**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 17**

**Episodes 1843-1973**

**Episode 1843**

CHARLIE

When Chad announced that the camp was under siege, I looked to Violet, weighing up whether to help them or not. On the one hand, I was a hunter, and this was what I had been trained for. On the other hand, Violet had just been hit with silver, and even though she did look better, I knew it would take a little while before she was at full strength again.

*Maybe she doesn’t want to rush in to help the folks who keep werewolf trophies on the wall?*

I wasn’t thrilled about that little fact, either. It’s not like hunters were likely to risk their lives to save a werewolf pack that was in danger—they were literally more likely to *be* the danger. But I had spent time with these campers, and they didn’t deserve to die a horrible revenant death because they’d happened to be born into this life. I’d been born into the same life, after all.

Going back would be a huge risk, especially since the people we’d be fighting *with* could turn out to be just as much the enemy as the revenants. But when I thought of Sophie, Reggie, Aisha, and other thus far innocent kids—plus my mom and Romilly—I knew I couldn’t turn my back on them.

*Who knows?* I thought. *Maybe in helping them,* again*, they’ll see that werewolves are just people too, and not murderous, soulless monsters.*

Well… maybe I wouldn’t hold out hope for *that* one.

I mind linked with Violet. *Do you want to do this?* *You’ll be safe if you stay here.*

*Are you kidding me?* Violet replied. *I’m not going to let you fight vampire revenants alone!*

Her response annoyed me a little, because I wasn’t afraid to go alone. But I was really moved by how quickly she’d agreed to fight. Of course she wanted to fight. Mates didn’t let mates fight alone. Still, I worried about her.

But my worry wouldn’t win.

*I’m going to be fine, Charlie.* *And one more wolf could tip the battle. It’s risky for me NOT to fight. I can’t sit by while your friends are in danger.*

She had a point, but I didn’t want to push her into something dangerous. *Are you sure I’m not asking too much? The hunters could hurt both of us if we aren’t careful.*

Violet didn’t have a chance to respond, because Chad interrupted us. Freakin’ Chad, always butting in and being annoying.

“Um, not sure what you guys are doing,” Chad said. “But I don’t like awkward silences, and this one’s getting real awkward.”

I broke the mind link and glanced at Violet, who nodded once. Her mind was made up.

“We’re in, Chad,” I said. “Let’s get moving.”

Violet, Chad, and I returned to the hunter camp, double time. Chad was keeping up with transmissions over the walkie-talkie, snooping on the codes and giving terse replies here and there. At one point, he turned to me.

“Your mom wants to talk to you when this is all over,” he said.

To which Violet muttered, “I’ll bet.”

I nodded in reply to Chad. I just hoped that there would be a time when this shit was all over. I couldn’t imagine how many revenants it would take to besiege the hunter camp, but I was pretty sure the number was somewhere north of “a lot.”

The three of us aimed for the breached fence where the enormous tree had fallen. Violet volunteered to go first.

“No,” I said. “You should watch Chad’s back.”

She frowned in disagreement and was clearly about to hit me with a comeback, but the distant scream of a hunter shut us all up. Shit was getting realer than real, and we had to push forward quickly.

I scaled the tree trunk, alert for movement. It was quiet up there, and instead of breaking the silence by talking and potentially tipping off our enemies with the sound of my voice, I motioned Chad and Violet forward.

We were in the camp when Chad’s walkie-talkie crackled, which irritated me because it was so damn loud when we were trying to be incognito. He pressed an ear to the speaker and relayed the message to us. “They’re making their stand at the training ground. Let’s move.”

Fine, *maybe* Chad’s walkie-talkie was coming in handy.

We wasted no time heading toward the training ground. I imagined a group of hunters using the archery range to pelt revenants like medieval warriors, and others using the obstacle course to mess the revenants up. But when we got in sight of the training ground, it was nothing like that.

The hunters were in the middle of the grounds, facing outward, encircled by a throng of vampire revenants. My heart dropped. There was my mom, wielding a crossbow as she backed away from the revenants. She was in real danger.

“What are we going to do?” I asked Chad and Violet.

Violet looked over the scene and mind linked with me. *There’s so many of them!* I could feel her panic like it was my own. Or maybe I was also panicking a little*. Are you sure we can help?*

*We can try*, I replied.

I told Chad my plan to relay over the walkie-talkie. “When you, Violet, and I create a distraction, the other hunters should fall back and get through, then run south out of the hunter camp where it’s safe.”

“And what then?” Chad asked.

“The hope is that we’ll be buying them enough time to get to safety.”

Chad and Violet froze. I was suggesting that we may not survive, and we all knew it.

But Violet nodded.

“This is what I’ve been training for. I’m ready to kill some supernatural scum,” Chad said. “But if you two tell anyone I’ve been nice to you, you’ll pay for it.”

Ah, there was the Chadster I knew and hated.

But we were all on the same page, game to risk our lives for this fight. We may have been a small group, but we were all ready to fight. Chad clicked the walkie-talkie and communicated the plan as Violet and I shifted.

“Hey, wait,” Chad sputtered, pointing at me. “You’re the wolf that—"

He cut himself off as Violet howled. Refocusing our attention, we stormed toward the revenants. Chad ran too, brandishing a spear that he picked up on the way. The revenants turned, clearly not expecting another force. I hoped they wouldn’t realize how tiny our cavalry really was.

Violet leapt into the fray, shredding the nearest revenant, and I was right beside her, slashing through them as quickly as I could. Violet and I fought side by side, and Chad hurled his spear like a track and field star. We were a small but mighty team.

In the midst of battle, I heard the hunters yelling, and what sounded like my mother’s voice. That split-second distraction allowed the revenants to overwhelm me, and I saw orange eyes glowing as I hit the ground and felt Violet frantically calling me through our mind link, asking where I was.

*I can’t see you anymore, Charlie!*

I quickly rolled onto my back and sliced up at the revenant holding me down. I tried to take as many of them down with me as I could. It was a relentless fight, nonstop, like there would never be an end to any of the chaos. The eyes glowed more intensely orange as I fought. It’s wasn’t looking good, until, suddenly, the eyes dimmed.

*They’re falling!* Violet said.

Revenant after revenant collapsed around me. Chad yelled in triumph. “We did it! I think!”

I stood and saw Violet surrounded by the still bodies of revenants. Hunters slowly approached, unsure of what had happened.

*What’s going on? Why did they all die?* Violet asked me.

I didn’t have an answer. Something larger than us was at play, but I didn’t know what. I was just thankful it was over, at least for the time being.

Then I locked eyes with Violet and felt how relieved and tired and happy she was. All I wanted was to be with her… But the hunters were approaching us, and there was a lot to get through before we could be alone.

At my signal, Violet and I shifted back to human. Chad yelped and closed his eyes, not expecting a naked girl. He really was such a goofball. Romilly was already there, wrapping a jacket around Violet.

My mom rushed to me, handing me a jacket as well and asking if I was all right. “What happened? How did you stop the revenants?”

I realized that my mom was in awe, and that she thought our little trio had massacred countless revenants. I quickly explained that I thought it was something else, that maybe the one who’d controlled them was gone. The piles of revenant bodies were huge, and there was no way the three of us had done all that damage, though I was tired enough to know we’d made a dent.

“We should burn these things right now,” I said. “In case they can still come back.”

Who knew what rules applied to revenants beyond the grave? A fire would hopefully seal the deal and make them disappear for good.

Pepperdine overheard and agreed. “I’ll get the gasoline.”

Romilly stepped in. “You two, you’ve both done a massive day’s work. It is time for you to go back to the dorms to rest. I’ll send someone to check on any wounds in a little bit.”

