyson and Artemis—but at the moment, I didn’t have the slightest idea of how to do that. I thought back to the confused look on Greyson’s face when I’d attempted to mind link with him. Maybe that meant something. Maybe it didn’t. *We’ll see.*

I shifted back to human and took a few cautious steps toward Greyson where he knelt by the pool, still trying to stop the burning in his hands.

*Greyson, are you there?* I mind linked again. I concentrated, surprised when I heard the faintest reply, so low that I almost missed it.

*Xavier! Get away from the water! Get Cali out of here, it’s not safe!*

Yes! Greyson was still in there somewhere. Before I could tell everyone the good news, something reached out of the water and latched on to my ankle. I kicked and struggled as it tried to drag me down into the ghost pond. With one hard yank, I broke free and scrambled as far away from the water as I could. I watched in horror as orange lights materialized in the depths of the pond, quickly approaching the surface.

“What’s happening?” Cali wailed, just as a mass of hissing revenants rose up from the water.

“Get back, now!” Big Mac yelled.

We all watched in horror as a torrent of revenants began to drag themselves out of the water. They all looked like they’d been in there for way too long. What little flesh they had clinging to their yellowed bones was a swollen, white, blobby mess. Their arms and legs were bent at strange angles, and their orange eyes shone into the night as they dragged themselves toward us, putrid water rolling off them as they advanced, gnashing their mossy, rotten teeth.

We all backed away as we took in the unbelievable sight. They didn’t quite look like the revenants we’d been fighting. They were scarier and more disgusting than any of the other revenants we’d seen up to this point, which was saying a lot. I didn’t care, though. I would kill them, just like I’d killed the others. Anything to protect Cali and the rest of the pack.

“Cali, don’t do a damn thing!” Big Mac and I said in unison. We shared a quick, exasperated look.

“Rishika, get ready to fight!” I called.

“Oh, don’t worry about me. I’m ready,” Rishika replied, already getting into a battle stance and flexing her hands in and out of fists.

“There’s no point in fighting!” Artemis said, her creepy, distant-sounding voice echoing around us like it was coming from everywhere and nowhere, all at once. “Don’t you see that you’ve already lost?”

Artemis turned to the ghost pond as the revenants gathered around us, filling the air with their rotten, putrid odor. It was enough to make me gag. Artemis and Greyson linked hands and raised them above their heads. In Artemis’s other hand, she revealed a knife that she used to slice through her and Greyson’s raised palms in one expert movement. Their combined blood ran down their arms and dripped into the water.

“What’s happening?” Cali squealed.

“I don’t know.”

I reached for her hand as the water started bubbling and steaming, casting a thick vapor all around us, so that I couldn’t even see directly in front of me. An evil laugh raced through the air as a form materialized in the mist, its glowing eyes cutting through the haze of the vapor. As I looked closer, I realized that it appeared to be made of the thick mist that rolled in waves off the water. Slowly, it started to coalesce into something more defined as it drifted up from the water.

“Stay back!” I said, yanking Cali behind me.

The figure stepped forward, slowly taking shape before us as it neared the muddy bank of the ghost pond. The figure was no longer made of mist, but had turned into what appeared to be a physical body. Still, it was ghost-like at the same time. I narrowed my gaze, trying to see it fully through the foggy air. I didn’t want whatever it was to get the jump on us.

It was a tall, muscular, man with pale white skin and long, wavy, black hair. His evil laugh boomed around us again, sending a literal chill through the air. His eyes had grown blindingly bright, and they glowed like an open flame.

*Fuck. This guy is jacked!* I thought as I took in the sight of his bulging biceps, his taut pecs, and his rippling six pack. It was obvious that he wasn’t one to skip leg day, either, since his legs and calf muscles looked like two massive baseball bats.

“Who—who is that?” Cali asked, her voice small and tinged with absolute terror.

I hated hearing her that way, so afraid. I had no idea what this guy had in store for us or how I was going to protect her from it, but I would do everything in my power to do so. I’d die before I let anything happen to Cali. Were Greyson in his right mind, I knew he’d agree. There was no way in hell I was going to leave her side.

I edged backward more and more, pushing Cali as I went. I didn’t know exactly who this fucker was, but I would’ve bet anything that it was Letifer.

My suspicions were realized as Greyson and Artemis knelt before the man, their faces all but touching the ground.

He looked down at them and smiled. “Ah, it’s good to be back.”

**Episode 1828**

Letifer was here. In the flesh. Somewhat, at least—he was shimmering and rippling, caught between life and death. Either way…

*Uh, this is not good!* I screamed inside my head, taking in every inch of his form. He just stood there by the pond, tall and broad and jacked. He looked like a cross between Fabio and Brad Pitt from *Legends of the Fall*, long hair and all. And okay, *perhaps* I could see why Didi had been so drawn to him.

But that had been BEFORE.

Before Letifer had become evil incarnate.

I could barely wrap my head around the fact that Greyson and Artemis were kneeling before him right now. Greyson, who was a strong-willed Alpha, his pride as unshakeable as a mountain. And Artemis, my sister, the only person I’d ever met who was as stubborn as me—I couldn’t believe she had succumbed.

How fucking powerful was Letifer to make these two actually *kneel*?

The question made a chill run down my spine. My anxiety was overcome by fury—I wanted to blast Letifer away, to tear him into pieces, and the violence of my thoughts startled me. It didn’t matter, though—I couldn’t hurt Letifer, not when it meant hurting Greyson and Artemis, who were directly in his path.

*How the hell did we all end up here?* I thought, aghast, turning to Xavier.

“What the fuck is happening right now?” I demanded.

A stern-faced Xavier gripped my arm. He’d probably realized I was ready to get the explosions going over here.

Between his teeth, he whispered, “I don’t know. Stay calm.”

Letifer smiled at me, all teeth and with the charm of a barracuda. “Listen to your Alpha, girl. You don’t want to do anything rash. It could cost all of you dearly.” He gave Big Mac a scorching look. “Same goes for you, witch.”

I saw Big Mac narrow her eyes like she wanted to tear him into a million pieces.

Letifer glanced between all of us. “Need I remind you that Deidamia paid a price for defying me?”

“*You* killed Didi?” I asked, gasping. My voice came out choked; the memory of Didi talking about Letifer, about loving him so dearly, about them loving each other burst inside my head. Didi had been ready to kill Letifer, too. She had seen how corrupt he’d become, and yet, I couldn’t help but wonder: Hadn’t there been a part of her that had still loved him?

I asked him that very question.

“How could you hurt her? Wasn’t there a part of you that still loved Didi? How could you do that to her without another thought?”

Letifer’s eyes flashed with menace. “Deidamia was in love with a fantasy. She never loved the real me—she didn’t want to see my true self. She did not accept me as I was and wanted to end me herself. She paid for it.”

Oh, wow. This man was the poster boy for abusive relationships.

*I will blast him, so help me god!*

“You’re standing there jabbering all fucking philosophical, but you still haven’t told us what the hell you want,” Xavier snapped. “Why are you here?”

Letifer arched an eyebrow, turning to Big Mac. “I want the bridge.”

Big Mac went rigid. “You will *not* touch Marta,” she snarled.

Letifer smiled. “The bridge has no choice, witch. She will help me return to the flesh, or she will perish, along with the rest of you.”

I was boiling with fury.

“Oh, you—” I hissed, and was about to charge forward when Xavier grabbed me by the elbow.

Letifer ignored me, turning to Greyson, who still knelt at his feet. “Do what you failed to do before, boy. Bring me the girl.”

Greyson stood, as if he was nothing but a puppet. He nodded, his eyes vacant, his expression empty.

“Greyson, please, don’t do this!” I screamed, still being held back by Xavier.

*Please, Greyson, fight this!* I mind linked, but I was met by a wall. *This isn’t you! Can’t you hear me? Your love?*

Without a glance in my direction, Greyson turned toward the woods, shifted, and ran off.

“Greyson, no!” I struggled against Xavier’s grip.

“STOP!” he ordered.

I didn’t have the time to protest. I gasped as Letifer, his form made of shimmers and ripples, raised his hands. On his command, the pond revenants started moving toward us.

*Okay, this is bad!*

“Cali…” This time, when Xavier tugged on my arm, I let him pull me away. Myself, my mate, Rishika, and Big Mac—all four of us backed up slowly. When we were twenty feet away, the revenants formed a circle around Letifer, keeping us out.

Letifer was now out of earshot, so I instantly turned to Xavier.

“Xavier, please,” I whispered. “You can’t let your brother go—he’s Letifer’s puppet. Greyson would never do this if he weren’t under Letifer’s control. He would die before turning on his own pack.”

Xavier looked away, shaking his head. “I know, but I won’t let you run after him and straight into danger.”

“But you could—”

Xavier stared at me sharply. “I could run after him myself? I’m not leaving you out here with these *things* roaming around!”

“But—”

“He won’t listen to me, Cali,” Xavier declared. “He’s gone, don’t you see?”

His harsh words knocked the air out of me.

“I don’t want to leave Artemis, either,” Rishika spoke up.

I turned to look at her, and her eyes were glistening.

“We should split. up,” Big Mac told Xavier. “You take Cali and run after Greyson. Stop him from reaching Marta. Maybe he’ll listen if it’s the two of you.” She pointed between Rishika and herself. “We’ll deal with Letifer.”

“No way!” I shook my head. “Just the two of you? That’s not enough people for an attack, it’s too risky—”

“Big Mac is right, though. It’s our only option right now,” Xavier interrupted. He turned to the other two. “You need to create a diversion so we can slip away without having revenants run after us.”

Rishika nodded swiftly. “I’ve got this.”

She shifted into her wolf, took a few steps back, and then started running.

I held my breath, shell-shocked by her power as she charged at the monsters. She jumped right over the circle of revenants and leapt straight at Letifer.

And then all hell broke loose.

“Protect your master!” Letifer snarled to Artemis, and Artemis, her eyes still blank, blocked Rishika. She hissed at Rishika while Letifer stood behind Artemis like a king.

“Artemis, stop!” I screamed at my sister, but she wasn’t listening.

“Kill the wolf,” Letifer snapped at Artemis, pointing at Rishika.

“Artemis, no!” I shouted. My blood ran cold when I saw Artemis take a fighting stance. If she hurt Rishika… How could my sister ever come back from that? I knew I would lose my mind if I ever hurt either of my mates. I knew I would—

“Cali, get back!” Xavier shouted as Rishika howled, and at the same time, Big Mac delivered a purple blast of magic to force the revenants back. In the chaos, Xavier shifted.

*We have to go, Cali. Now*, he said.

I was torn—my sister was here, clearly pretty fucking lost, but Greyson was out there, and he needed my help too. Artemis had Rishika here to care for her, though, and Greyson had nobody. That realization made my choice easier.

*Now, Cali! We have to get to him before he gets to Marta!* Xavier said, and I snapped out of it, climbing onto his back. Before he started to run away, I took one last look over my shoulder.

Engulfed by vibrating purple magic, Big Mac was blasting revenants right and left. They fell back like broken dolls. At the same time, Artemis and Rishika were circling each other, hatred in Artemis’s face, agony in Rishika’s eyes—but determination as well. I knew in my heart that Rishika wouldn’t cause any deadly harm to my sister, and I stupidly prayed that that would somehow make Artemis shake out of her stupor.

*Hold on tight!* Xavier said, and I did, wrapping my arms around his neck.

And then we took off.

*I promise we’ll get to Greyson*, Xavier said after he started to run. *I promise we’ll stop him.*

Xavier meant well. I knew that. But I still couldn’t help but hear the hint of doubt in his voice that felt like a jab in the gut. I clenched my teeth, fighting to block out the sounds of struggle right behind me. And as Xavier started racing through the forest, with the cold air hitting me straight in the face, I hoped so badly. I hoped that we weren’t too late, and that Greyson hadn’t reached Marta. I hoped that Greyson hadn’t hurt a sweet, innocent girl.

I hoped that the worst hadn’t happened, and we would get to him in time.

Otherwise, I had no idea what would happen next.

**Episode 1829**

LOLA

Jacqueline, the cowardly little twat, just ran away.

Ray. *Away*.

I was horrified, but then really pissed off. *Oh my god*, this girl was the worst! I should have known that she wouldn’t help me!

Still fuming at Jacqueline and generally mad at everything, I snarled and kicked the revenant that was coming at me. It was a good hit, and the smelly thing fell to the ground.

Having bought a few seconds, I looked at the stake in my shoulder.

Was I supposed to pull it out? Could I bleed to death? Like, was that a thing for vamps? Should I *not* pull it out and just accept it as a part of me from now on? It was hurting so much right now, I was pretty sure it would hurt even more if I took it out, so…

The revenant hissed, interrupting my thoughts. It stood up once more, and I realized that it wasn’t like I had a whole lot of time to decide here. With the revenant about to charge at me once more, I bit the bullet, pulling the stake out of my shoulder.

It hurt like fucking *hell*.

Screaming, in both agonizing pain and fury, I fought to turn the bloody wood back on the revenant. My vision was a little spotty—who would’ve thought that something as simple as wood could fuck up a vampire so much?

“Get off her!” A shout pierced my ears, and a second later, I saw—

*Jacqueline?*

She grabbed the stake from my hands and stabbed the revenant in one swift movement. The thing screeched, writhing. While it was distracted, Jacqueline grabbed the sides of its head with both hands. She tore it off with ease, kicking the thing in the nuts at the same time.

I choked, staring at the posh vampire as she flipped her hair over her shoulder and dusted off her designer blouse. “So gross,” she said, wrinkling her nose. Then she turned to me, looking casual. “Sorry, did I make you wait?”

I wanted to smack her. What the *hell*!

“Yes!” I flicked her shoulder, and she gasped as if gravely injured. “Why did you leave in the first place?”

Jacqueline huffed, crossing her arms. “Whatever, maybe I was scared! But I came back, didn’t I?” She gestured at her blouse. “And even though I’m wearing vintage Chanel, I managed to get the job done!”

I wanted to strangle her.

“Are you serious right now?” I shouted at Jacqueline, who flinched. “You were thinking about not ruining your outfit while I was literally *dying*?”

Jacqueline rolled her eyes. “You’re so dramatic. I helped you, didn’t I? You’re alive.” She glanced at my injured shoulder. “*Your* shirt is ruined, though. Not that it matters, because it’s horrifying. Where did you get it, the Gap?”

This girl and I had very different definitions of the word “horrifying.” I felt all the blood rush to my head. I was about to grab and shake her when I heard Jay yell my name.