I put my arm around Violet, and we walked toward my cabin. Violet was dragging her feet, like she couldn’t wait to lie down. I agreed, but I wasn’t ready for rest just yet. I hugged her closer as we walked, letting her know I was ready for some alone time with her.

“I’m so not letting you go anywhere anytime soon. Not even to a separate bed,” I said.

We arrived at my cabin, and the second I closed the door, I reached to kiss her. Even with the exhaustion of the fight, I was energized just having her with me. I could tell Violet felt the same as she perked up under me. She kissed me back with an intensity that left me equally breathless, and I wondered if we might finally be ready to take that next step…

**Episode 1844**

LOLA

I was pacing near the trenches with Jay, Emmett, and Jacqueline when Emmett said he had a very good way to ignite the bodies. That was Emmett, always the professor, with ideas for every occasion, even when it came to a bunch of trenches full of bodies. He retrieved what he needed from the lab, and I couldn’t help but worry that it wouldn’t be effective, or that we’d run out of time. He worked fast to combine a dash of this and a swirl of that, forming a liquid concoction that I hoped like hell would get the job done.

I dumped the liquid into the trench closest to me and crossed my fingers. *Please let this work.* It was going to take a very special brew to make all these bodies disappear. And it needed to be a fast-acting solution, because I knew Letifer could launch another attack at any moment. If we didn’t dispose of the bodies before he struck again, we’d be totally overrun by his army. *The worst part about fighting the undead is that there are so damn many of them.*

When I poured the last drop in, I got ready for the bodies to dissolve, or disappear in some sort of magical puff of smoke. Nothing. Had he failed? I stood there wondering what was next, and Jay came up to me and smiled his sexy smile. Clearly Emmett had clued him into something. Before I could ask what he knew, he dropped a lit match into the trench. I watched it fall as if in slow motion. It hit the soaked bodies in the trench, and at first all there was was a subtle spark before a massive fireball swooshed up, and then huge flames shot out all around it. I shrieked and leapt to the side, barely avoiding the flames. I mean, Jay had always lit my fire, but this was a bit much!

“Watch out!” Jacqueline shouted. “Vampires don’t like fire!”

Jay pulled me away from the fire, apologizing. I laughed it off, but he held me for there a moment, the heat of his body and the fire going to my head.

“All through this crazy battle, I was only thinking of you, Lola,” he said.

I felt a hit of the vampire heat, and he sensed it. As the bodies burned behind us, he went in for a kiss, and I was ready to return the heat. But then Emmett called out, “Later, kids!” and spoiled the moment.

I looked into Jay’s eye and wanted nothing more than to end this battle and celebrate the ceasefire in our bed. Instead, I cooled things down and backed away.

“Hold that thought,” I said, and he rolled his eye but didn’t protest. We both knew that we had to wait. We had to return to the task of destroying the bodies. I poured more liquid into another trench, and Jay reached for another match, but then Jacqueline pointed into the woods.

“Someone’s coming!” she shouted. We all looked up, and my jaw dropped. “Lots of someones,” Jacqueline added.

I was tensing for another fight, but then I exactly who it was coming into view, and it wasn’t the enemy. “Cali!”

I was so relieved to see my best friend safe and sound. She looked like she’d been through hell and back, but she was alive and flanked by both her mates. It seemed like forever ago that we’d just been two average roommates trying to figure out our life plans, implementing a crazy idea to get Cali out of debt.

I ran toward Cali and flung my arms around her, so happy to see her.

She was happy to see me too. We talked frantically, trying to get all the words out since we had so much to catch up on. While I was having a happy reunion with my bestie, I glanced at Jay and saw that he looked concerned.

He turned to Xavier. “What happened out there? Are you in retreat? Should we fall back to the house?”

Before Xavier could answer, Emmett piped up, asking if fire would be useful in the next attack.

But Cali shook her head. “There won’t be a next attack.”

I sensed Cali’s sadness and looked around to see if someone could explain what was going on. Big Mac came along, and I thought she might explain, but then I saw something that defied explanation… or should I say some*one*.

“Lilac!” I burst out. “Oh my god, is that really him?”

I stared at the figure I’d never thought I’d see again. How was he alive? I couldn’t believe my eyes. Excitement surged through me, until I registered that he was carrying an unconscious Marta in his arms. My smile vanished, and time seemed to slow down. Lilac looked so devastated, and it looked like there wasn’t an ounce of life left in Marta’s limp body.

I ran to help Lilac carry her. “Did she get bitten? We have a serum for that.”

Lilac clearly didn’t have the energy or time to give me details. “She needs healing, but it might already be too late.”

I was so confused. Lilac was alive, and Marta was on the brink of death. *How did this crazy role reversal happen?* Just when despair began to set in, Xavier stepped up, in full Alpha mode, his voice booming loud enough for everyone to hear.

“Letifer has been defeated. The revenants are gone. The Orb won’t bother us anymore.” He looked around. “We fought hard and paid a big price, some of us more than others.” When he said that last part, he looked at Marta, then went back to addressing the whole crowd. “But we survived. I’ll get sentries to stand guard through the night for the next few days to be sure, but we can relax a little now. Clean and rest up. It’s over.”

Again, I experienced a swirl of mixed emotions. I was elated that Letifer was gone, and the bloody battles were done. But my happiness was short-lived when I looked at Marta again.

Cali and Big Mac helped Lilac carry Marta into the house. Someone summoned Torin, and I began to see that the situation called for a healer, which meant there wasn’t much that I could do.

Jay confirmed what I was thinking. “She’ll be okay,” he said. “The pack takes care of its own. Marta’s in good hands; we should get out of the way and head to bed.” He laid his hand gently on my lower back and activated every nerve in my body.

A wave of vampire heat burned in my belly. Or maybe it was just regular lust. My head swam with all kinds of ideas about what I wanted to do to him and how I wanted him to make me feel. I wasn’t sure my weak knees could carry me back to the house.

I rallied my strength and grabbed Jay’s hand, leading him to the house. We’d been all business in battle, but now it was time for bedroom combat.

In the bedroom, I shut the door. “Are you ready to make more fire than we created in the trenches?” I said, stripping off my shirt and pressing my body against his.

He took control, ripping off the rest of my clothes. Then he lifted me and kissed me like it was the first time, his strong arms holding me up as I clutched his shoulders and received everything he had to give.

“You’re going to burn, little girl,” he said, and dipped his tongue into the valley between my breasts. “But don’t worry, I’ll only start the kind of fire that gets you off.”

He threw me onto the bed and pinned my hands above my head, but after all that battling of evil forces, I was feeling like a warrior, so I fought him off for fun. I wrapped my legs around his hips and rolled him over so I could be on top. I looked down at him and stroked his sculpted chest.

“You weren’t kidding about making our own fire,” he said. “Your hotness is going to incinerate me.” He reached up and caressed my breasts.

I guided him inside me, then rode him, moaning, until our very own fireball exploded and engulfed us both. Afterward, we lay there, slick and fevered, and I started to drift off, but Jay had other ideas.

“Second time’s the charm,” he said, and disappeared beneath the sheets.

I had no choice but to surrender in my aftermath of overheated weakness. He had me where he wanted me and gave me what I hadn’t known I needed. I arched my back and welcomed the waves of vampire heat, rippling to their full crescendo inside me as he tasted me again and again. He’d won the battle between the sheets, and I’d never been so glad to be a casualty.

The fire we made wasn’t extinguished until early the next morning.