“Lola!”

I turned around to see revenants moving away from the house in a flurry, and I couldn’t believe my eyes. What the fuck was going on? Why in the hell were they suddenly retreating? It wasn’t—

Wait, was that Lilac riding a wolf with Marta?

*What the HELL is happening?*

“They’re following Marta!” Jay yelled at me, probably recognizing the shock on my face, but that still made no sense. Why on earth would these things be following the medium? Again, WTF!

Mace, along with his pack’s wolves, chased after the group of revenants. Now that the pain in my shoulder had eased, I realized I needed to join them—this couldn’t be good, and I had to help as much as I could.

But what if everything got worse? What if this was a trick?

There was only one way to find out, and that was following them.

“I’m going with Mace. You in or what?” I asked Jacqueline.

She shrugged. “As long as I don’t break a nail, I guess.”

“I love how your priorities are in the right place,” I told her, my eye twitching.

She smiled, my sarcasm eluding her. “Aw, thanks, bitch.”

I took a deep breath, ignoring both the urge to strangle Jacqueline and also the fading pain in my shoulder.

In an even voice, I said, “Stay by me. We can watch each other’s backs.”

“Just like I did earlier!” Jacqueline said happily.

“Yeah, but this time, do it quicker,” I said wryly, and she rolled her eyes.

I was about to tell her to shut up when Jay showed up next to me, reaching for my hand. “Are you okay?” he asked, his eyes filled with worry as he looked at my shoulder.

“Yes,” I said, nodding. I squeezed his hand, instantly feeling better. “Let’s do this.”

Jay wielded his axe, looking like a Norse god before our eyes. Then, all three of us followed Mace’s pack and the revenants, which seemed to be following Marta—who was riding a freaking *werewolf?*—like moths drawn to a flame.

But just as we were about to attack, a bright flash of light engulfed everyone and everything.

*What’s happening?*

I screamed, getting knocked backward. I felt the impact of falling on the ground, my bones rattling, the pain in my shoulder magnified. Panting, dazed, I fought to sit up, looking around. Everybody else had fallen back as well—Mace and his werewolves, Jay, Jacqueline. She’d probably broken that nail now, and would soon be very upset about it.

“What the fuck was that?” Jacqueline asked breathlessly as we both got to our feet. I was ready for a fight, Jay and his axe by my side, as we all looked ahead to figure out the source of the light.

As it faded out, a figure emerged.

*Marta?*

“Marta did that?” I squeaked, turning to Jay.

His eyes were wide. A few of Mace’s wolves shifted back to human and looked around at the revenants, still lying still on the ground.

“What the hell…” Jay said.

I swallowed roughly. “It’s like they all just dropped, like flies. And Marta’s light was the pesticide.”

“Make sure all of these things are dead!” Mace barked at his wolves in the background, while Jacqueline frowned at my words.

“But are they dead, really?” She poked one with her stake and added, “Seems so. At least they don’t have those awful orange eyes now…”

“We need to burn them before they rise again,” Jay said under his breath, realization dawning on his face. “We need to burn them before they rise again!” he shouted at Mace and the Blue Bloods. Mace nodded, his expression stern, and in the blink of an eye, Jay darted toward the house.

“Follow me!” he called at me over his shoulder.

I didn’t need to be told twice. I followed my mate, jumping over the dead revenants. I realized that Jay wasn’t going to the house after all—he stopped at one of the sheds nearby and started rummaging through it.

Jacqueline raised an eyebrow, turning to me. “Not that I’m judging your extremely hot mate’s competence here, but how are gardening tools going to help us, exactly?”

I stared at Jay, wide eyed. “Jay, what is—”

“Aha!” Jay turned to face us with a jump, holding a propane tank and a hose. “Lola, go get a lighter from the house!”

I blinked in alarm. “I’m sorry, but are you making a fucking *flamethrower*?”

Jay let out a strangled, almost hysterical laugh that was truly unlike him. “Do you have any other ideas right now?”

I gaped, turning to Jacqueline, who shrugged. “He’s right.”

I dashed into the house, getting in through the kitchen entrance and going straight for the drawers.

“Seriously?” I grumbled under my breath, going through everything frantically. “Why doesn’t this pack smoke? Or light fucking candles for baths?”

“Everyone in this pack is a peasant.” I heard Jacqueline’s voice, all snarky. For once, I had to agree with her.“Take a fucking candlelit bath, people! Forget about the environment and water usage, JUST DO IT!”

Before I could spiral further, I thankfully found some matches and then a candle lighter.

“What’s going on?” I heard Emmett ask from behind me. I faced him, flinching. “I saw the revenants leaving,” he added, looking stunned.

“Marta did something!” I said, still rifling through the drawers, searching for something to light shit on fire. “We’re trying to burn a whole bunch of revenant bodies, and we need to do it fast—who knows how long they’ll stay down?” I slammed the last drawer shut. “But I can’t find enough lighters!”

I stopped suddenly as an idea erupted inside my head. I felt crazy just thinking of it, but still. I couldn’t help myself. I turned to Emmett, who looked alarmed. Fair.

I took a step toward him. “How good are you at making things burn?”

**Episode 1830**

CHARLIE

I pounded on the door of the B and B again and again.

I knew that Violet was inside—she had to be. Her scent was all over the place, and I hadn’t stopped tracking her since I’d managed to get away from the revenants and my mother. The instructors were still up in the air about whether to kill me or to let me fight alongside them, but I didn’t give a damn about that.

The only thing driving me was finding her.

While the hunters had gained control over the fight with the revenants, I’d managed to slip away unnoticed. I’d rushed through the forest—catching Zachery’s scent along with Violet’s first, and then Chad’s…

If either one of them had hurt her, there would be hell to pay.

My wolf growled inside my chest, the sound vibrating through me, the mate instinct going nuts. I slammed against the door again, furious. “Let me in! Let me the fuck in before I burn this goddamn—”

The wood under my fist retreated, and I stumbled inside, smashing head first into the wall.

“You couldn’t wait two seconds, child? Goodness me, I was coming!” The old lady who had opened the door pointed at the hole in the wall. “Now who’s going to fix my wall?”

I jumped to my feet and took a deep breath, scenting the air. Violet was here, but I—I smelled blood too. *Fuck*.

“Is Violet hurt?” I asked the old lady.

“Leave it to a werewolf to not even say hello,” she said with a huff.

I blinked in surprise, pausing for a moment. “Wait, how do you know I’m a werewolf?”

The lady looked at me up and down, eyebrows arched. “You’re naked, hon.” She pointed upstairs. “You must be Violet’s mate—we thought you might be a hunter. They just went upstairs if you want to—”

I didn’t even register the rest of this woman’s sentence. My heart pounding, I scrambled up the stairs and saw an open door. Violet’s scent overwhelmed my senses.

*She’s in there!*

I ran in, elated that I would finally get to see her, but then…

I recoiled.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I snapped, glaring at Chad.

Chad, of all fucking people, was sitting next to Violet.

“I—”

“Get the fuck away from her,” I snarled, and the dude actually stood up, scrambling backward as I reached Violet, gently taking her hand. She was on the bed, her eyes closed, her breathing even. Chad stood holding gauze, poised ready to put it on her bloody arm.

And then I saw the dark veins spidering their way across her skin.

“What have you done to her?” I hissed at Chad, who flinched as I grabbed the gauze from him.

When Violet moved, though, I lost any and all interest in him.

“Charlie…”

“Sunshine,” I said, stroking her cheek. I felt woozy at the sight of her like this, like someone had gripped my heart and kept on twisting. I wrapped the gauze around her arm, trying to be gentle. “What happened to you?”

She sighed, her eyes bleary. I took her in my arms, holding her softly, almost afraid she would break. I didn’t care about anything else right now, not the old lady hovering by the door, not Chad watching us with wide eyes. Violet was alive. My strong, beautiful mate. I held her close, kissing her cheek, her forehead, her mouth, stroking her hair back.

“You’re here,” she whispered.

I choked out a sob, full of relief and dread at the same time.

I had found her, but she was hurt.

“It’s okay,” she murmured, wiping my eyes. I hadn’t even realized I was crying.

“How are you feeling?” I asked, my voice hoarse.

Before Violet could speak, the old lady answered. “Your mate was attacked.”

I glared up at Chad, fury invading every inch of my body. “You son of a bitch, I’m gonna rip you apart!”

I was about to jump on my feet, ready to attack, when Chad threw his hands up. “Whoa, whoa, I didn’t do it!”

“Charlie,” Violet breathed, resting her hand on my chest. Only her voice, only her touch managed to pull me out of my trance of fury. Panting, I turned to her.

“He didn’t do this,” Violet said, coughing. “It was Zachery.”

Zachery. My *friend*.

Former.

My fury morphed into rage in seconds.

“He cut me with a silver knife,” she said, and I held my breath.

“*Silver?*”

She nodded. “Chad helped bring me here. It’ll be okay.”

My head felt numb, all the blood rushing to it. My wolf prowled on the inside.

“No,” I said through gritted teeth. “You won’t be okay. Silver *kills* werewolves.”

Violet stared at me, wide-eyed.

I hated myself for being blunt with her, for saying that, but…

There was no comfort within me.

Only pain and rage.

“I’m going to kill him,” I said simply. But not even that eased the animal inside me.

Violet gasped, and Chad made a strangled noise.

“Whoa, there!” I turned to Chad, and he sputtered. “I don’t really know what’s going on, but, like, Daisy is Violet now? And yeah, she’s a werewolf, and you’re a werewolf too? Am I getting that right?”

I would probably kill Chad as well, just for fucking talking*.*

“What is your point?” I ground out.

Chad blinked. “I don’t know what’s going on, but killing Zachery isn’t the way to go about things.”

“Don’t tell me what to do, hunter,” I snapped. “Did you see that safe house? *Your* kind is the monstrous one—I’ve never seen a wolf keep human body parts as trophies. That’s a serial killer’s work, you sick fucks!”

Chad took a step back. He was looking at me like he didn’t know me, but I didn’t give a shit. I didn’t know myself right now, either—all this rage was bringing out a side of me that I’d never experienced before.

“Charlie…” Violet whispered. I turned to look at her, and she seemed so pale that it made me feel sick. She was so weak, and it was Zachery’s fault.

I should’ve seen it coming the first time he’d kissed her without her consent.

I should’ve ripped his throat out back then, just to get it fucking over with.

Violet gave the smallest nod, and my vision went blurry.

I was still crying.

“I might have something for the silver,” the old woman said, and my heart skipped a beat.

“Why didn’t you lead with that?” I demanded, my emotions like whiplash. “Why didn’t you already do something?”

The woman gave me a steely look. “Violet was too weak moments ago. The only reason she can speak now must be the mate bond between the two of you giving her more energy.” Then she pointed at Chad. “Her and the beefcake have been here for one minute practically!”

Chad’s cheeks went bright red.

“I have to gather some things from my pantry, but I’ll be right back,” the old woman told me.

Instead of feeling hopeful, though, I stayed meshed in my fury. How could Zachery have done this to Violet—after the tunnel door incident, I’d realized that Zachery couldn’t be trusted, but to try and *kill* Violet?

“It’s going to be okay,” I told my mate, squeezing her hand. It felt like I was lying both to myself and to her, and that hurt most of all.

My wolf was howling on the inside.

Violet smiled weakly at me. I wiped my eyes quickly as she whispered, “I’m just glad you’re here.”

“I’m back,” the old woman announced, placing a basket on Violet’s bed. There was an assortment of bottles and things inside, and she rummaged through them. “Must be here, where is it?” she kept muttering under her breath, until exclaiming, “Aha!”

At last, she pulled out a vial and turned to me with excitement in her gaze.

“You can never be too prepared,” she said. She uncorked the vial and removed the gauze I’d put on Violet’s arm. Now, I could now see every inch of the spidery veins emerging from the deep gash. I looked between the wound and the liquid in the vial, a dark red substance.

The woman made a move to drop some of it on Violet’s injury.

“Wait!” I choked out, grabbing onto the woman’s wrist.

The woman froze.

I stared at her. “What *is* that?”

“It’s the only known cure for silver poisoning—Fae blood,” she explained.

I turned to Violet, who nodded. “It’s true,” she whispered.

With a slow exhale, I released the woman’s wrist. My heart pounded in my ears as she applied the blood to the wound as if it were an ointment.

“Shit,” Violet said, wincing, holding my hand tight.

“Does it hurt?” I asked, frantic. “Is this healing you or killing you? For the love of—”

I stopped speaking midsentence when all of a sudden, the black veins began to fade. The gash started to stitch itself up quickly, as if by magic.

This *was* magic.

“Sunshine, are you okay?” I asked, cradling Violet’s face in my hands. “Does it hurt?”

Violet, sniffling, shook her head. “I’m okay.”

I kissed her cheeks, her mouth, pulling her close. I looked up at the woman, feeling like hugging her. “Thank you.”

I didn’t sound like myself. Instead of making me soar, the relief felt like a grenade inside me. I was about to erupt, because even though Violet’s wound was gone, the person who had created it was still out there.

“Violet needs to rest. Why don’t you come downstairs and have a cup of tea, kid?” the old lady asked me gently.

“I’d like some tea,” Chad grumbled, but nobody paid him any attention.

I stood up. “I can’t stay.”

Violet blinked up at me. She was still pale, but the color was steadily returning to her cheeks.

She would be okay, but my decision had been made.

Zachery had dared to lay a hand on my mate. *Repeatedly*.

And then he’d tried to kill her.

“Where are you going?” Violet asked me, clearly surprised. “What are you gonna do?”

My voice was cold. “I am going to be the hunter my family has always wanted me to be.” I turned to Chad, making sure he heard every word. “I’m gonna kill Zachery. I’m going to kill him, and I’m not going to think twice about it.”

**Episode 1831**

XAVIER

I was running through the woods, hustling after my brother with Cali on my back. Her weight on me, her tight grip on my fur, her scent… They were the only things keeping me afloat. That was how much I loved her and what her love could do for me.

Still, though, I couldn’t escape the fear creeping up inside me.

Everything was so out of control. And seeing Letifer appear like that, make demands, order around *my* pack members… Well, it was a clear sign that things were only getting worse.

I felt Cali adjust herself on my back, her arms wrapping around me more tightly. Even though I was glad that she wasn’t on the battlefield, this didn’t feel much safer.

How the hell was I supposed to protect her out here?

But what were my options here, anyway?