**Episode 1845**

I helped Lilac take Marta upstairs to her room. She was still laying so still and quiet in Lilac’s arms as he set her down on the bed. She looked frailer than I had ever seen her. How much energy had she needed to use in order to bring Lilac back to the land of the living? That white streak in her hair scared me the most. It was like a piece of her had turned into an old woman.

I knew we needed Torin. His healing powers had been invaluable to the pack. I imagined his blue healing light beaming into Marta, his incantations soothing her back to health. As if he’d heard me calling, Torin appeared at Marta’s bedside.

“Thank god, I was about to go get you myself,” I said, laying a hand on Marta’s shoulder. “Do you think there’s still time to save her?”

“I’ll do everything I can,” he said.

While Torin summoned his healing energy, I thought about other ways to help Marta. I pictured Big Mac and Kira putting her back together. Since Marta’s wounds were psychic, it seemed like the witches might be able to help.

With that backup plan in mind, I settled in and watched Torin throw himself into his healing work. He was still torn up about Astrid, but maybe healing Marta would keep his grief at bay. He worked like a man utterly determined to get the job done, his focus incredible, the light and energy around him clear.

He was so gifted, and I loved watching him gather his powers to help Marta. As I watched him concentrate, I couldn’t help but wonder what he would do now that Letifer was dead and the pack house was about to quiet down. Would he find another place to use his powers? Would he stick around? For now, he was totally focused on Marta, and that was enough. He leaned over her with an intense expression, then he looked to Big Mac, who stepped up, ready to give whatever he needed.

“I need the herbs you have,” he said. “The ones with life-giving properties. They might help Marta come back to herself.”

Big Mac clearly knew exactly which herbs Torin was referring to, and she listed them out loud to Kira, who went to get them.

While we waited for Kira’s return, I focused on Lilac, who was holding Marta’s hand and begging Torin to bring her back.

“Please, Torin,” Lilac said. “If anyone can save her, you can. She brought me back, and I won’t be able to live with myself knowing my life was exchanged for hers. I can’t believe she did that.” He whispered that last part as he stroked Marta’s head, keeping himself as close as he could while not getting in Torin’s way.

I thought of Lilac in his other life, before he’d died. I’d known him for a while, and back then he’d been such a funny kid. Kind of quiet at times and always filming, pranking, and being a goofball teenager, but even in those days, behind his happy-go-lucky exterior, I’d always been able to see something more. He’d always been a truly good person. And then when he’d appeared again, tethered to Marta, I’d thought they were best friends. But the way she’d sacrificed herself to get him through that portal, and the way he begged Torin to bring her back… It was obvious that there was something more between them.

*Is their tethering like the mate bond?*

I looked at Xavier and Greyson, who were talking in a corner of the room, apparently debriefing after the battle. I felt so lucky to have them both. It had been such a long, hard few months, full of wars and hardship—the battle with Letifer and his wish to be fully in this world, the Orb and all its power, Silas turning packs against each other and bringing all that pain to his sons… All of it was finally over, and somehow, I still had both my mates, alive and unharmed.

My gaze lingered on Greyson. *I came so close to losing him forever, but he’s here now*. Then I shifted my eyes and thoughts to Xavier. It was so good to see the brothers talking and acting like a team at last, and the sight of it warmed me. Out of all that darkness, their brotherly bond had finally been forged. I couldn’t believe the joy I felt just to have them beside me without anyone threatening their lives. I was so ready for life to bring on a little boredom.

Right as I was letting myself relax into my new, danger-free reality, Kira’s voice rang out in the hallway, and she sounded the opposite of happy. “It’s too soon for us to know if Letifer’s magic is truly gone. She’s a danger to us all as far as we know.”

I rushed out, pushing away my earlier idea of relaxing into all things dull. When I arrived in the hall, Artemis and Rishika were standing there, disheveled and exhausted. Kira had a pissed off scowl on her face, showing a level of anger I’d never seen in her before.

She pointed at Artemis. “Rishika, step back. We don’t know that Artemis doesn’t have dark magic in her anymore. Destroying Letifer doesn’t automatically mean she’s cured.”

I gasped and jumped into the mix, putting myself between Kira and the girls. “Kira, please calm down.”

My words apparently had no impact.

Kira glared at Artemis. “*Calm down?* She stole the decoy orb. We know she’s susceptible to dark magic!”

I wasn’t about to let Kira rile me up, or accuse my sister of a damn thing. She should have known me better than that—friends and family come first in my book.

I held my hands up, a signal for her to stop right then and there. “Artemis isn’t evil. She’s my sister! I saw when Letifer’s influence left her. Artemis fought it off, and she’s fine now, just like Greyson. Letifer’s been set beyond the gates of the mortal world. He can’t have any influence over anyone, let alone Artemis. Please, I respect your caution, but not at the cost of my family.”

Kira narrowed her eyes, and I couldn’t help but swallow nervously. I knew what I was saying was the truth, that Letifer had gone through the portal and taken all his evil influence with him. But part of me doubted it, and I had to wonder—what if, once Letifer had possessed a person, he never totally left their body? I hoped like hell that Letifer didn’t leave traces of himself behind, because both my sister and my mate would be impacted if this were true. No, I didn’t believe it. Letifer was gone, and Kira was creating unnecessary drama.

Though I had to admit, I could see where Kira was coming from. I understood how difficult it had to be to believe that Artemis was truly okay and no longer Letifer’s minion. But I had to make it known for sure that Artemis was free of Letifer for good—and that the same was true for Greyson.

“You have to trust me, Kira. I was there, and I saw it all.” I stuck my chin out. “Just ask Big Mac. She’ll tell you the same.”

Kira grumbled and folded her arms. “You’d better hope for everyone’s sake that you’re right.” She held up some herbs. “I have to get these to Marta. Excuse me.”

After she left, I went up to Artemis and Rishika. “Kira’s been too busy to get the latest news. I’ll tell everyone that Artemis is feeling better.”

Artemis laughed and shook her head. “That’s a nice way to say ‘no longer possessed.’”

Rishika chimed in, urging Artemis to get some sleep. “You’re barely standing.”

I gave my sister a quick hug and told her to go and rest. “Rishika will take care of you,” I said.

Rishika winked and gave a sly smile. “Damn right I will.”

I couldn’t help but smile myself as my sister and Rishika walked off together. I watched them go and felt happy for a moment, but then my mood dropped again when I thought of Marta. I returned to her bedside. Xavier and Greyson were in the room with her, along with Torin and Lilac. The brothers were marveling over Lilac’s return.

“I still can’t believe it,” Xavier said, shaking his head. “Violet’s going to be so happy—as we all are.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time someone came back,” I said. “Remember Ava?”

I tried to avoid looking over at Xavier, but I could feel him staring. I wasn’t trying to bring up old jealousies, but I knew that’s what he must think I was implying. Despite my better judgement I hazarded a look, but he pulled his eyes from mine before they could meet.

My attention was pulled away from Xavier at the change in Marta’s condition.

Lilac gasped, and Torin exhaled. Marta inhaled deeply, and her eyes flew open*.* She was awake!

**Episode 1846**

GREYSON

Now it felt like a true victory. Marta was alive and awake. I could feel the surge of relief from all around me, including myself. It was like a welcome home party for a friend we’d thought might be gone forever. Lilac had never looked so overjoyed. It was great to see the kid who’d died and come back to us feeling so happy.

The commotion in the room was too much for Marta, so Big Mac and Kira started kicking us all out of her room, saying the patient needed to rest and recover. Xavier hung back to ask the witches something, and I took the opportunity to catch Cali alone.

Just a few steps ahead of me, Cali turned to me when I called out. She was still so beautiful, even after all she’d been through.