Cali was refusing to back off from helping Greyson, and frankly, I wasn’t gonna back off either. I’d never thought I’d see the day when I’d be freaking out over my brother’s sanity, but seeing Greyson possessed…

It was unnatural. It wasn’t fair.

I’d always believed I would be the one to drive my brother to his demise, not some fucking jacked ghost that wouldn’t take no for an answer. This was a matter of principle—that was *my* brother, so only *I* was allowed to kill him. End of discussion.

*What’s happening?* Cali asked then, interrupting my thoughts. *Are we nearly there?*

Greyson’s scent remained strong under my nose.

*We’re getting closer*, I replied. *But you need to keep holding on. Can you do that?*

I heard her sharp inhale. *Yes, I’m okay. Just hurry. We have to help him.*

*I know, baby. Hang on.*

I heard a noise behind me in the distance, and my stomach dropped. There were revenants chasing us. *Shit*. Did that mean Rishika and Big Mac were hurt? Or worse?

I kept the question to myself.

I didn’t need Cali freaking out right now, especially not while I was fucking crumbling myself. I was in the middle of the woods, with no backup other than Cali, and Cali… She couldn’t take out all these things at once. It just wasn’t logistically possible.

*Shit shit shit!*

I felt like the worst Alpha in the entire world right now. My brother was off being possessed, I couldn’t protect my pack, and I couldn’t protect my mate either. I was such a loser that it was disgusting, unacceptable, I just—

*No.*

I stopped that train of thought. I couldn’t let myself think that way, not when there was so much on the line. I forced my gaze forward and kept following my brother’s scent.

Suddenly, out of the corner of my eye, I saw something moving ahead.

I came to an instant stop.

I could actually hear Cali’s heart pounding.

“What’s wrong?” she whispered.

I stared straight ahead as a line of revenants emerged from the woods, blocking our way. Dead orange eyes, rotting flesh, sneers full of evil… I could’ve jumped right over them, but not with Cali on my back. I couldn’t risk her losing her grip on me and tumbling to the ground, but what else could I—

“Get ready to make a run for it!” Cali yelled.

Before I could realize what the fuck was happening, she unleashed a purple-pink blast of magic, breaking the revenant chain. They fell back like bowling pins. I watched, wide-eyed, as a gap was created between the revenants. I followed Cali’s orders and immediately made a run for it, skirting through the grabbing hands of any revenants that had remained standing.

*That was incredible, Cali*, I said. *Thank you*.

Cali made a noise that resembled both a laugh and a sob.

With her on my back, I put my head down and raced faster. We needed to catch up to Greyson before he found Marta. It seemed like she was the only thing stopping Letifer from his fucked up plan to seize power over everyone and everything. Apparently, that was literally the only thing bad guys cared about—world domination.

It didn’t seem all that implausible, if you considered the fact that Marta had brought back Didi fully just by accident. The medium was more powerful than she knew. Probably more powerful than any of us could imagine. And if Letifer was brought fully back to life …

That couldn’t be good.

Though, on the upside, that could give me the pleasure of tearing his throat out.

My thoughts were cut off when the trees ahead thickened, and I immediately slowed—thick trees meant more places for an attacker to hide. I instantly sensed something but didn’t see it yet.

*Cali*, I said, *keep your eyes—*

I didn’t finish my sentence.

Something as fast as a whip slammed into me, knocking Cali off my back. I snarled, spinning around just in time to see a revenant vampire hiss and lunge for her, the motherfucker. Snarling, I leapt, knocking the revenant to the ground, hovering over it. Its nails dug into my leg, but I was too furious to feel the pain. I moved quickly, opening my mouth before I unceremoniously bit its head off.

I spat it out with menace, hurling it away.

And then I turned to Cali.

*Are you okay?* I asked frantically, racing up to her.

She stared up at me, still on the ground. She seemed shaken but not hurt. Her hand trembled as she rested it against my snout. “I’m fine.”

She wasn’t fine. I hoped I hadn’t made a horrible mistake, bringing her here.

“Don’t overthink this,” Cali said, as if she could read my mind. Her eyes flashed with determination. “We can’t stop right now. Greyson needs us.”

Before I could figure out what to say, before I could dare to protest, Cali was up on her feet and climbing onto my back. There was a certainty to her movements that settled me, somehow.

*Greyson isn’t far*, I told her, even though I wasn’t sure if that was all that comforting.

What the hell would we do to Greyson when we saw him?

What *could* we do to stop him when he was still possessed?

I told myself to avoid the answer to that question and deal with one problem at a time. Right now, I had to wonder if this thing that had taken over Greyson was making him weaker. His fresh scent said that he wasn’t moving as quickly he normally did.

With these thoughts twisting in my head, I ran through the thicket of trees, making sure to keep my eyes and ears open for any other threats. The moment we emerged, though, the threat was staring us right in the eye.

In the small clearing stood my brother’s silver wolf.

And then, the question returned:

What the hell happened now?

How did we stop him?

I hadn’t planned anything, and actually killing Greyson was off the table. Cali would never forgive me. Moreover, if I was gonna kill my brother, it was going to be on my *own* terms. Not because he was possessed, or some bullshit. I refused.

Maybe I could try to reason with him?

“Greyson,” Cali choked out as I lowered myself down.

*Get on the ground*, I said. *I’m going to shift back to seem less threatening to him.*

*Please be careful*, Cali said as she slid off my back.

I shifted back, shooting her a reassuring look. *I’ve got this.*

She swallowed roughly, nodding. I *didn’t* have this, but it would be good for her to think that I did. For morale’s sake.

“Greyson!” I called, and the wolf froze.

Slowly, my brother turned to face us, his grey eyes falling upon Cali and me.

It was a look I barely recognized—Greyson, but not Greyson. It was unsettling. I wanted my real brother back.

With caution, I stepped toward him.

There were twenty feet between us.

“You need to give up,” I said loudly. “Let the pack help you.”

Greyson’s wolf shuddered out a growl. A clear warning. I slid closer still, but not too close. I was careful—I needed to leave some space between us. If Greyson attacked, I’d need some breathing room to shift and defend myself.

To protect Cali.

But as I got closer, and Greyson did the same, snarling, his silver gaze moved past me. It was fixed right over my shoulder, to my right. Every hair on my body stood to attention.

“Cali,” I choked out. “Get back!”

But of course, my mate didn’t follow direction.

“Xavier, I need you to listen to me,” she said, gently touching my bare arm.

I didn’t dare turn to look at her. Not when the massive grey wolf that was my brother had her pinned with the eyes of a predator, his teeth bared.

“Stay. *Back*,” I repeated to her.

I heard her exhale sharply.

And then she whispered, “You’re not going to like what I’m about to do, Xavier. But I think it’s the only way to stop Greyson.”

**Episode 1832**

GREYSON

My eyes darted between Xavier and Cali. My mind railed against the revenant control on my body. I was locked in this battle with Letifer’s magic, my wolf howling in despair and agony as I watched Cali.

Cali, my mate, took a step forward toward me, leaving Xavier behind. I could never allow Letifer to hurt Cali, especially not through my very own hands. And yet it was so hard to resist when the dark magic spread all over me like pollution. When it said, *Attack her!*

The magic saw Cali as the enemy, not the love of my life.

The magic didn’t care that I would rather die than hurt her.

The magic held me prisoner, and I could no longer control myself.

As Cali approached, her eyes huge and vulnerable and so precious, I could feel my own legs fighting to run forward. I was supposed to follow Letifer’s fucked up desire for destruction, but all the while, my heart was fucking screaming, *No no no no no!*

*NO!*

Something cracked inside, and for a moment, I froze. I stopped my body from moving forward, shoving the magic down as if it were a physical opponent that I had punched hard enough for it to stagger backward.

But it was only temporary.

*Get out of here!* I told Cali, trying to reach her through our mind link. *Get away, love, for the love of god. Please don’t get hurt!*

She couldn’t hear my pleas, though. With a fiery determination that I knew all too well, she continued to approach me. And when a voice spoke in my head, it wasn’t Cali’s.

It was Letifer, clear as day.

*Kill her*, he ordered again.

I could feel my body once more, and that was a bad thing. It allowed me to hear Cali’s heart, almost taste her skin. It was the same skin that I was being called to pierce, and the thought made me so sick that my brain recoiled.

*NO.*

I got control again, holding myself back, but Cali—*god*, Cali was still coming closer. Her gaze was forceful enough to knock the breath out of me, and when her lips parted, a shiver ran through me.

*Greyson*, she said in my head. It was a relief to hear her instead of Letifer. A short-lived relief, because then she asked, *Can you hear me? I’m going to help you.*

She couldn’t help me. She could only help herself, and all I could wish for right now was for her to just stop coming closer. My senses were filled with her face, her scent—the raw feeling of a predator ready to destroy.

*Kill her*, the voice repeated. *That’s an order!*

*Fuck off*, I snarled, my rage becoming so potent I could taste it.

It tasted like blood, coursing down my jaws as I gritted my teeth together, doing my best to hold myself back. To hold myself back while Cali…

“Greyson, come back to me,” she whispered, only six feet between us now. “Greyson, come back to me. Please. You can fight this.”

I wanted to believe that she was right, I really did, but belief was different than reality. I barely had a grip on myself, my control hanging by a thin thread that was ready to snap at any second. I heaved and choked and fought—I was fighting to stay back, to defy the magic, to be free.

If I lost my hold, I would watch myself kill Cali, the love of my life.

*Love makes you weak*, the voice said.

Now, it sounded like my father.

That was all it took for the thread to snap.

My body was no longer my own, and I obeyed the magic’s orders, a blinded, useless servant, a worthless monster who lunged at the girl he adored.

Cali’s scream was accompanied by a howl.

*Xavier.*

Xavier, fucking finally, decided to shift. To my relief, he shoved me away from Cali. But now I was fighting with him, rolling on the ground, us snarling at each other. Me, entirely lost, a mere puppet. He, the man protecting our mate. I was fighting against him, but in reality I was fighting against myself—I didn’t want to hurt my brother.

I didn’t want any of this.

It reminded me of the Lupo Finale—how I’d needed to defeat Xavier, but I hadn’t wanted to hurt him. I would hate myself if I hurt him like this, with no sense and reason, while under someone’s spell. The magic felt like a rock weighing me down, caging me.

*I don’t want any of this!*

Suddenly, I managed to create an opening, pushing myself out for a mere moment. I gained control for a second only, and that was when Xavier slammed me to the ground, onto my back.

*Thank you*, I mind linked, looking up at my brother.

I didn’t know if he heard.

*Greyson!* Cali’s voice emerged in my mind once more. *You’re strong, sweetheart, you can fight this—I know you can.*

I wanted to cry out. I wanted to laugh. I wanted to admit defeat, right here, underneath the wolf of a brother who’d wanted to kill me time and time again, but not like this.

Not like this.

Maybe Xavier killing me would be the only relief left for me, though.

*Oh, love*, I wanted to tell Cali. *There’s a chance you’re wrong about me. Maybe I’m not strong enough to fight this.*

Xavier had me pinned to the ground, teeth bared, and it was almost as if Cali could hear me when she replied, “I know who you are, Greyson. You’re loyal, brave, honorable, powerful. I *know* you—I know the man I’m in love with is in there. You have to keep fighting this. Come back to me.”

*Come back to me, Greyson…*

*Come back to me…*

*Come back*, Cali kept saying, but it didn’t matter.

I could feel the dark magic in me brewing, a strong energy taking hold of my howling mouth, my claws, all my power as I pushed and fought against Xavier.

“Greyson, no!” Cali screamed, the moment my claws dug into Xavier’s side.

*Love is weakness*, the voice repeated in my head. *You’ll thank me for ridding you of it.*

Xavier stumbled back, clutching his side. I could see his flesh fighting to stitch itself together, werewolf healing taking charge, but the viciousness inside me said, *Keep going.*

*Don’t let him win.*

*Destroy him.*

Destroy him, Letifer said. But that was my little brother he was talking about.

Xavier was just a little kid in my earliest memory of him—Silas screaming over our heads, urging us to spar in one of our first matches ever. We were Silas’s sons, and Silas’s sons were supposed to know nothing but violence. Silas’s sons would be forced to do horrible things. I remembered, so vividly, hating the idea of hurting my brother, especially when he looked so small, so innocent, so easily broken.

But even now that Xavier was a formidable fighter, he was still my younger brother. Colton, too. Despite what disagreements we might’ve faced, I still loved them both. I would still die to protect them.

Xavier was the man who wanted to steal my mate, but he was also my brother.

And I’d still rather die than kill him right now.

The magic recoiled at the mere thought of something so strong—at the idea that I could resent and love my brother at the same time. It was forceful enough that the magic froze for a moment too long. I managed to get a grip on myself, shifting back to human.

“Get away from me!” I shouted at Xavier’s black wolf. “Go somewhere to heal!”

I stumbled backward, trembling with the effort not to shift again and attack as I had been ordered, and then…

Then, I saw Cali.

She was right. *Here*.

“Greyson?” she whispered, reaching out to me. Her hand was trembling as she raised it. There were tears in her eyes, her beautiful face full of sorrow. I’d done all that. I made myself sick.

“Is it really you?” she whispered.

I was writhing on the ground, fighting to stand. “Yes, love. It’s me.”

The magic fought to take control of me again, and I winced away from Cali, until—

She grabbed my hand.

At the sensation of her touch, I suddenly felt invincible.

Suddenly, I was certain that I wasn’t Letifer’s puppet anymore.

I was stronger than all that, especially with Cali by my side.

“You can do this,” she said, more tears streaming down her face. I could feel Letifer’s command thrashing inside me like a caged monster. It wanted to be let out, to harm, but Cali’s touch was a steadying force.

Cali made me believe that I could be myself again.

Cali and our mate bond, strong enough to rule over a curse as powerful as *due destini*. Strong enough to vibrate between us like a livewire while Letifer’s magic recoiled in fear inside me. Letifer’s magic was *scared* of the bond I shared with Cali.

And then, I did the only thing that I could think of to force the dark magic out.

I grabbed my mate and kissed her with everything I had left.

**Episode 1833**

MARTA

I stood still as the voices swirled around me—but this time it was the voices of the living I heard.

“What the hell was that?” Lola was asking, her voice awed. “I’ve never seen anything like that.”

“Me neither,” Jay agreed. “The way they were just flattened—that was *badass*.”

I blinked hard, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that I wasn’t fully awake. I just felt… detached. Though I looked up when Lilac ran over and dropped down next to me.

“Marta! How the hell did you do that?” he asked breathlessly.