“How are you feeling?” I asked.

“I think I’m finally relaxing a bit, to be honest,” she said. “It’s finally over, isn’t it?”

I loved seeing her happy. And I was glad to take a breather from all that fighting and Letifer’s incessant voice. Relief on my mate’s face was just about the best thing I could have seen in that moment.

“Yes, it’s over,” I said. “It’s like a different world without that awful voice in my head. It was like living in a nightmare. Cali, I would never have forgiven myself if something happened to you because of me. Possession or no possession, it wouldn’t have mattered.”

Telling her all that felt like a huge relief. I’d been so busy holding in my feelings and thoughts so I could focus on fighting. My connection with Cali in that moment was strong.

She must have felt it too. She reached out and put her hands on my shoulders. I hoped she understood how awful I would have felt if Letifer had used my body to hurt her. Her touch was like a healing ointment.

“I know, Greyson. I knew that it wasn’t really you doing all those things. You’d never betray the pack like that.”

She thought it was only about the pack? Wow, did she need a lesson in how much I loved her.

I stepped closer to her. “I’d never betray *you* like that.”

She looked at me with real love in her eyes, like I’d told her something she didn’t already know. And then I couldn’t help myself. I leaned in and took her face in my hands, kissing her slowly, savoring every moment with my mate. She returned my kisses vigorously, and soon we were passionately entwined. I ran my hands up her back and pulled her close, pouring all of my attraction to her into our deepening kisses. Then all at once, she broke away, glancing guiltily toward the room where Xavier was.

“Maybe now isn’t the time for this,” she said.

I had to hide my disappointment. I stepped back, stung, and tried to cover up my feelings with a smile. It was hard, though, after all that had happened, to feel this rejection from Cali. I had been possessed by Letifer and nearly died at his hands, and now I couldn’t even show my mate how I felt? Though I was trying not to let on, that old tension rose in me again, the sibling rivalry over the mate Xavier and I both wanted.

But I refused to let those bad feelings take over and ruin what had been my most passionate moment with Cali in a long time. She’d been dealing with way too much already, and I didn’t want to be the kind of mate who added to her stress.

“We have all the time in the world now,” I told her.

She smiled at me, and in the silence we both felt a little awkward, but then Mace approached and broke the tension.

“I should… go check on my parents. They’re probably looking for me,” Cali said, a little flustered. I wanted to come up with some excuse to keep her near, but she was probably right to give Mace and me some space.

I shook off my mixed feelings of passion and slight jealousy, then turned to Mace.

“What’s up, Mace? Is everything okay?”

Mace looked at me like he had bad news.

“Just tell me,” I said grimly. I couldn’t wait around for any more surprises. I was ready to be done with everything that caused even the slightest bit of upset for a while.

“I know this is going to sound abrupt, but I’ve been thinking this over, and now that Letifer is gone, it’s time,” he said.

I was confused. “Time for what?”

“Time for me and the Blue Bloods to move on.”

I understood, and I was honestly a little relieved. The news could have been much worse. Though I liked having the Blue Bloods around, leaving was a logical step now that Letifer had been defeated. But I would miss Mace, for sure. He and his pack had become like family.

“You know you’re welcome here as long as you want,” I said. “We might have started this thing as an alliance, but we’re all friends here now.”

I was pretty proud of the way I’d turned my relationship with Mace around after everything that had gone down. Mace hadn’t liked me in the beginning, and he certainly hadn’t backed me up as Alpha, but I knew I’d proven myself to him. It felt good to know I’d earned his respect.

“Hey man, I’m thankful that the Redwood pack took us in,” he said. “You guys gave us so much support after what happened to Pip. You demonstrated that you know what it means to be an Alpha—you understand the sacrifice that comes with the job, and you know that it’s not just about raw strength. I’m going to take a page from your book and rebuild the Blue Bloods.”

It was nice to hear this from Mace, especially since it had taken a while to get him to trust me. I honestly hadn’t even realized that he’d come to like me at all. I’d assumed he just thought of our relationship as more business than personal, and that had been enough for me. But now that he was really talking to me, I knew that what he was saying came from the heart.

“We’ll always be there for the Redwood pack, if you’re ever in need,” Mace added, and

it felt like I’d made a friend for life. “You’re a good man, Greyson.”

I’d never thought of myself that way, as someone others might look up to.

“I was just trying to survive, Mace,” I said. “Whatever you need, you just ask. The Redwood pack will always be here for the Blue Bloods.”

I held out my hand, and Mace shook it, then pulled me in for a hug. There was usually so much tension between other packs, so it was good to have at least one alliance we could count on in the future. But hopefully things would be more peaceful now.

“Are you taking off before the victory party?” I asked.

“Don’t worry, we’ll stick around for that. We’re not going to run out in the middle of the night,” Mace said.

As Xavier approached, Mace headed out to check on his pack. “Catch you guys in a bit.”

He walked off, and I passed on the news about the Blue Bloods’ departure to Xavier.

He nodded thoughtfully. “We’ll miss them, but I understand. And anyway, you don’t want more than one Alpha around for long.” He looked at me, then told me exactly what he meant by his comment. “I’m still Alpha.”

I scoffed. A real Alpha wouldn’t have to say that. “You were voted Alpha because of the situation the pack was in,” I reminded him. “As I recall, it was temporary. Letifer is dead now, and I’m not possessed anymore.”

Xavier glared at me. He wasn’t going to give up that easily. I didn’t want things to get ugly, but he had to let it go.

“Well, I guided the pack through the more dangerous moments,” Xavier said. “And I was the Alpha when Letifer died.”

Wow, he was really trying to make his case. I held my ground.

“Yes, for a short period of time. That was the deal, but now it’s over. And ultimately, it’s up to the pack,” I said. “A real Alpha knows he can’t just assume that a pack will follow blindly. We’re wolves, not sheep.”

That sparked his anger, and I could see that he was not about to budge.

Xavier scowled. “Save your lecture, brother. You always think you know what’s best. Best for the pack, best for Cali, best for me. But right now, I’m still Alpha.”

I didn’t like how this was unfolding. I’d thought my brother and I had come further than this, that we were beyond bickering over who was boss. It was so clear to me that I was the leader of the pack. But I put all those feelings aside, because we’d all been fighting for so long, and I just wasn’t up for another battle right then. I wasn’t about to get all riled up. A real Alpha didn’t need to engage in a petty power grab. So, I just smiled. “Enjoy it while it lasts.”

**Episode** **1847**

XAVIER

Still rattled by my confrontation with Greyson, I gave myself a quick pep talk. I reminded myself that, as Alpha, I had the upper hand. Greyson may be right, this *was* supposed to be a temporary arrangement, but I think I had proved what I could do as Alpha. The pack could decide to make it permanent, and I had ambitions… either way I had held my ground. For now, I was still Alpha.

I moved through the pack house, telling everyone that tonight’s dinner was a celebration barbecue, partly to mark our victory over Letifer, and partly to say goodbye to the Blue Bloods.

“We have much to be grateful for, and great friends to see off in style,” I said.

The house buzzed with energy as everyone prepared for the party of a lifetime. The place was soon decked out in lights, and all kinds of drinks and snacks were being made in the kitchen. The witches lit candles and used herbs to make the house smell amazing. The pack hung victory flags everywhere, and a few of them took out their musical instruments for everyone’s entertainment.

When all the party preparations were finished, the whole group gathered outside. Emmett promised that the barbecue fire would be natural and safe, which made Lola and Jay laugh, given the story they’d told us about Emmett’s magic fire potion back at the trenches. He lit up the barbecue pit, which immediately glowed blue, causing Lola to jump back a little.

“I thought you said this fire would be natural,” Lola said, eyeing Emmett suspiciously.

“Where’s the fun in that?” the vampire scoffed with a smooth wink. I was glad at least that crazy vampire professor was on our side. “Besides, blue fire is perfectly natural.”

Lola didn’t seem convinced until Big Mac grinned and said the blue tint was her doing, “in honor of the Blue Bloods.” Lola finally softened, a smile replacing her suspicious scowl.

“That’s sweet,” she said, leaning into Jay, finally relaxing.

The Blue Bloods cheered at the sight of the flames that honored their contribution to our recent efforts.

The party was in full swing, and I walked around to get some time with pack members and friends. Lilac and Marta were up and about, and I asked how they were doing.

“I’m just happy to be alive,” Marta said, kissing Lilac on the cheek.

“And you haven’t aged a day,” Lila teased, flicking the white stripe on Marta’s head. He was rewarded with a punch to the arm. I laughed. The medium sure could land a solid hit judging from the rueful wince Lilac gave, but they seemed happy, so I wished them well and let them continue their playful teasing.

Next, I went to chat with Rishika and Artemis, who were standing by the fire, laughing and gesturing.

“You two look like you’re having fun,” I said.

They told me that they were trying to have a sense of humor about the crazy fight that Letifer had made them engage in. It was nice to see they could laugh together about something that had made us all so worried.

I walked over to Mace and the Blue Bloods, who seemed entranced by Big Mac. The whole Blue Blood gang was hanging on Big Mac’s every word as she gave them her recipe for making blue fire.

“It’s going to be our new trademark,” Mace told me.

“You’d better listen to Big Mac very closely,” I joked. “She never reveals her spells and potion recipes twice.”

“He’s right,” Big Mac said. “You’d better remember every ingredient, or your fire will turn out pink, and I won’t be there to help you out.”

The Blue Bloods laughed, and Mace told one of them to go get a pen and a notebook to write down Big Mac’s instructions.

I walked away and was surprised to see Torin relaxing in the back room, listening to music. He hardly ever gave himself time to enjoy life, always working to heal someone’s pain.

“Enjoying yourself?” I asked, and he smiled in response.

I was feeling so connected to everyone, the way a leader should feel when a battle has been won and the victory party is well under way. Then I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned around to see Greyson.

“If I didn't know better,” Greyson said, “I’d say you were running for office.”

Leave it to my jealous brother to kill my good mood.

“I don’t have to run, I’m already in office,” I said.

Greyson smiled, wide and confident, in just the way that I hated. My brother had always known how to annoy me. I knew the Alpha confrontation would come eventually, but not right now. Luckily, I saw a perfect interruption, even if it wasn’t a pleasant one.

I looked away and saw Ava staring at me from across the room, sipping a cocktail. I had to go to her. Things weren’t completely settled between us, and I wanted that to change. I walked over and faced her, unsure of how this exchange would play out.

“Congratulations,” she said, raising her glass. “You guys actually did it. I’ll admit that if I’d placed a bet a few weeks ago, I might have bet against you.”

“Well, you did work for Silas,” I said. “And Iñigo. And who knows who else.”

She shrugged. “I did what I had to do,” she said, downing the rest of her drink. “A girl has to survive. And in the end, I did come back to you.” She touched my arm. “You know, I really thought I was dying, earlier. When you came to kiss me goodbye.”

She looked into my eyes, her expression vulnerable and appealing. I remembered the kiss vividly. I’d thought it was the last time I’d ever see Ava alive, and the kiss had been… confusing. I hadn’t wanted to say goodbye to her. When I was kissing her, I’d wanted her to live.

“Don’t read anything into it,” I said gruffly. “You were dying. It was just a kiss. It meant nothing.”

I stood there feeling uncomfortable. I didn’t want have this conversation in the middle of a party. Ava had always twisted me up, and this moment was no different. I looked away and faked a casual tone of voice.

“So, do you have plans now that all your enemies are dead?” I asked. “Could I offer some suggestions, like getting the hell out of my life and moving on?”

Ava laughed bitterly, and even without the mate bond I could feel that my prodding words got her hackles up. “I haven’t decided yet. Life is pretty interesting here.”

She leaned forward and gave me a peck on the cheek before I could dodge her. Then she sauntered away. It really pissed me off. To make matters worse, I looked over and saw Cali. Her eyes had been on me for a while, I could just tell. *Shit.* *I need to nip this in the bud.*

I went over to Cali. “It wasn’t what it looked like.”

She looked at me like, *yeah, right*. “What do you think it looked like? Your old mate, occasional traitor, and part-time Cali impersonator kissing you?”

“Ava’s always trying to stir things up. Everyone knows you’re my mate.”

We were standing there, face to face, neither of us knowing what to say next, when a thought popped into my head.

“I should be the angry one! You kissed Greyson right in front of me!”

Now she was worked up.

“I was trying to save his life, you idiot! You were there—don’t pretend it was anything else. I would die if I lost either of my mates, and I’ll do anything I have to to save you. *Both* of you.”

Whoa. I was a little stunned by her vehemence. But I shouldn’t have been surprised. That was Cali to the core, passionate about the people she cared about. I knew I needed to back off and drop my defensiveness.

“I know,” I said. “It’s what I love most about you.”

Cali sighed, relaxing. She smiled at me.

“It’s difficult,” she said. “We’ve been on edge for so long that it’s hard to wrap my mind around the idea that we’re not fighting an evil sorcerer from hell. But Letifer is gone, so now we should focus on the future. What comes next?”

I knew what she was getting at. She was speculating about our future, presenting a “what if” scenario to see what I would say about our next set of life plans. She wanted her happily-ever-after, a scenario in which her two mates stayed by her side, the three of us a forever family who got along brilliantly. But my idea for what came next was very concrete and specific. I knew what I wanted, and everything I was going to do was for her… for *us*.

I pulled Cali close. She looked at me expectantly, eager to hear what I had in store. “What comes next is me locking in my status as Alpha of the Redwood pack,

forever.”

**Episode 1848**

I snorted at Xavier’s little joke. “Right. Three cheers for Alpha Xavier!”

He frowned at me. “I’m not kidding.”

I blinked rapidly. “Seriously? How many times do we need to go over this? You being Alpha was supposed to be temporary, just until the battle was over, so now—”

“Now that it’s over, it’s time to make it official,” Xavier said, crossing his arms. “I’ve never disguised my desire to be Alpha—remember the Lupo Finale?”

My stomach clenched. That was like him asking me, *Remember one of the most traumatic and anxiety-inducing periods of your entire freaking life?*

“How could I ever forget, Xavier?” I scoffed, throwing up my arms. I had just found out about the *due destini*. And it was so hard to watch my mate and Greyson, my at-the-time possible mate, try to kill each other. It was something I never wanted to see ever again… I stared at him in horror. “I really hope you’re not suggesting another Lupo Finale.”

Xavier shrugged. The *monster*.

“Xavier!” I poked his shoulder. “I mean it! That would be horrible! Above all, for *me*!”

Xavier shrugged again, his avoidance to offer a direct answer beyond obvious. His reply went on a different, albeit expected, direction. “I’ve now proven that I can lead as Alpha, Cali. Why not take things a step further?”

*Why not take things a step further?* I repeated in my head incredulously. *WHY NOT TAKE THINGS A STEP FURTHER? I could think of a thousand reasons why he shouldn’t engage in another Lupo Finale. Did I really need to list them out?*

With my eyelid literally twitching from the tension, I looked over at Greyson. He stood there, looking good and vaguely murder-y, just as a vibe, talking to Mrs. Smith. I wanted to laugh. Literally, start laughing. Or cry.