“I… I’m not totally sure,” I admitted. I shook my head, still feeling out of it. “But I had help.”

“What do you mean?” Lilac asked, confused. “From who?”

The memory of the voices came back to me—calling to me. I’d recognized them the moment I’d heard them; I’d been hearing the voices of the dead my whole life.

“From the other side,” I told Lilac. “It was like I summoned those spirits to help me.”

He took this in for a moment, then shook his head, his eyes shining. “I wish you could have seen it, Marta. You were just surrounded, and then—*WHAM*—they all went down. You just laid waste to those orange-eyed freaks. You looked like a freaking superhero!” He grinned at me and—in his excitement—leaned in and kissed me.

It caught me off-guard, and for a moment I leaned in, happy to just feel connected to something.

But then the reality of the moment intruded, and I remembered where I was and that I was surrounded by pack members. I pulled away from Lilac, blushing furiously. But—in the midst of my embarrassment—I could still feel the warmth that I’d felt, seeing Lilac in the middle of the revenant attack. I remembered how seeing him had helped me gain strength when I needed it most, and given me the courage to fight.

“Marta.” Lilac reached out for me as I swayed. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I murmured, trying to clear my head. I *was* fine, but like so many times before, kissing Lilac had been more than just a kiss—it had been an exchange of energy—and I felt suddenly dizzy as I felt some of my own energy slip away. Lilac, on the other hand, was already looking clearer, more corporeal.

“So how come you didn’t do that mowing down thing before?” Mace asked, striding over. He had a long cut along his jaw, and his left eye was turning purple. He didn’t look angry with me, more put out. “That was impressive as hell, but it could have saved us a lot of trouble earlier.”

Lilac grinned down at me. “I’m so proud of you, Marta,” he said. “That was really incredible. Did you plan that, or did it just happen?”

I shook my head, “No, I didn’t plan it. It just sort of happened. I don’t even think I know how.”

“It’s because you’re a bridge.” That was Kira, who was standing nearby. She was looking at me closely. “You must have harnessed the energy from the spirits.”

“You heard them?” I asked quickly, looking up at her.

“No.” She shook her head. “I don’t hear them, not like you. I could sense them, though. But I’m not sure *why* they were able to come.”

I looked around at the field of fallen revenants and walked toward one. The orange eyes were now dark and empty. The sight made me feel sick to my stomach.

“Marta?” Lilac was at my elbow. “Are you feeling okay?”

I nodded. “I just…” I gestured around. “I hate that I did this. I mean, I know revenants are bad, but this…” I looked at the destruction surrounding me. “I hate that I was responsible for it.”

Lilac slipped his arm around me and pulled me close. “You may have saved the entire pack. You’re a hero, Marta.”

Before I could respond, there was a shout from the house, and we both looked up.

“Move aside, please. Let me through!” Jacqueline—that vampire girl Lola had brought back—was coming down from the house and charging through the werewolves.

She handed something to Lola, who pulled it on. It looked like a backpack with a long hose attached, and Jacqueline was wearing one, too. The two of them headed straight for the revenants.

“Out of the way,” Jacqueline snapped. She pulled the hose around and ignited the tip. A bright orange flame licked out into the cold air.

Lilac’s eyes went wide. “Flamethrowers? Cool!” Then he yanked me aside as Jacqueline blasted the dead revenants with a stream of fire.

Next to her, Lola lit her flamethrower and started burning another group of revenants. A few of pack members cheered as the revenants went up in flames, but I turned away as a wave of foul-smelling smoke blew across my face.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” I muttered, trying not to breathe through my nose. I didn’t turn back. I didn’t want to watch those desiccated bodies catch fire.

“Everyone needs to keep their eyes open,” Jay called over the sound of the flames and the cheers. “I think we got them all, but these bastards are sneaky as fuck. Keep an eye out for stray revenants, and *be ready*. We need to get all these things burned to ash.”

I forced myself to turn around. The bodies were on fire, curling in on themselves as the skin melted and the hair burned. I tried to keep breathing, even as I felt my heart fluttering with panic. How had it come to this?

“I thought we were trying to *save* the revenants,” I murmured, trying to keep my voice steady. “*Restore* them. Wasn’t that what the serum was for?”

Lilac looked down at me. “We tried it, Marta, but it didn’t work.” He glanced at the field of burning bodies—it looked like a snapshot of hell. “They were all already so far gone. We had no choice.”

When Lilac wrapped his arms around me, I bit my lip hard to keep from crying. He was right—I knew he was right. They had tried. And I knew I shouldn’t blame myself for this. If I hadn’t stopped the revenants, they would have killed us all.

I closed my eyes and leaned into Lilac, just wishing for this all to be over.

But then I heard something and I stilled, listening hard. It was the sound of voices—so many voices, I couldn’t count them. I pulled away from Lilac and looked around wildly. And that was when I saw it: the mist rising from each of the burning bodies. It was wispy and white and swirled like a tiny cyclone above the physical form of every dead revenant. They were spirits—hundreds of them, maybe more. There were too many for me to count. And—as though blown by a wind—they moved toward me, swirling around me, engulfing me.

No one else seemed to see anything or hear anything, but Lilac saw them. He stepped away from me, looking at the swirling mist, his eyes wide with amazement.

“Oh my god,” he said quietly. “Marta. Do you know what this means?”

“I-I don’t,” I said. I was overwhelmed.

“You freed them!” he said, shaking his head in disbelief. “The revenants were trapped by the magic that made them slaves, and you freed them.”

I looked around. I could see them, and Lilac could see them—could anyone else?

Kira was looking at me curiously. I didn’t think she could see them, but—like she’d told me earlier—maybe she could *sense* them.

The energy from the spirits wrapped around me, grateful and happy. They smiled at me.

“*Thank you!*” a thousand voices sang out in dozens of languages, some with thick accents, some the voices of children.

Tears sprang to my eyes. “You’re free?” I asked. “You wished for this?”

“Oh yes,” a musical voice whispered to me. “It was the greatest desire of my heart. Now I can return to my world. We all can. We are free of him.”

“Letifer?” I asked.

“Yes. We are free. We can return home,” another voice said.

“You see!” Lilac said, grinning at me. “You saved them! You really are a hero!”

Joy unlike anything I’d ever felt filled my heart. This power that had scared me so much had saved not only the pack, but the spirits that had been bound and forced to do Letifer’s bidding.

I nodded, smiling. “I see.”

Lilac stepped through the swirling spirits. Even as he moved, I could see that his corporeal body was beginning to fade, but he seemed unbothered by this. He looked around, amazed. “You did this,” he said, turning to look at me. But then his smile faded. His eyes went wide with alarm.

“Lilac?” My heart thudded. “Lilac, what’s wrong? Come back here,” I called, stepping toward him.

“Marta!” Lilac called, but his voice sounded distant, like he was calling to me across a chasm. He reached for me, and I reached for him, but our fingertips only had time to brush before he was jerked back, pulled by some unseen hand. He screamed with fear.

“Lilac!” I cried, sprinting into the swirling mist. “Lilac! *Stop!*”

And then I felt it—the tether that was holding us together *snapped*.

I stopped suddenly with a gasp, feeling like someone had just punched me in the gut, and Lilac disappeared into the swirling mist.

**Episode 1834**

VIOLET

The Fae blood stung like fire as it worked itself into the cut on my arm. The silver wound had hurt like hell, but I was starting to wonder if the cure was just going to kill me faster.

I ground my teeth, trying to keep myself from screaming in pain, and clutched Charlie’s hand. “Don’t kill him,” I said, forcing the words out.

Charlie looked at me, his eyes flashing with fury. I could see how upset he was, and frankly, I was just as angry. *I* was the one who’d been roped and nearly killed. But killing Zachery wasn’t who Charlie was. And as angry as he was, I couldn’t stand back and watch him do something that would be a complete betrayal of his own character.

I tried to sit up, but—failing—I propped myself up on my elbow instead. “Listen to me, Charlie. Do *not* kill him.”

Charlie’s jaw worked. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t.”

“Because it’s not you,” I breathed, feeling sweat breaking out on my forehead. “And could you please just sit back down? It hurts like hell to keep looking up at you.”

He hesitated for just a moment, then dropped down onto the bed next to me. When I lay back down with a sigh of relief, he used a corner of the sheet to wipe my forehead. “Tell me what happened out there.”

I closed my eyes. “Zachery didn’t know it was me, at first.”

“What does that mean?” Charlie asked, and I felt his body tense with anger again.

“Just let me get through it,” I said.

I took a deep breath and told him everything—about the rope around my neck and having to shift into my human form to reveal who I really was. I told him about the revenant and how I’d saved Zachery’s ass.

“And when I tried to run, that’s when he got me,” I finished, looking down at my arm. As I’d been speaking, the pain had lessened, and the wound had started to knit itself together.

Charlie had been quiet and still as stone as I’d spoken. When I looked at him, his eyes were alight with rage.

From the other side of the bed, Chad shifted on his chair. “Hang on. So Zachery did all this bullshit because you wouldn’t *date* him?”

I winced at his crude—though accurate—assessment. “Pretty much.”

Chad shook his head in disbelief. “And I thought *I* was a dick.”

“Was all that supposed to make me *not* want to kill him?” Charlie growled. “Because you maybe missed the mark. That was way worse than I thought.”

“Yeah. I always thought that dude was a weenie, but I never pegged him for one of those creepy ‘nice guy’ douchebags,” Chad added.

“Yeah, but—” I started.

“And he knew you were a wolf, right?” Charlie pressed. “And he knowingly cut you with a silver knife?”

“Okay, yeah, when you put it all together, it seems like Zachery’s going down a pretty dark path here, but I still don’t want you to kill him.” I looked over at Chad, then up to Mrs. Riggins, who was still standing in the doorway. “Could you give Charlie and me a minute alone, please?”

Chad raised an eyebrow but shrugged and left without a word.

Mrs. Riggins hesitated for just a moment. “I’ll get you a glass of water, dear.”

When they were both gone, I reached for Charlie’s hand and gave it a strong squeeze. “Look, I’m getting better. See?”

Charlie rolled his eyes. “It was all chance, Violet,” he said, his face pale with rage. “What if you’d never made it here? What if you hadn’t run into Chad, or he hadn’t helped you?” He shook his head, looking angrier and more scared than I’d ever seen him.

“But I *did* make it here. Chad did help me. And Mrs. Riggins had what I needed. None of that bad stuff happened, and we can’t waste our energy imagining what would have happened if it had.” I took a deep breath. “I get that you’re angry with Zachery—I am, too—but killing him? What would be the point, Charlie?”

“What he did to you…” Charlie said, looking down at my arm, which was still streaked with blood.

“We’re going back to Oregon soon. We’ll be with our pack. We’ll never have to deal with him again.”

“Violet—”

“Listen to me, Charlie,” I said, and my voice had lost its softness. “You have to understand, I have seen some shit in my day, okay? I’ve seen senseless killings. My brother was one of them.”

Charlie pulled his hands away from mine and closed them into tight fists. “I just… I want to *hit* something,” he snarled. He stood and paced away from the bed. “I’m sorry for what that hunter did to you, Violet. For what this world has done to you. I’m a hunter—there’s no changing that. It’s just part of me, and it seems like it’s something that’s going to always put you in danger.” He rounded on me. “How am I supposed to live, knowing that?”

“Charlie.” My heart ached, and I held my arms out to him. He stepped back to the bed, and when he sat down, I took his face in both of my hands. “My arm is fine. It’s healed. And as for the rest of that—we’re going to get through it the way we have everything else so far: together.”

Charlie was so close to me that I could pick out the individual gold flecks in his eyes, and when he looked at me, I saw past the anger to the fear—and the love—in them. Then his eyes dropped down to my mouth, and we leaned toward each other.

Electricity shot through me as our lips met. I could feel tears welling in my eyes as I leaned into him. All the fear I’d felt out in the woods after we’d been separated came back to me. Zachery had been deranged, and then after he’d cut me, and the silver poison had started to spread… I’d been so afraid that I’d never see Charlie again. So afraid that I’d never get to touch him or hug him or kiss him again.

I slipped my arms around his neck and held him tight. I never wanted to let him go.

He must have felt the same way, because he was holding me just as tightly. His kiss was hungry and searching, and he was just starting to ease himself on top of me when there was a knock at the door.

We pulled apart just as the door opened and Mrs. Riggins peaked her head in. “I’ve got that water for you, Violet. And I brought both of you some clothes,” she said, holding out a small stack of neatly folded clothes. “I’m not sure if they’ll fit, but I’m pretty good at sizing people up.” She gave Charlie a shrewd look as she said this, then handed me the glass of water and the clothes.

“Thank you,” I said, blushing, and gulped down the water. “My arm feels so much better, Mrs. Riggins. How can I ever thank you for what you did?”

“Oh, you’re very welcome,” she said airily. “I was glad to help.”

“I don’t know what I would’ve done without you,” I said. Despite what I’d said to Charlie, I *had* thought about what would have happened if she hadn’t been there, and willing to open her door to a hunter and a naked and bleeding werewolf. “This really is a safe house for all of us.”

She smiled. “Well, that’s nice to hear. Just don’t make a habit of it, all right?”

I smiled. “I promise.”

“And be sure to give me five stars on your Yelp review,” Mrs. Riggins called over her shoulder as she headed out of the room.

Charlie chuckled and grabbed the T-shirt and jeans Mrs. Riggins had brought for him. She wasn’t wrong—she was good at sizing people up. The jeans fit him perfectly, and we dressed quickly.

I was just slipping on the sweater she’d brought me when I heard the distinctive crackle of a walkie-talkie. I looked over at Charlie. “Did you hear that?”

He nodded. “I’m going to go see what it is.”

“Hang on,” I said, yanking the sweater down. “I’m coming too.”

We headed into the hall and almost ran into Chad, who was rushing up the stairs. Sure enough, he held a walkie-talkie in his hand, and the deep, tense-sounding voice on the other end of the radio was reeling off a list of codes.

“What’s going on?” Charlie asked, looking from the radio in his hand to Chad’s face.

Chad looked between us for a moment, then at Charlie. “You’re a hunter, right?”

“Yeah,” Charlie said slowly. He narrowed his eyes, looking for the trap.

“And you.” Chad looked at me. “You’re his werewolf girlfriend?”

It was too simplistic, but he’d hit the basics. “Yeah.”

Chad shook his head. “This is all still pretty wild to me, but I’ve seen you both fight, and I think you’re both good people—”

This caught me off-guard, especially coming from Chad, of all people.

“—and I think we need your help. Both of you,” he continued.