“Yes, Xavier,” I said in the most sarcastic tone possible. “This is totally an amazing idea. Just declare yourself Alpha again, because that went so well last time.”

He sighed. “Cali—”

“Claim it all! Say that you won Alpha-hood! By *a lot*! Literally, that’s all you’ll have to do for Greyson to step back—*oh my god, have you even* talked *to him?*”

Xavier looked shifty. “Greyson and I are in… discussion.”

“Right. Because Greyson’s simply going to give up control. That’s totally how it’s gonna happen,” I deadpanned.

“Okay, Miss Sarcasm,” Xavier said, arching an eyebrow. “Rein it in. You shouldn’t worry about that—I just want you to consider all the possibilities.”

“The possibilities,” I said flatly.

“Yeah!” Xavier said. There was a kind of excitement to his face that he usually reserved for the bedroom, so that was interesting. “If I was Alpha, everything would keep going well. I could bring order back to the pack and, more importantly, have you as my Luna.”

*Me? A Luna?*

That caught my attention all right. Xavier’s enthusiasm and my own potential delusions of grandeur entered the scene—I had always wanted to be Luna… But I didn’t know whether the Luna process would hurt me, despite being Fae. Part of me still ached about the fact that I couldn’t be a wolf.

I scolded myself. *Get a grip! That’s not important right now!*

Reality dropped on my head. Being Xavier’s Luna would mean I would have to make a choice, and that would be fatal for Greyson. As if that possibility hadn’t even registered with Xavier, he leaned down and kissed my cheek.

“Just think about it, baby,” he murmured, before walking off toward Jay.

I grumbled to myself about mad Alphas who didn’t understand anything. It felt like I’d been backed into a corner once more. I knew I had to at least *think* about Xavier’s idea, but that was about all I could do about it—*think*.

Huffing, I looked around. I caught sight of Lola, sitting by the fire. I could use her advice—plus we had a lot of catching up to do.

I sat down next to her, just as she smoothed her hair back. The gleam of the firelight did wonders for her skin. Like, she was glowing, for real, even though she looked disheveled.

“What’s going on with you?” I asked, arching an eyebrow.

With a dreamy look on her face, Lola gestured at Jay as he talked to Xavier. “Doesn’t my Jay look amazing? What a man.”

I snorted. The floofy hair and all the glowing made sense now. “You and Jay just hooked up, didn’t you?”

Lola smirked. “Is it obvious?”

“Yes.”

“You won’t believe what he did—”

“It’s okay,” I said, snorting. “No need for details.”

Lola winked at me. “Let’s just say, being a vampire has its perks.”

I patted her shoulder. “Whatever that means, I’m happy for you. I guess things with Jay are good now?”

Lola gave a happy sigh. “Couldn’t be better.” She nudged me. “How are things with you and the boys? Still complicated?”

I let out a breath. “*Forever* complicated. I thought that once Letifer was out of our hair, everything would settle down, but…” I looked around, lowering my voice to a tiny whisper that I hoped only Lola could hear. “Xavier’s planning to stay Alpha.”

Lola winced. “*Damn*. He’s back at it already?”

“The man is relentless,” I said.

Lola huffed. “Can’t we just enjoy our victory for one night? I know you and I agreed to talk about stuff, but I could really use a break from the Alphas—I think we *all* could.”

I nodded, taking a deep breath. Xavier hadn’t given me an ultimatum, at least not yet. I was supposed to think about his suggestion, though I wasn’t sure what there was to think about, exactly. In the end, I told Lola, “You’re right. This is supposed to be a fun night.”

She gave me a side hug. “Try not to get too stressed out. Have a beer or a glass of wine.”

I reached for a wine cooler, examining it with a grimace. “Well. I don’t know if you remember, but I tried to seduce Greyson the last time I drank…”

Lola chuckled. “Don’t worry. At this point, I don’t think you’d have to try too hard to get into his pants.” She looked up at Jay once more, licking her lips. “You know… I wonder if Jay’s up for another round.”

“That vampire heat is pretty demanding, huh?” I asked, a little amused. She grinned, hugging me one last time before standing up and making a beeline for Jay.

Hopefully Lola would get all her hormone stuff under control sooner rather than later, or she would wear Jay out. He wasn’t exactly complaining, though, if the way that he was currently kissing her in front of everyone was anything to go by.

I looked at Xavier—he had redirected his attention to Big Mac, and I noticed that Greyson was on the other side of the fire, as far away from his brother as possible.

*That’s actually a good thing right now*, I thought. But then I frowned. It was sad how the two people that I loved the most in the world couldn’t even stand next to each other.

Xavier glanced at me, then, raising his beer at me with an intense look.

I knew that look. It always made me tingly. At the same time, though, I felt someone else’s eyes on me. When I turned, I saw that Greyson was staring at me too, with one of those sexy smiles of his that made my cheeks heat up. They were both at least thirty feet away from me, but I felt flustered, caught between them in a mental lockdown.

*Time to escape!* I internally squeaked and stood up, looking around until I spotted my parents and Torin. My dad was manning the grill, chatting with my mom while Torin listened in. I approached as Dad pulled two bloody steaks from the grill, and I was surprised. My dad had always been a well-done kind of guy—what was this all about? Had his palate changed because he was turning into a werewolf?

“You gotta put the lemon juice on after you’re done with the grill, otherwise the meat gets too stiff, and we don’t want that,” Dad was explaining to Torin, whose expression was unreadable. My sweet friend who always used to wear his heart on his sleeve was so quiet. I couldn’t blame him.

I had to swallow a lump in my throat at the thought of Astrid.

“Your dad is giving a lecture again,” Mom whispered in my ear, wrapping me up in hug.

I sighed. “I’m glad that he’s making an effort to keep Torin busy. You think he’s been doing better?”

Before my mom could reply, Dad told Torin, “Here.” He gave Torin the fork he’d used on the steaks. “Hold this for me, please.”

Torin’s impassive expression suddenly turned into one of agony, and he burst out crying, running away.

I gasped, turning to my dad. “Oh my god, what did you say to Torin? Why is he crying?”

Dad stood there, holding that damn fork, blinking in befuddlement. “I just told him to hold the fork?”

*Well, Torin obviously wasn’t ready for that!* I yelled in my head, looking over Dad’s shoulder.

“Torin, wait!” I called, running after him. I caught up to him, my heart pounding when I touched his shoulder. “What’s wrong? Are you okay? Can I do anything for you?”

Torin choked, turning to face me. Tears were streaming down his cheeks. “I can’t do this, Cali. I don’t belong here. I’m going back to the Fae world.”

**Episode 1849**

MARTA

I lay in bed, examining the white streak in my hair. Was this something I should embrace? Or should I just dye it and call it a day? It felt like something I’d earned, though. Like a badge of scary honor after what I’d just been through.

I didn’t remember every little detail, and I was somewhat grateful for that, but I did recall enough to know that I’d done what everyone had wanted me to do. I’d helped close the portal.

Finally, it was all over.

I exhaled in relief.

A knock on the door made me look up. Lilac poked his head into the room, and my stomach was flooded with butterflies. A whole horde of them, all flapping around and chaotically crashing against each other. Apart from closing the portal, I’d also pulled Lilac from the spirit world—a huge added bonus.

“Hello, it’s me,” he said with a wink. Goodness, *why* was he so cute? “Can I come in?”

“You’re actually asking for permission? And here I thought you had no sense of boundaries,” I said.

He waved me off, snorting. “I’m done with that life now that I’m alive.”