“What’s going on?” Charlie asked.

“It’s the camp.” Chad held up the radio. “It’s under siege.”

**Episode 1835**

I stood motionless for a long moment, shocked at the feel of Greyson’s lips pressed against my own. Was this real? Was I dreaming? Or had I actually—*finally*—gotten through to him?

It felt like I had. The kiss felt real. Like, really, *really* real. It was deep and searing, and the way Greyson was pressing me to him… It felt like he was never going to let me go. Then he moaned, deep in his throat, and when I felt it rumble in his chest, my whole body felt electrified. My hands slid up his face, and my fingers gripped his hair. He was coming back to himself—I could feel it—and I couldn’t let him slip away. Not even for an instant.

In the far reaches of my mind, I remembered that Xavier was there, watching all of this, but as Greyson’s tongue slid along mine, everything else melted away. It was just the two of us—me and Greyson. It had always been just the two of us. It would always be just the two of us. We were alone in the universe, just our bodies and our lips and our hands.

I pulled away slowly, feeling half-drunk, and looked up into Greyson’s stormy grey eyes. “Do you remember when we were in the Fae world?” He scanned my face but didn’t respond. “When we were being held in my grandmother Hera’s palace? When she told you that you loved me? She gave me a warning—do you remember that? She said that I was Fae, and that Fae and werewolves didn’t mix.” I tightened my grip on his biceps. “But we’ve proven her wrong, haven’t we? I told you back then that you didn’t have to stay with me—that you had no obligation to help me with all my problems. And do you remember what you said to me?”

Greyson nodded, his eyes locked on mine. “I told you that where you are is where I want to be,” he said, his voice a hoarse whisper.

My heart nearly shattered, but I fought to keep it together. He *remembered*. He hadn’t forgotten. Greyson was there—even with whatever had been possessing him—my Greyson was still there. I swallowed hard. “You said that you didn’t care where we were—”

“—as long as I was with you,” he rasped, finishing the sentence.

I reached up on tiptoe and pressed a kiss to his lips, tasting the salt of my tears as they streamed down my face.

“So you should understand,” I said, pulling back to look at him. You should get it, then. That’s why I’m here. That’s why I had to come, Greyson. To try and bring you back—no matter what it cost me. I’m not going to abandon you, just like you weren’t going to abandon me. Do you get it now?” I asked, giving him a frustrated shove.

My puny shove barely moved him, but he smiled down at me. “I get it. And it’s okay, love.” He took a deep breath. “I’m back.”

“That’s fucking terrific,” Xavier cut in, his voice as icy as the wind that blew around us, “but let’s not forget that the danger’s hardly passed. We’re here for Letifer, remember? He’s the reason we’re all here.”

I glanced over, then quickly looked down. I wasn’t ready to meet Xavier’s steely gaze. The intoxication of the moment with Greyson was starting to wear off, and the knowledge of what Xavier had seen was settling in. I knew he’d probably hated everything about it, but I was *not* ready to think about that at the moment. The important thing was that I’d gotten Greyson back. I glanced up at him, and when I found him looking down at me, my heart beat faster. He was back.

Turning, I started moving in the direction of the ghost pond, but I stopped when a hand reached out and grabbed my arm.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going?” Xavier growled. His eyes looked nearly black in the darkness.

I looked around at the ghostly trees looming up into the night sky, then back at Xavier. “Where do you think? We have to go back to get Artemis.”

He shook his head. “Cali—”

“Xavier, now that’s Greyson’s back, there’s no threat to Marta,” I said.

He considered this for a moment. Then he looked over at Greyson, his eyes narrowed. “Are you really back?”

Greyson shrugged. “Yeah. I think so.”

Xavier didn’t look convinced. “Because if this is some kind of bullshit Letifer ruse, I’m not going to be responsible for what I do to you.”

“Xavier!” I gasped. “*Seriously?*”

He shrugged, looking unrepentant. “I’m just saying.”

I huffed, feeling frustrated, and tugged my arm from his grip. The last thing I remembered seeing was Rishika and Artemis circling each other, preparing to fight. Now that Greyson was back, all my anxiety was focused back on my sister. “We need to get back there. *Now*.”

“Fine,” Xavier grunted. “Let’s go.”

Greyson stepped toward me and moved to shift, but Xavier pulled me back once more, closer to him.

“Cali rides with me,” he snarled.

Greyson looked between us for a moment, then nodded.

They both shifted, and I climbed onto Xavier’s back. I held tight as he led us through the dark forest toward the ghost pond. He stayed off the path and kept looking around, searching for anything threatening as we got closer, but nothing moved.

I forced myself to keep my eyes open, but I was praying we wouldn’t run into any more revenants. And—not seeing any—I had nearly loosened my death-grip on Xavier’s fur when he mind linked with me.

*I can smell them. Be ready.*

My heart hammered in my chest. I shot a glance over my shoulder at Greyson, who was just behind us. At least his wolf looked normal again—his eyes were alert and his coat has regained its glossy sheen—which convinced me even more that he was truly back. I took a deep breath, feeling relief—over *that*, at least—flood through me.

But that good feeling fled in an instant when we heard a shout of panic. Xavier sped up, running until we saw Big Mac, fighting to hold off a group of revenants in a tiny clearing ringed with trees. Greyson didn’t hesitate, just lunged toward the monsters, tearing into them, taking them down one by one.

Xavier crouched so I could slide off his back, then ran after Greyson, his jaws locking onto one revenant, his back legs kicking another as he leapt into the fray.

I spied a particularly menacing-looking revenant going straight for Xavier, and—using my magic—sent the thing hurtling back to smash into a tree. Big Mac stepped up to stand next to me and, using her magic, picked up another revenant. She lifted it ten feet into the air, then let it drop. I heard the bones snap as it hit the ground with a thud. Xavier and Greyson attacked the rest of the revenants, dispatching them quicker than usual because they’d been weakened by magic. We kept working, and—between the four of us—we destroyed the knot of monsters in a matter of minutes.

Afterward, we all stood in silence for a moment, breathing hard, looking around at the mangled bodies and dismembered limbs. Xavier and Greyson shifted back to human.

“What were you doing out here by yourself?” I asked, turning to Big Mac. “Where’s Artemis? Where’s Rishika? Are they okay?”

Big Mac wiped a trickle of blood from her lip. “They’re still back at the ghost pond, I’d guess. That was where I last saw them. Rishika and I were fighting revenants back there. They tried to force us apart and managed it.” She gestured around. “Obviously. But we have to get back. Rishika was holding her own, but it’s been a good minute, and I’m sure she could use your help back at the pond.”

“Oh god,” I murmured, looking into the trees. “Let’s go.”

“We’d better hurry,” Big Mac said, starting off.

“Hang on!” Greyson called out. “Big Mac, what about the orb? The real one?”

“Yeah,” Xavier chimed in. “Where the hell is it? In the safe back at the pack house?”

Big Mac grinned. “No. It’s been right in front of you this whole time.”

Xavier rolled his eyes. “And what the fuck does that mean?”

Big Mac waved her hand in a circle, then slashed through it. “*Videtur*,” she murmured. And there, on her shoulder, was a satchel, where one hadn’t been before.

“What the hell?” Xavier muttered. “Where did *that* come from?”

“Right in front of you,” Big Mac said, raising her eyebrows. She opened the satchel and rummaged around. She pulled something from its depths, and when she opened her hand, she was holding the orb. She looked up, eyeing each of us in turn. “We only have one shot. We have to make it count.”

**Episode 1836**

RISHIKA

Another revenant came at me from behind, and even as I shook it off, I had to admit to myself that I was starting to get tired. I could feel the fatigue as I lunged for the thing and bit into it, feeling the brittle bones crumble beneath my teeth. I was getting the job done for the moment, but I’d been going for hours, and I wasn’t reacting as quickly. Even if it was only maybe a half-second difference, in a fight like this, where every instant mattered, that kind of lag was about to get deadly.

*Dammit.*

It had been okay when Big Mac and I had been fighting together. She had used her magic to hold them off and I had attacked them when they weakened. The revenants weren’t strategic by nature, but they had somehow managed to separated us, and that had cost me. It had probably cost both of us. I didn’t know where she was anymore, and at the rate these monsters had been coming at me, I couldn’t spare the time to look around for her. If I really concentrated, I could hear that strange pop her magic made in the distance every now and then, and that reassured me. I just hoped the witch was doing okay on her own. I kept thinking that if I could get through the crowd in front of me, I’d go look for her and help her out.

But revenants just kept pouring out of the damn ghost pond. One after another after another. There was no end to them. Letifer had amassed a seemingly endless army of the dead, and I was wearing down.

Artemis stood near the edge of the pond, looking out over the troops like some kind of general from hell. I couldn’t even look at her. Everything about her made me feel sick to my stomach. I hated seeing her this way. Her face was slack, and her beautiful eyes were glazed over. This wasn’t the woman I’d met—the woman I’d fallen for. This was someone else. This was some*thing* else. Something dark.

Filled with fury, I bit into the putrid skin of a revenant. But as I ripped its head from its body, I heard a voice that chilled my blood.

*Letifer’s voice*.

“Artemis,” he thundered. “Why haven’t you finished off your lover?” There was a pause. “Don’t tell me you still care for her?”

My body tensed, and without really meaning to, I looked over at Artemis. All around me, the mangled bodies of the revenants littered the ground.

The ghost of Letifer was standing next to Artemis, a smoke specter. Artemis turned in my direction, then cocked her head, looking at me curiously.

I shivered. *It’s not her*, I reminded myself. Artemis had a dark past—I knew there were things she didn’t talk about—but she’d done those things to survive, not because she was evil. I had seen creatures like Letifer before. He was like Ryker. Like Silas. Only out for power, without regard for anyone but themselves. Creatures like that would destroy anyone or anything to get what they wanted. Power was the ultimate prize, and no cost was too great.

*You don’t want to do this, Artemis. I know you don’t. I know you.*

I wished more than anything that I could mind link with her. Until this moment, I’d never even thought about it. I’d never thought I had to. Artemis and I had always been so connected—always on the same page. Yeah, we’d had that one little miscommunication where we’d almost broken up, but… I’d never felt so strongly about someone. Never. And though she’d never said as much, I didn’t think Artemis had either.

Maybe that was our problem—we felt so deeply, but weren’t always willing to say what we felt. But looking at her now, her eyes blank with demonic possession, Letifer’s ghostly hand on her shoulder, my own mouth filled with the bitter taste of revenant blood, I knew I loved this woman. And I didn’t need a mating ceremony to know that I wanted to choose her every single day of my life.

That is, if Artemis didn’t kill me first.

Letifer put his other hand on Artemis’s shoulder, and I growled, the sound almost involuntary. I didn’t want that demon anywhere near her. His smoky eyes on me, Letifer leaned down as though to whisper in her ear. My growl grew louder, nearly a howl. I wanted to rip that fucking ghost apart.

“It’s time, Artemis,” he said in a whisper, loud enough for me to hear. “Time to take care of this nuisance, once and for all. Then our real work can begin.”

Artemis’s eyes narrowed on me.

*Fuck*.

I didn’t want to hurt her—that was the last thing I wanted—but Artemis took a step toward me, and then another, and another. She began to sprint, and my mind reeled, wondering what in the hell my options were, because Artemis did not look like she had any intention of holding back.

She lunged for me with a scream so loud it made my ears ring, and I jumped out of the way just in time. I didn’t want to hurt Artemis, but if I didn’t play this carefully, I wasn’t going to have any choice in the matter. No one knew better than me that Artemis was a kick-ass fighter. She had skills that I’d never even seen before, and she was more than a match for any man or creature stupid enough to challenge her.

Artemis spun and came after me again. I retreated, dancing along the edge of the pond. Revenants were still churning those waters, so I didn’t want to get too close to that, either. Trying to keep an eye on both and already exhausted, the adrenaline pumping through me felt like lighter fluid in my veins—like I was about to burst into flames. Artemis and I had sparred often enough that I was able to anticipate most of her moves, but I was lagging, and when I tripped over a pile of stones, she caught up to me and slipped her arm around my neck as quickly and powerfully as a cobra. I twisted in her arms, trying to free myself, but it was no use—she had me fast, and was forcing me down to the rocky shoreline.

I reached instinctively for Artemis’s neck but stopped myself just before my outstretched claws ripped into her throat. I had to be careful—I had to *think*.

Taking a deep breath and summoning what was left of my strength, I braced my feet on the sandy shore and flipped Artemis over, slamming her to the ground and pinning her down with my paws.

Artemis let out a furious scream and struggled to free herself, but I pushed harder, forcing her into the sand. Her pale cheeks flushed with anger, but when she put her hands on my paws, something in her face changed suddenly, and she looked up into my eyes.

My breath caught in my throat, and I breathed out, steam rising into the cold night air. *She’s in there.* Artemis was in there. I could see it in her eyes. I didn’t know how I knew, but I knew, like a window had opened and I could see through. I swallowed, terrified, but I knew I had to take a chance. It was now or never.

I shifted back to human, and my paws on her shoulders became my hands. “Look at me,” I commanded.

Artemis stopped struggling, and—though she didn’t speak—her eyes scanned my face.

“It’s me, Artemis,” I said, my throat tight with sobs. “It’s me. Rishika. Can’t you see me? Look at me. I want to help you. Please, Artemis. Let me help you.”

Artemis’s breath came shallow and fast, but still she didn’t speak. She looked angry and scared and confused.

“Please.” I could feel tears falling onto my cheeks. They felt burning hot in the freezing air. “Let me help you. I love you.”

The anger in Artemis’s eyes flickered. Then, slowly, it began to set like a summer sun. The confusion and fear remained, but the anger was gone, and I knew—in that moment, I *knew*—that she recognized me. Artemis knew who I was.

She took a breath and seemed to be on the verge of speaking when two sets of skeletal hands grabbed her shoulders and yanked her out from underneath me.

“*Artemis!*” I screamed. I reached for her, punching at the revenants who had grabbed her. “Let her *go*!”

Artemis was fighting too, as were the revenants, and I felt a blinding pain on my right side as one of the revenants raked its sharpened nails over my ribs. I paid it back with an uppercut that snapped its neck back so hard I heard bones splinter, but it came back, grinning and swinging.

Another revenant joined the fight, and Artemis pulled out her knife. She lunged toward me, and then there was a loud, sickening, squelching sound.

**Episode 1837**

MARTA

I stood, my eyes wide as saucers, shocked into stillness. That did *not* just happen. That could not have just happened. My connection to Lilac—it couldn’t have *broken*. The tether couldn’t have *snapped*. I blinked slowly, then reached out my hands and stepped forward, walking into the mist.

“Lilac?” I whispered. I held my breath, expecting him to pop up next to me, like he’d been doing for weeks. “Lilac?” Nothing. “Lilac? *Lilac!*” My heart beat faster as my call grew louder. I was yelling, now. Screaming for him. “Lilac? Where are you? *Lilac!*”

There had to have been some kind of mistake. Or Lilac was playing some kind of sick joke. This couldn’t be happening. But… I had feltthe tethering break. I had *felt* it. I couldn’t deny it. It was physical, like a vein to my heart had been snapped—or cut.

“Lilac! Lilac! *Where are you?*”

“Marta!” A hand grabbed my arm and pulled me back just as a column of flames shot out in front of me. “Watch out. You almost got barbecued.”

I looked up into Lola’s eyes. She was still wearing the flamethrower pack, and her eyes were red from the smoke.

“You gotta watch yourself,” she said. “Apart from the flames, there are still more revenants out there, probably heading this way to attack. Hey,” she said, a thought occurring to her. “Since you wiped out this bunch, you should be able to do them all, right? Can you do that thing again?”

I shook my head and started off into the mist again. “No, I can’t. Something happened to Lilac, I have to go find him.”

Lola caught my arm. “Marta, wait. Hang on, you can’t just go charging after him. Maybe he…” She shifted, looking uncomfortable. “You said some spirits were freed, right? And going to the spirit world. Maybe…” She shrugged. “Maybe Lilac was able to go back, too?”

I bit my lip so hard I tasted blood. This had occurred to me, too, but I hadn’t let myself really consider it. I just couldn’t. The way he’d called my name as he was pulled away, the fear in his eyes… I shook my head. This hadn’t been a joyful passing to the other side. He hadn’t wanted to go.

I just couldn’t accept that Lilac had just been here—standing next to me, speaking to me—and now he was gone. I just couldn’t. After all this time, I’d gotten too used to that irritating ghost.

I looked up at Lola. “I can’t stay here. I have to find him.”

“Marta, listen—” Lola started, but I wouldn’t.

I was headed into the woods, and no one was going to stop me.

“Marta! Stop!” Lola huffed, sounding frustrated. “Jay! Come here! Mace! It’s Marta!”

The sound of running footsteps sounded behind me. It was a wolf, but it wasn’t Jay. Mace’s wolf crossed in front of me and stopped, huffing and pawing at the ground.

“Get of out my way.”

Mace moved forward, pushing me with his head, trying to get me to move back, trying to send me back to the house.

I sidestepped around him and closed my eyes, trying to concentrate. I could still feel the energy of the spirits around me, even though the swirling mist was starting to dissipate. I opened my eyes and looked around desperately. Was Lilac out here, too? Somewhere?

Magic was flowing through me, so strong I could feel my hands itching with it. I looked down at Mace, who was still head-butting me, trying to push me back the way I’d come. “You need to get out of my way, Mace. I don’t want to hurt you or anyone else. But I *need* to look for Lilac.”

He was the only thing I could think about. I had to find him. I moved around Mace, but just as I was about to step toward the trees, a gust of wind kicked up. It was so powerful it pushed me back, and I had to brace myself against it. I squinted my eyes against the billowing leaves and dust, and through the swirling debris I saw a form begin to manifest in the darkness.

My heart thudded hard in my chest. “*Lilac?*”

But as the form took shape, I saw that it wasn’t Lilac. So who was it? I peered at the form and watched as it took the shape of… a forest ranger?

I stared at them, remembering the first time I’d seen them at the pack house—this same forest ranger. “Vander?”

Vander nodded. “It’s me.” They looked around. “Wow. And what have you been up to? Marta! Everything’s a mess!”

I did *not* have time for this. I rolled my eyes and stepped forward, trying to move around Vander.

Vander blocked me, stepping right into my path. “And didn’t I tell you?”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, looking up into their face.

They raised their eyebrows. “What am I talking about? I’m talking about kissing that ghost! I told you it was going to cause problems!”

Anger and guilt flooded through me like red hot lava. “I know that, but can you save your ‘I told you so’s for a little later? I need to go save Lilac from being dragged down to, I don’t know, probably demon hell or something real quick.”

Vander was shaking their head. “Are you kidding me? Are you seriously telling me you don’t know what’s happening right now?”

“What are you talking about?” I snapped. My anxiety was reaching boiling point.

Vander looked around, arms outstretched, taking in the burning revenants. “Um, have you not noticed all the spirits running loose?”

“I’ve noticed,” I said, shifting uncomfortably.

“The spirit world is overflowing into this world, Marta—”

“It’s not my fault,” I shot back. “That’s not on me. It’s Letifer!”

“I know,” Vander said. “I know that. He’s opened too many portals that should never have existed.” They shook their head. “That spirit pool and the pond. It’s unnatural.” They looked at me. “And of course you know I’m all about the natural and keeping the balance.”

“Yeah, I don’t care,” I snapped. I could feel time slipping away, and I hated being held hostage, listening to Vander’s nature philosophies. “I’m trying to stop Letifer, Vander. I have to go.”

They rolled their eyes. “It’s not that I’m not pleased to hear you’re jumping into that fight, Marta—I am, of course—but I have to warn you not to do anything else that further upsets the balance.”

“I won’t,” I said quickly.

“I mean it,” Vander said. Then, without waiting for me to respond, they were gone.

I looked around, making sure I was alone, and then I took off, sprinting deeper into the trees, screaming for Lilac. But the only sound I heard in response was the echo of my voice, bouncing off trees and stones.

As I ran, I fought the tears that were threatening to fall. I was terrified, and I couldn’t get the picture of Lilac’s face as he’d been pulled from me out of my head. The horror on his face was seared into my memory. If I was scared, I couldn’t even image how frightened he had to be. My throat tightened, and, as I choked back a sob, I stumbled to a stop.

What was I going to do? The spirits around me were fading. How was I going to find him?

Hang on—I was a medium. A bridge. I’d gotten so used to Lilac always just being there, it hadn’t even occurred to me that I could try to contact him. But maybe I could. I closed my eyes and focused all my energy, trying to rid my mind of all my fear and anxiety and anger.

And as I did, the voices came back. They were wailing—one great keening howl. I squeezed my eyes shut even tighter, listening as hard as I could, but I couldn’t separate out Lilac’s voice. I couldn’t hear *just* his voice anywhere in the tumult of sound.

But I heard something else. Beneath the voices, I heard the shuffle of footsteps drawing close to me.

I snapped my eyes open and looked around, peering into the darkness. My stomach dropped as I saw a headless form stumbling toward me.

“Holy shit,” I muttered, watching the thing walk closer. I knew I should run, but I stood rooted to the spot, transfixed.

The thing stepped in front of me, and I realized it was York. He was holding his disarticulated head beneath his arm, and, as I watched, he grasped it with both hands and jammed it back onto the bloodied stump of his neck. He twisted it, like he was screwing it into place.

I stared at him, waves of nausea washing over me.

Head back in place—though slightly askew—York’s eyes focused on me, and he grinned. “You’re coming with me,” he growled.

And then everything went dark.

**Episode 1838**

AVA

I was surrounded by a mist-shrouded wood on all sides. Something about this place felt vaguely familiar… and then again, not. My mind was hazy, fuzzy; I fought to remember how I got here, but I came up empty. And yet I could feel Xavier’s presence as I ran through the woods. His kiss lingered on my lips. It made me sad at first, but once I started running, the sweetness of our bond fueled me. It was all I’d ever wanted, that feeling of wildness and freedom as I ran in my wolf body in the presence of my mate. It was like when I was young and had first learned about my mate bond with Xavier.

A shadow flickered in my peripheral vision, and I lost sight of Xavier, but I sensed that he was close. I raised my head and tried to catch his scent, but all I could sense were leaves and the cold fall air… until I smelled something else. *Blood?* Fear ran down my spine as I hurried through the woods, trying to sniff out the source. Was the blood Xavier’s?

I tried to mind link with Xavier, but he didn’t respond, so I sped up to get within range. Darkness descended out of nowhere, and I couldn’t tell if night was falling fast, or if the shadows were multiplying. I tried and tried to link with Xavier, but it was no use. Why wasn’t he responding?

I started moving at top speed, pumping my legs with all my might, but I was standing still, stuck in a nightmare. I couldn’t catch up with Xavier, and every step I took felt like a step into quicksand. I was covering so much ground in the ever darkening, misty forest, but I was going nowhere. My heart pumped hard as my fear of losing Xavier forever took hold, but I refused to stop. I was panting and trying not to overheat, but I pushed through.

Suddenly, I spotted Xavier up ahead, and all my panic melted away. Even with all my fear I couldn’t help but notice how gorgeous he was. Everything I had ever wanted. I was gaining on him, and I felt happiness blooming in my body with every step I took. But then we were side by side, and something didn’t feel right. He was cold and detached, like I was just some stranger. *Why isn’t the mind link working?*

Suddenly, Xavier’s Alpha voice echoed in my head. *We’re not mates. The bond is broken.*

I was stunned, but there was a cold feeling of recognition in my gut, like my body knew something that my brain had forgotten. *Of course we’re mates. You’d never break our bond!*

Disdain crackled in his voice. *It was easy to break. You broke it better than I ever could long ago. I have a new mate now.*

My heart broke into a million pieces. Another mate? I was his only true mate. I’d thought I couldn’t be more stunned by his words, but then things went from bad to worse. He began to speak in Latin, uttering that familiar spell that had shattered our bond. *Nego illam mate foedere iungit.*

Terrified and totally confused, I ran away from the horrific sounds of the words that had torn Xavier and me apart. I was running blind, with no destination in mind, only an urge to escape the sound of that terrible spell. *How could Xavier say those things to me?*

The pain threatened to explode my heart, and I couldn’t help but think that what he’d said was the truth. I ran to escape my thoughts, which were scrambling my brain, and the pain, which was getting worse by the second. The only cure for my aching body, heart, and mind was to focus on the primal part of me, the wolf I really was, and ignore the terrible stabbing sensation that my body was enduring. A wolf could suffer a lot and still survive.

I was flying fast on all four legs, but despite my speed, I knew something was very wrong. The pack house was the only place where I could go to figure out what to do next, and to think about how to stop the pain I was suffering. My instincts went on high alert, and I decided to head straight for the house. As I tore through the woods I was hit by an overwhelming sense of déjà vu. Hadn’t this happened before? Wasn’t it happening now? What was going on?

A flash of memory nearly knocked me over, and I saw the revenants closing in on the pack house. Of course! It was time to pick up some serious speed. I had to get back there pronto. That was where the danger was.

Despite my focus and full-on speed, I was still out in the thick of the woods instead of closing in on the pack house. The house wasn’t that far away, so I had to wonder how the hell I’d missed it. Could I have taken a wrong turn?

I turned right, looked left, and realized I was totally lost. *How can I be so directionally challenged this close to home?* And what about my sense of smell? I couldn’t pick up the familiar scent of the pack house, which tripled my worry. Something was very wrong.

Through the blinding mist, I chose a path that seemed familiar, but I couldn’t be sure. Then, out of the dark air, the sounds of a fight emerged. *Good. I’m getting close. It won’t be long now.*

The sounds of battle became overwhelming in an instant, and the ground melted away from me. The misty woods, Xavier’s presence, all of it was turned on its side as a new sensation hit me. One of intense loss and grief. I could hear a distant howl of anguish, felt it in my chest as if it was my own. But it wasn’t. I saw a female wolf lying dead on the frosty ground. I knew her. Memory was slow here, but her name came back to me: Joss. But what did I care for Joss? Why did the sight of her dead make me want to scream as if she was my mate?

Another flash of a memory that I was understanding wasn’t my own. And I saw Ravi kneeling alongside her, weeping. Why was I getting Ravi’s memories? This wasn’t right. I couldn’t imagine the pain he must have felt, witnessing the brutal demise of the woman he loved. Just when I thought the memory was over, it played again in my mind, and I knew then that I was doomed to relive it over and over, feeling the pain of Joss’s death as if Joss were my own mate. It was as if Ravi’s blood was running through my veins and I was living all of his heartache, which hurt like hellfire.

I was trying so hard to deal with all the pain gripping my mind, body, and heart, but it felt like I was going to be incinerated by it. I saw something like a hologram, a flicker of a person that came, went, and came again. *Ravi!*

He was in his human form, and the look of agony on his face almost made me vomit. I didn’t know what the hell was happening, but Ravi was soon watching Joss’s death right alongside me, and we were both writhing in pain. I felt Ravi’s agony like it was devouring my own body. Even after all the pain I’d been through, I couldn’t handle the pain I was experiencing in that moment. I had lost a mate bond, died, and been resurrected, but that all seemed like small potatoes compared to what was being inflicted upon me now.

I reached out to take Ravi’s hand, offering a tiny bit of comfort to this person whose suffering I was literally feeling first-hand. Ravi looked at me but stayed silent, too twisted up in his grief to talk.

I looked down at Ravi’s hand and let out a gasp when I saw a vine twisted around our forearms. There were thorns in our wrists, and blood was dripping along the vine. It was like a horror show, and the more Ravi writhed in agony, the more his pain pulsed through my body.

I tried to jerk my hand away, but I couldn’t pull free. Ravi gripped my hand tighter. *The blood can save you*.

I heard myself moan, and then, with a start, I suddenly woke up. I’d made it home. I was lying in bed at the pack house. Ravi was sitting next to me, a tube running from his arm into a needle in my wrist. Emmett was hovering nearby.

“I think the transfusion was a success,” he said.

And I finally got it. The terrible pain inside my body wasn’t just about Xavier and the dredged-up spell that had broken us—it was about Ravi’s blood, which was now flowing through my veins. Blood was a powerful conduit, and it had carried all of Ravi’s psychic pain to every part of my body.

I looked up at Ravi and whispered, “You saved my life.” *I’m sorry you couldn’t save Joss*.

Ravi’s eyes widened, and his voice echoed in my head. *Did you just…*

Our eyes locked.

“How do you feel?” Emmett asked, like the crazy scientist he was. “Any side effects?”

I lied to Emmett because I was barely ready to tell myself the truth, never mind anyone else.

“I’m just a little woozy,” I said, knowing full well that I was lying through my teeth.