“Come in, then.” I tried to sound cool, but my voice sounded more like a squeak.

He walked over and sat down on the bed beside me. He was holding a plate with what looked like peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. I stared at him, at his beautiful face and that cheeky smile, and fought to process the fact that he was real.

Maybe Lilac was my reward for saving the world. Seemed fair.

“You hungry?” he asked, running his hand through his wet hair. He was wearing a red T-shirt and dark sweatpants. It was so *weird* to see him in different clothes now. And to know that he wasn’t going to fade away. “I made these for us,” he added, holding out the plate toward me. He shifted on the bed at the same time, and that caused me to roll toward him just a little.

Just enough for my hip to make contact with his knee.

A jolt ran through me at the contact. I fought not to flinch, trying to stay cool, but I could feel my entire face heating up. Sheesh, this was *different*. This was another thing that I had to get used to—Lilac had a real, physical body.

With broad shoulders and… other stuff.

“Marta?”

My gaze darted up to his face, and I hoped to god he hadn’t caught me ogling him, because I wouldn’t hear the end of it.

Thankfully, he just said, “Sandwich?”

“Right, no, thank you, I’m good,” I blurted.

“More for me,” he said, taking a bite. He started chewing and rambling, bringing his legs up onto the mattress, making himself comfortable while I lay there, staring at him.

I just couldn’t get enough of looking at him.

“It feels so good to eat again,” he was saying. “To put on clothes. To take a shower! Being a ghost robs you of the simple things in life, like…”

He kept listing stuff, and I was only half-listening, caught up in how excited he was, how real he was—how fucking hot he was. The T-shirt stretched over his chest, curling over his biceps. I stared at his neck as he spoke, at his Adam’s apple, at the sharp angle of his jaw, at his lips. His lips looked so soft, I wanted to touch them. Especially when his mouth stretched into a smile.

“Are you having a good time staring at me?” he asked, teasing.

I tried to play it off. “I mean. You’re alive. So. That’s—”

“Good?”

“Good,” I admitted.

My heart was drumming in my chest, and when our eyes met, he smirked.

“You know,” he murmured, placing the plate on his lap, one of the sandwiches left half-eaten. “There’s something else being a ghost robbed me of…” He hovered over me, leaning down as he glanced at my lips.

“What’s that?” I whispered, holding my breath.

He brushed his mouth softly over mine. He tasted like strawberry jam, and my entire body vibrated at the contact. This felt familiar but new, so new that I wanted more and more of it. Just to make sure that it was *real*. That it would stay that way.

As if he could hear my thoughts, Lilac mumbled, “We should do this often, just to make sure I don’t turn back into a ghost.”

His teasing tone, his wicked eyes, the so-obvious joy and warmth rolling off him made me feel woozy. When he leaned back down for another kiss, my arms flew around his neck, pulling him down to me, and I kissed him back, hard enough that he groaned. I knew he felt this too—he could feel how glad I was to have him here, to be with him, to feel this moment like it was part of life instead of magic.

The plate went crashing to the floor, but Lilac didn’t even flinch, and I barely did either—he slid over me, flesh and blood and pressure. He started shaking when my hands reached under his T-shirt to feel his muscular back, his skin.

“I love this,” he whispered against the shell of my ear, kissing down my neck, and I shivered, running my fingers through his wet hair. His scent was the *best* thing. So clean and fresh and delicious. This moment was the best thing I’d felt in a whole goddamn century, and I—

“*Ahem*.”

The breaking plate hadn’t broken us apart, but a very loud and wry clearing of someone’s throat did. We flinched away from each other, startled. I was panting, flushed and feeling just a little crazy, and then I saw Big Mac glaring at us from the doorway.

“Everything okay?” she asked dryly.

“I…” I fought to find my voice here. “We were just—”

“I can see that,” Big Mac deadpanned, clearly unimpressed. She pointed at the plate. “One of you should clean that up.”

“Why are you here?” Lilac asked the witch, standing up to pick up the broken plate and his half-eaten sandwich. “Marta and I are real living people who have important business to attend to, and you interrupted us.”

I wanted to smack him. And also laugh.

“Excuse *me*,” Big Mac scoffed. “I heard something fall and came to make sure Marta was all right.” She turned to me. “How are you feeling?”

I pressed my lips together. “I’m okay.”

Big Mac arched an eyebrow at me, shooting a sideways glance at Lilac. “Try not to wear yourself out.”

I blushed. Profusely. “Thanks for checking in.”

“As for you,” Big Mac said, glaring at Lilac, “mind your manners.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about—I am literally an angel come to life,” Lilac deadpanned.

Big Mac scoffed at him and left.

Lilac turned to me, looking impressed. “Big Mac must really like you to come see how you are. She doesn’t like anybody.”

I glanced at the door. It was still open. I knew I should probably close it before grabbing him and kissing him again. I also knew I should probably respond to his comment first, too.

“Big Mac’s been looking out for me since we met,” I said. “I kinda like her.”

Lilac gave me a look. “You’d better be careful, though. Big Mac is a witch.”

I snorted. “So?”

“So, witches are dangerous!”

I smirked. “I’m the one who’s dangerous, you know. It’s *you* should be careful around *me*. I’m a medium. And a bridge, too.”

Lilac gasped in pretend horror, his hand flying to his chest. “No way! This is brand new information! I am shocked! Stunned! Offended, even!”

“Can you cut the bullshit?” I asked, laughing.

He grinned. “*Please*—I could never be afraid of you. Now, where’s your phone?”

I was confused. “Why?”

“I want to FaceTime my sister,” Lilac said. “I wanna tell her I’m alive!”

I had been secretly hoping that I’d close that door and we would pick up where we left off, but of course he was excited to tell his sister. Violet would be so happy.

*I* was so happy.

I still couldn’t believe he was here. I remembered being at the portal, calling for him, worrying that he couldn’t hear me, that he would be lost in the spirit world forever. How my life would be so different without him.

The possibility frightened me, even now.

“Here,” Lilac said, handing me my phone back. He looked annoyed. “She’s not answering. Probably making out with her boyfriend…” He arched an eyebrow, trailing off. “Speaking of making out—where were we?”

A flush of pleasure and excitement ran through me as he moved toward me.

“No, what if someone else walks in?” I said, lightly pushing him back, despite wanting to do the opposite.

He looked down at the sandwiches on the ground. “I should probably save those. And they need a milkshake to go along with them, don’t you think?”

I laughed. “Definitely.”

He leaned in and kissed me quick. “Be right back.”

I couldn’t stop smiling after he left the room. I tried to remember the last time I’d been this happen—this stupid, silly happy. I didn’t know if I ever had been.

But then I felt a strange wind inside the room. Immediately, I was on edge as a swirling mist appeared out of nowhere. I gasped as the Keeper of All Nature materialized in the room, wearing the same park ranger uniform.

“Vander!” I exclaimed. “It’s you!”

“Yep.” Vander looked at me and smiled. “You were very brave, Marta. You probably saved the world, so kudos to you.”

I couldn’t help but smile back. I felt such a strong sense of pride. This was a far cry from when I’d been trapped, forced to serve Bert’s every whim.

“Thank you,” I said.

But Vander wasn’t listening.

Their expression darkened as they fixed their eyes on me.

“There’s a big problem here, though,” Vander said sternly. “You performed an unsanctioned act of necromancy, and there will be consequences.”

**Episode 1850**

LOLA

My heat was starting to get out of hand. Again. I was doing my best to keep it in check, but standing next to my mate was making it hard. I couldn’t take my eyes off Jay—he was sipping at his beer, his lips wrapped around the neck of the bottle in the most obscene way possible, laughing at something Zainab was saying.