This was a huge problem, and I was going to have to face it. That kiss Xavier laid on me had been mind-blowing, but maybe he’d only done that because he’d thought I was dying. It was hard to admit the truth, especially since my heart still ached for Xavier. I couldn’t deny what was happening before my very eyes. I had just mind linked with Ravi. That shouldn’t have been possible… and yet. It seemed I had a new bond, and it wasn’t with Xavier. It was with Ravi.

**Episode 1839**

MARTA

I couldn’t see a thing when I woke up and quickly realized I’d been blindfolded. When I tried to move, I felt restraints on my arms. I was sitting against a tree, my arms wrapped around the trunk, bound with rope. I wriggled my wrists, but the knots were too tight. As I struggled to free myself, I had to take deep breaths and tell myself not to panic. Freaking out would only make things worse.

I wished Lilac were there to help me. Sure, he could be a total pain in the butt, but he had always been by my side when things got rough. He’d never let me down when we were linked, but when I cast my mind beyond the tree I was tied to in search of him, I only found empty space. I had to face the fact that I had lost my link with him, and I had no idea how to get it back.

Until our link had been severed, I hadn’t realized how much I’d relied on Lilac. I’d almost taken his companionship for granted. In the darkness caused by the blindfold, I suddenly remembered kissing him, and my heart did somersaults. I’d never thought our chemistry would heat up, but I’d been wrong. What had started out as a favor to help him become corporeal had grown into so much more, and the memory of those blooming fond feelings made me miss him. I hated to admit that I actually cared about him and couldn’t imagine losing him. I wished I could go back to the time when he’d meant nothing to me. It was always easier when feelings weren’t involved, and I had to admit I didn’t really know how to process the fact I *cared* about him. I was used to being on my own. Alone. And, well… here I was, alone again. And if I couldn’t get the link back to Lilac, I was going to be alone for a very long time.

I had to focus if I was going to get out of here. I kept trying to wriggle free of the ropes until the sound of footsteps made me freeze. Before I knew it, the footsteps were right in front of me, and I held my breath. Then the blindfold was ripped from my eyes, and a familiar form came into view. *York!* He stood above me, leering, a jagged scar on his neck from the time he’d been beheaded.

“There’s no point in struggling, Marta,” he said. “You’re tied up and surrounded. But don’t worry. I’m not going to kill you.”

I didn’t believe him for one second. He had spent so much time on a mission to kill. I spat at him to make it clear I wasn’t falling for his lies. “So… what is it that you want from me?”

Instead of answering me right away, he slowly squatted down, his glowing eyes penetrating mine, a menacing smile forming on his lips. His face was inches away from mine. “Killing you would be such a waste. And you’re far too special to waste.”

I shook my head to let him know my special powers wouldn’t help. I had to think fast and come up with reasons why I was useless to him.

“I’m a medium, but that doesn’t mean much,” I said. “What good is talking to the dead for the dead? You can just as easily do those things yourself.”

York’s vicious smile widened. He was really enjoying my helplessness and reveling in his power over me. I wished again that Lilac was here, and once again I remembered that my link with him was gone.

“So modest,” York said, his smile stretched ear to ear. “You’re not *just* a medium. You’re a bridge.”

My mouth went dry, and I swallowed nervously. He knew too much. And I was too scared to ask how exactly he had learned something I had only recently discovered myself. Playing dumb wasn’t working. I had to change my strategy.

“Okay, I’m a bridge, whatever that means,” I said, trying to maintain a cool demeanor. “But that doesn’t mean I know how the hell to use those powers. What you want is a witch. The witches at the pack house are way more powerful than me. But if you offer me up as an exchange maybe you can do a deal with them. It’s probably your best shot, because right now I’d be completely useless to you.”

I searched his face to see if he believed me. My inner thoughts were very different than the stuff I’d made up on the fly. I knew that the second Big Mac and Kira stepped in range of York, they would blast him into ash. *Please*, I thought, *please, be cocky enough to show your undead face at the pack house again. Big Mac and Kira will wipe that smile right off it.* His expression didn’t change, and I couldn’t tell if he was buying my bullshit, so I had to keep laying it on thick.

“Come on, you know I’m right, York. With a witch, you could do a lot more. I’m not part of that pack, I just got dragged into this mess. Let me go. I’m a nobody,” I said. I wondered if he could sense the fear behind my tough-girl act.

While I tried to study his reaction, he slowly reached out to touch my face in a way that was tender but also super creepy. I flinched and turned my head, pressing my cheek against the tree’s cold trunk.

“You say you’re nobody,” he said, speaking softly, almost like a lover. “I was once like you. But Letifer graced me, and now I have more power than an ordinary mortal could dream of. Letifer is going to crush those little puppies in the pack house, and then he’ll spread his influence over this whole world. The life I once had was meaningless. Death opened a door to the winning side. You are lucky enough to be offered the choice while still alive.”

He turned and spoke to a figure emerging from the darkness. “Isn’t that right, master?”

I thought my heart stopped beating when I saw Letifer, less ghostly and with more definition to his form than the last time I’d seen him. As he approached, my medium powers involuntarily kicked in, and I reached out to understand what the hell was happening. He appeared to be almost fully solid, yet he was shimmering and flickering ever so slightly, as if he wasn’t completely grounded in this dimension. He nodded at me, and I had the strangest sensation he could read my thoughts.

“You can see me clearly, bridge,” he said. “I have used considerable power to rejoin this world, but the transfer is not yet complete.”

A tiny spark of hope lit up inside me. *If the bastard isn’t all here, maybe the pack can destroy him before he wreaks havoc on the world*. I gathered my courage. Someone had to stand up to this evil being.

“Oh, what a shame,” I said, bravado and sarcasm dripping off my voice. Inside, I just kept thinking about what would happen if he fully transferred to this realm. The very thought made me feel sick.

York stepped aside, and Letifer took his place directly in front of me. He knelt down, looking almost humble as he locked eyes with me. At first, I tried again to twist free of the ropes around my wrists, but then an impulse to listen to him overtook me. He really was a compelling figure. I understood why some people followed him. He truly had the kind of charisma and confidence that was almost spellbinding.

*No, don’t be fooled, Marta, don’t let him suck you in*. I shook my head to clear it. I had to summon all my strength. *Keep your head on straight, and do not fall under this jerk’s spell like so many others*. Though my link to Lilac was long gone, I tried to keep his image in my mind. I pictured him beside me, and it kept me grounded, focused.

Letifer extended his hand like a king. I couldn’t tell what his intentions were, and again I felt the pull of his considerable power.

“I will not ask you to join me,” he said, calm and soothing. “I can see that you will not. But luckily, I do not require your loyalty.”

Relief wrapped itself around my heart.

“If you don’t need me as one of your pathetic minions, then let me go,” I said.

I was ready to be untied, to flee this forest and go home. Not being needed had never felt so good in my entire life.

Letifer smiled, and my veins felt like they had ice running through them.

“As soon as I’m done, you have my word that you will be released,” he said.

I could no longer hide my fear. Bravado was not an option as I looked at the terrible monster in front of me. When I spoke, my voice was trembling and full of fear. “Done with what?”

He did not explain. Only smiled a terrible, ghastly smile. He bent down, bringing himself closer to me. I couldn’t back away. There was no escape. A whimper escaped my lips involuntarily as he placed a hand upon my head.

For a moment all I could feel was the cold, clammy, half-corporeal flesh against my brow. And then there was a tug. Subtle at first, but quickly followed by a painful tearing as Letifer began to drain my very soul from my body.

**Episode 1840**

I stared at Big Mac in shock. I couldn’t believe she had the real orb with her this whole time. Xavier was fuming, and I could tell he was about to blow up faster than the magical weapon would. It was true that Big Mac shouldn’t have kept such an important secret, but I wasn’t in the mood to waste time with a fight.

“What the hell is going on?” Xavier boomed. “How long exactly did you plan on keeping this a secret from me? I’m the Alpha here, Big Mac, you can’t hide all your tricks just for one big dramatic reveal. We’re at war!”

Big Mac shot Xavier a glare. She wasn’t one to shrink in the face of someone else’s anger. “I know *exactly* what I’m doing, and it’s a good thing someone does, or precious relics and weapons wouldn’t stand a chance in this house.”

Before Xavier could respond, it was Greyson’s turn to get angry. I was losing patience with the whole useless disagreement. I had no time for all this ego-fueled bickering when my sister was in real trouble. Greyson stepped forward, and I could tell he was about to give Big Mac a piece of his own mind, but I didn’t give him a chance to speak. I had more important things to do than stand around and watch a fight about who knew what, and who should be in charge.

“I don’t care who knows what and when!” I shouted. “The fact is that the good guys still have the orb, and the bad guys have still got Artemis. You all can stand around and argue about if someone should have told the other about the weapon sooner, but I’m going to find my sister!”

Xavier and Greyson both tried to tell me it was too dangerous to search for Artemis, but I wasn’t about to back down. They could fight all day if they wanted, and they could keep trying to tell me I didn’t know what I was getting into, but I wasn’t going to waste one more second.

“You’re not going out there alone,” Xavier said.

“It’s too dangerous,” Greyson said.

“You want to talk about danger? My sister is the one with no protection right now. She needs me,” I said. I was ready to find my sister on my own, even if everyone else thought it was a bad idea.

I was surprised when Big Mac nodded. “She’s right. Artemis is a powerful force. We can’t allow Letifer to own her. We have to end his hold on her… one way or another.”

I did not like the look in Big Mac’s eyes: pitying, but cold and firm. I knew exactly what remained unsaid. If I couldn’t save Artemis, they would have to kill my sister. *Not a chance.* I vowed right then and there to never let that happen. I marched toward the woods.

I hadn’t had nearly enough time with Artemis, and there was no way I was going to lose her. I would find her no matter what I had to do, or who I had to confront. Instead of spending time with me, doing normal sister stuff, Artemis had spent all those years in an orphanage, and then doing tasks for the Kollector. It wasn’t fair that we had been kept apart for so long, and I couldn’t let her slip away again. With my determination renewed by Big Mac’s unspoken idea, I picked up speed, stomping into the trees, following the trail to the ghost pond. Artemis and Rishika had been circling each other there. *Please don’t let me be too late.* I could sense my friends following me.

I picked up my pace and ran as fast as I could through the trees, feeling closer to my sister with every step. Sure enough, when the surface of the pond came into view, I saw the distant figures of Artemis and Rishika, circling each other. But they weren’t alone. All around them, revenants were closing in. I’d thought I was prepared for anything, but I couldn’t hold back my scream when I saw Artemis lunging toward Rishika with a knife, surrounded by Letifer’s dark, flickering energy. I ran right toward them, screaming at my sister. “Artemis, stop!”

A feeling of horror gripped me. I knew I was too late. Time slowed down as I watched my sister—dark energy crackling all around her—rush toward Rishika, whose impressive martial arts skills were on display, but who ultimately was no match for Letifer’s dark energy. I raised my hands to unleash a wave of Fae magic to force them apart, but I knew I couldn’t summon magic without running the risk of hurting someone. The image of how I had nearly harmed Xavier with my last magical blast sprang readily to mind. But what else could I do? Artemis couldn’t be allowed to act on Letifer’s evil impulses. He was using her for his own ends, and I had to stop it. I straightened my arms and aimed at Artemis, but then I imagined the magic killing her. *Should I take a chance?*

A cascade of feelings flooded my mind as I stood by. I recalled Big Mac’s implications on killing my sister before she could be turned to Letifer’s influence fully. My magic crackled under my fingertips, but the idea of harming my sister made me sick. But still… Artemis was strong. She could handle a blast of magic and come out okay. Wasn’t it better to ask for forgiveness after she had a concussion than the alternative?

Before I could unleash my magic, the die was cast for me. Artemis flew at Rishika, and then past her. As I screamed “No!” and blasted another revenant that had swooped in, I saw that Rishika was still standing. Instead of hurting Rishika, Artemis slammed into a revenant behind her, stabbing it with the knife. The revenant let out a gurgle, and the dark energy around Artemis pulsed. With a surge of hope, I urged my sister on. She was resisting Letifer’s commands, and I knew she could keep doing it. After so many years of hardship, all that time living life as an orphan, I knew my sister could do anything.

“Artemis! You can do this, you can fight him. Don’t let him win.”

I moved forward, telling the others who had joined me at the pond to keep the revenants away. They wasted no time holding off the revenants, but Artemis was still inside the dark energy field, fighting Letifer’s influence, just like Greyson had done.

I forged ahead, sensing both Xavier and Greyson keeping pace with me as I approached Artemis. I knew that the mate bonds and our love meant that the slightest mistake could mean Artemis’s death. The boys would attack instantly if they thought I was in danger, so I had to be careful with my next steps.

I approached Artemis, who was standing there with a dead revenant at her feet, panting slightly, the knife in her hands.

“She’s in there!” Rishika called, and I nodded.

I went right up to my sister and looked her in the eye, sensing Xavier and Greyson getting ready to pounce at any second.

“Artemis, it’s me,” I said. She looked murderous, but I could see the confusion behind her eyes as well. “C’mon, Artemis, drop the knife.” And then my sister looked at me with something like recognition.

She looked down at the blade. It seemed like she was about to drop it when the dark energy flickered and I saw the shape of Letifer superimposed over my sister’s body. Greyson and Xavier growled, and I waved a hand behind me, signaling for them to stand down. I had to hold my ground. I knew my sister could be stronger than this horrific force of destruction if I kept my faith in her.

“I’ve got this,” I said, briefly catching my mates’ worried glances. “Trust me.” I returned my focus onto Artemis’s eyes, trying to see past the shadow of Letifer’s gaze. Despite that ugly look, I reached for Artemis’s hand.

“Please come back to us, Artemis. You’re so strong, and I know you can fight this. Letifer wants to use you, but you don’t need him. You have all of us, and we’ll help you. You can do it.”

Artemis squeezed my hand, and I could see the internal agony as my sister tried to fight. I watched as the ball of energy took the form of a menacing Letifer, then faded as Artemis fought. I held back my tears, fearing that Artemis was losing the struggle. Finally, on impulse, I stepped forward and embraced my sister.

“I love you,” I said.

I could feel Artemis shaking in my arms, but I held her tight and made her feel my love for her, the love of a sister who would never give up.

Just when I felt my faith falter slightly, and thought I had to let go, I heard the knife clatter to the ground. And then my sister whispered something only I could hear.

“*Get him out of me.*”

I held her tighter, and all at once, the dark energy seemed to collapse. Artemis sighed in relief and started to cry as all that awful energy drained out of her body. I was shaking in equal relief as I felt my sister put her own arms around me. “I knew you could do it,” I whispered.

I parted from her briefly, only to look back at the others. “She’s okay!” I said, a smile bursting wide on my face. Only Rishika had the same overjoyed reaction, but I could see the tension coil away from Xavier and Greyson as the danger passed.

I was about to suggest we all head back to the pack house to regroup when a single, terrifying scream echoed through the woods.

**Episode 1841**

GREYSON

The emotional reunion between Cali and Artemis was something I could relate to. I remembered what it was like to not be in control of my own body, so I felt for Artemis as she came back to herself after throwing off Letifer’s influence. He had clearly infected her deeply, just like he’d infected me, and she needed a minute to release all that anguish. But as she sobbed in Cali’s arms, a scream in the distance chilled me, and I knew we didn’t have time to waste.

Big Mac knew it too. “That sounded like Marta,” she said. She gestured toward the pond, and the patch of woods where the dramatic battle to free Artemis from Letifer’s grip had just ended. “Dammit!” she swore. Even for Big Mac, I could tell she was taking this a little too personally. “I’m such a fool. All of this—Artemis, the fight—it was a distraction. Letifer has the bridge, and he’s going to use her to come back fully. We have to get there first.”

I locked eyes with Xavier.

“Everyone follow me,” he ordered, then shifted into his wolf and bounded off.

I remained in human form, ready to shift as needed, and ran with the others, all of us heading in the direction of Marta’s scream. I stayed close to Cali and Artemis, who were running as fast as they could, even after all the struggle Artemis had just been through.

“Are you and your sister all right, Cali?” I asked, none of us pausing in our pursuit of Letifer.

“Artemis will be fine; she’s tough.”

“Why don’t you let me shift and carry her?”

“No way. I’ll be all right.” Artemis shook her head. Her voice was scratchy, but it was definitely her own. “The run will do me good, and you need to save your strength for whatever Letifer has planned.”

Another scream pierced the woods, closer this time. We were almost there; I could sense the fear in the air, smell its sour scent. It was apparent from the terrible pain powering her scream that Marta was enduring something horrible, and very different from what I myself had endured when Letifer had possessed me. Anger and memories of Letifer’s tyranny propelled me forward. *I will rip Letifer apart for all the pain he’s caused the people I care about.*

“Stay as far back as you can when we reach Letifer. Use your magic from a distance, and only if you absolutely must.”

I was expecting another argument from my mate. I knew she was strong and capable, but right now I needed her safe. Luckily, Cali only gave me a serious nod of agreement. Crisis averted.

Another weaker whimper crackled out of the woods as I rushed ahead, joining Xavier, who was baring his teeth in his wolf form. We’d arrived at a clearing, a wide, open area filled with revenants, but they were holding still, suspended near Letifer, who had laid his hand on Marta’s head.

I could see the magic flowing from Marta to Letifer. He was consuming all her power, growing more solid with every ounce of magic he stole from her. Marta had no choice but to sit there and have the life sucked out of her. Not only was she losing consciousness and form, but she was tied to a tree with no way of running or fighting back.

I shifted, mentally working with Xavier to flank Letifer for a surprise attack. I approached with stealth, but Letifer sensed me. He turned and locked eyes with me, which was honestly a huge surprise. I’d misjudged the situation by assuming that Letifer was completely absorbed in the magic siphoning.

With his cool gaze fixed on me, he uttered four words. “Too little, too late.”

I believed him for a split second, then shook off my doubt and prepared to attack.

I unleashed a growl and lunged toward Letifer, who had also misjudged the situation. I had regained my will to fight and remembered my number one rule of battle: Never take advice from enemies.

As Xavier and I attacked Letifer from both sides, York—who I wished in that moment had never been brought back by the orb—yelled out for the revenants to attack. Suddenly, Xavier and I were at the center of a huge brawl as Rishika and Big Mac joined the fray. I heard a howl through the trees and saw the few pack members on perimeter sweep emerge, almost certainly summoned from their guard duties by the same scream. All the other pack members were like a blur of chaos as they bared their teeth and held off the revenants, pouncing and ripping them apart.

While the pack did their best, the spotlight was solidly on me and my brother, as it was up to us to pull Letifer away from his latest victim. I was communicating with my brother at every turn.

*Xavier, you need to create a diversion, draw Letifer away from Marta*.

Xavier got my message and feinted in a way that made Letifer lunge at him, moving away from the tree where Marta was bound.

I snapped my attention onto Cali. We had to time this right, or we may not get another opening. *Cali, we’re distracting Letifer—you know what to do*.

Of course Cali knew what to do. She started to move around the edge of the clearing. I kept up the fight, reveling in hurting Letifer’s physical form. Still, I couldn’t deny that Letifer was strong. I took a moment to consult with Xavier.

*I don’t know if we can take him alone*, I said.

As if he’d read my mind, Letifer grinned like he’d already won. “You are all fools. My army is endless, deathless. You have no hope of defeating me. Once you are dead, I’ll take your corpses and add you to my ranks. You will watch, helpless, as my servants and I conquer the whole of the living world.”

He laughed as he struck me with a powerful dose of dark magic that drove me to my knees. I looked up at him, unable to hide my pain and defeat, almost resigned to my own downfall… But then an idea came to me.

I shifted. “What if we join you before we’re corpses?” I asked.

This threw off his concentration. Letifer paused and looked at me, a surprised expression replacing the confident one from a moment earlier. His split-second hesitation was enough.

I saw Cali and Marta out of the corner of my eye, both of them standing. Cali had freed Marta, who was surrounded by waves of rippling energy, the full force of the bridge unleashed at last. I was shocked at the extent of Marta’s power. Before my eyes, she opened a portal to the spirit world, and silvery forms flowed out.

*Is this the power that Letifer wanted? The reason why he wanted me to bring Marta to him?*

I felt a moment of triumph, then gathered my focus in order to finish the fight. Marta was clearly capable of summoning spiritual energy beyond what I had imagined, but I sensed a weakness in her. She wouldn’t be able to pull Letifer toward the portal all on her own.

I shifted back into my wolf and mind linked with Xavier*. We have to work together to get Letifer at the portal’s threshold.*

Xavier instantly responded. *You push, I’ll pull.*

We operated together, keeping Letifer off-balance as we maneuvered him toward the portal. Big Mac moved into position and reached her hand into her satchel. I glanced toward Marta, who was visibly weakening, and I immediately mind linked with Cali.

*You have to help Marta keep the portal open, or it’s all for nothing*, I told her.

Cali nodded, and Artemis stepped up to join the other two.

The three women blurred as Fae magic and bridge magic collided. I’d never seen anything more beautiful or awe-inspiring. I had always known that the sisters and Marta were strong on their own, but when the three of them blended, they created a forcefield of whirling magic that seemed unstoppable. Bridge magic plus Fae magic equaled a light storm of epic proportions. But I knew the women couldn’t remain blended in their magic for long. Even from the outside I could feel the overwhelming force of the magic.

Letifer howled in rage as he was forced a little closer to the portal with every step. Writhing and flailing, but still somehow maintaining a sliver of the confidence of someone accustomed to winning, he lunged for me. “You and your pack cannot defeat the power that I hold!”

Maybe he was right about that, but I knew we didn’t have to defeat him in the way he imagined. The sisters and Marta held strong. I signaled Xavier, and each of us grabbed one of Letifer’s arms in our teeth, holding him right at the threshold of the portal, the spiritual energy seething around him.

I howled toward Big Mac, hoping she’d hear me over the cacophonous roar of all that unbridled energy. Big Mac, that tough-ass witch, did not let me down. Clearly, she knew what was needed. As if she’d been born to do it, she nodded and hurled the orb directly at Letifer.

**Episode 1842**

I held on to Marta and kept her upright as we watched the orb arcing through the air toward its target. I had to hold my breath, because it seemed like the orb was just a random solid object, no more powerful than an ordinary rock. How could this simple little ball destroy Letifer’s chance at becoming fully solid in this realm and wreaking havoc here? We’d seen Letifer destroy so many lives, and now we were supposed to believe an orb could end his reign of terror?

But then the orb proved its power. An explosion emitted a tidal wave of force. I had to shield my eyes from the brightness of the blast as wind whipped over my head. I couldn’t believe I was somehow still standing through all that, but the orb was targeted to make Letifer suffer, not the rest of us. I steadied myself, keeping my feet firmly planted on the ground as Letifer let out a scream of rage and frustration as he was hurtled toward the spiritual doorway.

Satisfied, I rage-whispered, “Get fucked, Letifer.”

But the danger was far from over. I knew we still had work to do when Marta held her hands out, trying to direct all the swirling energies coming through the door as they mingled with the orb’s power.

Artemis gasped at something out of my line of sight.

“The explosion is changing the flow of the doorway. It’s going to suck everything in now, not just Letifer!”

As if my sister’s words were a cue, I felt my body being dragged toward the portal. The pull was stronger than the strongest magnet, and I dug my feet into the ground to hold my position. Dirt and leaves gathered around my ankles as I pushed my feet further into the earth. Marta was still in my arms, and my precarious grip on her was making it hard to fight the pull of the portal.

Letifer screamed in rage and pain as he was pushed into the other world. None of us were sorry to see him go, even as his form became twisted and distorted, flickering and flailing due to the powerful surge of energy that was carrying him out of our lives. It was like a powerful wind was following him through the portal, picking up everything else along with it. Grass, branches, rocks, and leaves ripped past me, disappearing into the swirling hole. Even a bird was dragged into the abyss. The roiling wind threatened to drag me and Marta along right behind Letifer.

I called out to Xavier and Greyson. “I’m not sure how much longer I can hold on!”

Greyson was closer than Xavier, so he moved to block the path between me and the door. His strong body was a buffer between me and the other realm, but I knew we couldn’t hold off the powerful forces swirling around us forever. I yelled at him over the noise. “Get Marta to safety! She’s too weak to resist the pull!”

Greyson was ready to carry Marta away from me and the doorway, but she fought him.

“No!” she yelled. “Not yet, there’s something I have to do.”

I couldn’t imagine what Marta was talking about. I urged her to go with Greyson right then and there. Time was running out, and I felt myself slipping toward that terrible door. I dug my heels in harder, and Marta rallied to do what she needed to do.

With the last of her energy, she faced the portal and screamed Lilac’s name. It was then that I realized Marta was desperate to get Lilac out of the world beyond the doorway before it collapsed and he was stuck there for good. But there was so much force going through that door, I wondered if it was even possible to get someone out.

I looked to Artemis. “Can we keep the portal open?”

Artemis frowned, like she wasn’t certain. She looked toward the door, and a doubtful expression crossed her face, but then I saw her composure return and knew she had a plan.

“Maybe we could get together and use a blast of magic against the wind itself?” she said. “We’d only be able to keep it going for a few seconds though.”

Marta nodded. “A few seconds might be all I need.”

Artemis and I extended our hands and allowed our Fae magic to surge out and force the doorway to stay open. It was hard, but together we kept the energy surging from our fingertips toward the door. I caught some of the chaos as revenants were pulled into the doorway, like water circling a drain. Every fiber of my being strained as I fought the swirling vortex with my magic. Artemis was straining too, and I was scared that we’d be seriously hurt if the door didn’t close soon.

Marta whispered Lilac’s name over and over. “*Please, Lilac*…”

I knew he wouldn’t hear her over the noise, but Marta just kept on saying his name. A thin stream of silvery, magical energy came out of the doorway, somehow moving against the flow. My arms began to shake. I knew I couldn’t hold my magic steady much longer. Amidst the chaotic flow of energy streaming both ways from the door, Marta kept whispering Lilac’s name, gathering the silvery threads to her.

Finally, just when I thought I couldn’t hold my outpouring of magic one more second, Marta whispered, “I have him.”

In almost the same moment, Artemis sagged and stopped supplying her magic. I slumped like my sister, and the vicious wind grew stronger.

“Now, Marta!” I called. “You have to close the portal, now!”

I didn’t know if Marta could do it. It seemed like she might let us all get sucked through the portal, she was so obsessed with saving Lilac. But then she lifted a weary head, looked at the portal, and slammed it shut, blinking it out of existence. In the sudden silence, she collapsed to the ground.

I was so weak that I couldn’t even crawl to Marta to help her up. I felt so bad that she’d made all that effort and hadn’t managed to save Lilac. As I watched her lay there, helpless in my own exhaustion, a figure stepped forward and gently lifted her . A gasp escaped my throat as I realized it was Lilac, looking as solid as a human.

He cradled Marta in his arms as if she were the only being on this planet. He paid zero attention to anything else going on as he stroked Marta’s head and held her.

Xavier was just as shocked as I was—I could tell by the sound he made as we watched Lilac, who seemed to have taken shape from all those silver threads.

Rishika rushed toward Artemis. It was good to see how much Rishika cared for my sister, even after their nearly fatal fight.

I felt Greyson, now in human form again, pull me up to my feet. He laid the steamiest kiss on me. “You scared the hell out of me, love, but I should know by now my mate is stronger than any magic in this world, or the next.” He kissed me again, and the moment was full of much needed passion and release, after all the chaos we’d both been through. He asked me several times if I was all right, and Xavier soon joined him, also wanting to know if I was hurt.

“Is he gone?” I asked. “Is Letifer really dead?”

Greyson was quick to respond. “The orb blew up right in his face and knocked him through the portal. I’d say that’s as dead as anyone could get.”

“We’ve been fooled once before,” I reminded him.

Greyson shrugged. “True, but from where I’m standing, he looks gone to me. There’s no way a werewolf could’ve survived that, so hopefully a being like Letifer isn’t strong enough to manage it.”

Xavier murmured his agreement.

It was good to know that Letifer was gone, but I still had to wonder if he was gone for good. It was strange to sit there in the silent aftermath and wonder if he could still hurt us.

Big Mac approached. “It’s really over. I can’t sense any of the dark energy that Letifer was giving off.”

I turned to look at Marta and Lilac, growing concerned that Marta hadn’t woken up yet. She lay there, a limp ragdoll in Lilac’s arms. He was being so strong for her, even though he’d just fought his way through god only knew what kind of physical challenges to push back through to the other side of the portal. He loved her—it was obvious in the amount of worry in his face as he cradled her and spoke softly. My heart went out to him. He pushed Marta’s hair from her face, including a white streak that hadn’t been there before. She had been tied up, drained of her energy, and yet had still managed to pull Lilac out of that door.

“She was trying so hard.” His voice broke. “She used all of her power to keep the door open long enough for me to get out. I… Cali, I think Marta is dead.”