I wanted to drag him behind the nearest tree and climb him like a tree, but we were celebrating, and I guessed I needed to respect that.

*Ugh. Unfair!*

I looked around and tried to think of something else. Old nuns, dead puppies, a flock of mosquitoes chasing me as I ran down the street… Speaking of bloodthirsty mosquitoes, I noticed Jacqueline talking to Tom as they stood by the grill. The vampire was twirling her hair, her hip cocked to the side a wicked smile on her lips.

I blinked in shock.

Was Jacqueline *flirting* with Cali’s *dad*? In front of *Orla*?

Oh my god, this was wrong on so many levels.

Glaring, I was getting ready to march toward Jacqueline and put a stop to this madness when I felt Jay’s hand at the crook of my elbow. His touch was firm but soft, and it sent heat waves coursing through me.

“Where are you going?” he asked, and even his voice was hot. *God.*

Fighting to focus, I said, “Jacqueline. She’s out of control!” I gestured at the vampire, and Jay grimaced.

“Yeah, that’s bad. But I’m pretty sure Tom can handle her.”

I huffed. “It’s not right, though! She needs to check herself before she wrecks herself!”

Jay chuckled, pulling me closer. He stroked my arm, and my heart rate spiked like I’d just run a marathon. “I noticed you talking to Cali earlier—is everything good between you two now?”

“I think so. But…” I lowered my voice, just for Jay to hear. “She’s worried about Xavier. He wants to stay Alpha.”

Jay sighed. “Sounds like more trouble for the pack. I love that man, but can’t we just enjoy this moment of celebration without more drama?”

I examined Jay’s expression. Did he seem fed up or just tired? I wasn’t sure. Either way, I asked, “What are you gonna do if Xavier challenges Greyson?”

Jay arched an eyebrow. “What I always do—aim for what’s right for the pack.”

I grinned, linking my arm through my mate’s. “Look at you, you sexy diplomat.”

Jay chuckled, all gruff and hot, and I got up on my tiptoes to kiss him, my hand resting on his shoulder. The moment our lips brushed, my heat went nuts, my fingers digging into his skin, my tongue nudging his lips open so I could get a taste. But just as things were getting good, I felt a hard poke on my shoulder that made me flinch away from Jay.

“*What?*” I gasped, glaring at the intruder.

It was none other than Jacqueline.

She giggled. “Wassup?”

Wrinkling my nose, I took in the vampire. She was obviously tipsy, holding a beer in one hand and fruit punch in the other.

“What’s up is that you interrupted us,” I said, eyebrows arched.

Jay snorted, and Jacqueline grinned at me, unfazed. “Just dropped by to let you know that you were super kickass during the revenant battle.”

I was pretty surprised to hear this from Jacqueline. She was usually an annoying little brat. “Thanks. And thanks for helping me out, I know you did your best.”

“You know it,” Jacqueline said, hiccupping. “Much like you did when you chose to wear green tonight.” She pointed at my shirt. “Is that caterpillar-green or Grinch-green?”

I rolled my eyes, ignoring her. I was ready to pounce on Jay, and nothing Jacqueline said was going to ruin my evening. But before I could drag him away, Jacqueline took a step closer to him.

“And you!” She giggled, her eyes drifting down to Jay’s bare abs. “It’s like you’ve got rocks hidden in there.” She smirked at me and slurred, “If you’re not careful there, Lola, you’re gonna get bruised.”

I gritted my teeth. This was fucking *unbelievable*! Was this girl flirting with Jay? In front of *me*? Did she have a fucking *death wish*?

“Right, uh…” Jay looked away at her comment, kind of blushing? It definitely seemed like he wanted to run away! At the same time, Jacqueline threw an arm around Jay’s shoulders, coming way too goddamn close, and I saw red.

I. Saw. *Red*.

“You know,” she slurred at him, leaning even closer, “you’ve really changed my mind about werewolves. I think I could have fun with one…” She revealed her fangs at my mate, flicking her tongue across them as she stared at his lips.

Jay leaned away from her in an instant, and as the mate bond throbbed between us, something territorial roared inside me.

“Okay, that’s *enough* of that,” I said and grabbed Jacqueline, hard, yanking her away from my mate. “You really need a lesson in boundaries, Jacs!”

I dragged her away from Jay, ignoring her objections, and pulled her aside.

“Why are you so upset?” She huffed. “It’s all just harmless flirting, don’t be so—”

“First of all, shut up,” I snapped. “Second, you can flirt all you want, but two rules—don’t flirt with married men like Tom, and stay the fuck away from my mate. You think you know everything because you’ve spent two minutes with a werewolf pack? Watch yourself before someone literally slits your throat because you crossed a line.”

Jacqueline laughed. Still looking tipsy, she said, “Jeez, calm down! There’s no reason for you to worry.”

That’s what she said, but there was a gleam in her eye that I hated. Before I could tear her a new one, though, Emmett came up to us, creepy and pretty as usual.

“How are you two doing?” he asked, pointing between us. “I’ll bet the fight left you both hungry.”

“Yes!” Jacqueline said, licking her lips, and Emmett brought a pouch forward and pulled out a blood bag for each of us.

The moment I saw the red liquid, a sudden hunger overwhelmed me. I hadn’t felt like this earlier, but now there was blood right in front of me, sweet and delicious. It was still hard to believe that I was a vampire—but not a dead one, like all the others. Maybe that was why I hadn’t realized I was hungry until now, and didn’t need to feed as often as regular vampires.

I took the pack without any rush while Jacqueline reached for hers with gusto, a startling greed to her features. She started guzzling it down, moaning in pleasure. I sipped mine slowly, looking around. I still wasn’t comfortable with feeding in front of Jay and the other werewolves, but I wasn’t about to turn this down. I knew I’d get ornery if I didn’t feed in time.

*Or maybe worse…*

Either way, there were a lot of exposed necks here tonight. It didn’t help that werewolves loved parading around semi or fully naked, with blood rushing through their arteries and all that fun stuff.

If *I* was so aware of them, I could only imagine what Jacs was thinking. Yikes.

She finished off her blood pack in seconds, holding it loosely as she shifted her flirty attention to Emmett.

“What are you planning to do the rest of the night?” she asked, then flashed her bloodied fangs, flipping her long hair over her shoulder.

Emmett didn’t seem to register her flirty mood. Unfazed, he said, “Now that my work is done here, I should return to Tottenville. Since Irma is unfortunately gone, I need to repair the damage.”

“That should be interesting,” I said wryly.

“I need to restore order to our academy so we can continue to educate vampires like you, Lola,” he told me. “Bring them into the modern world, give them the tools to thrive in society as it is today. That is my life’s mission.”

I rolled my eyes. What did this guy think he was doing? Shaping a generation? Did he consider himself some sort of Messiah? He could be so dramatic at times.

“Right,” I said. “Good luck with that.”

Emmett arched an eyebrow, looking between me and Jacs. “Will I be seeing you two next semester?”

Jacqueline gave him a once-over, offering a lusty smirk that made me want to gag. “Maybe.”

Emmett turned to me. “What about you, Lola?”

I wanted to laugh. Right in his face.

“Gee, thanks, but I’ve had enough Tottenville, and Tottenville’s probably had enough of me,” I said.

Emmett gave me an indulgent look. “Oh, come on. You don’t mean that.”

“I definitely do,” I said. “Besides, I’m fine. I’ve managed to get things under control, both my heat and my hunger, so…” I trailed off, my gaze flickering to something red a few feet away, to my left. Tom was over there, flipping a bloody steak.

Very bloody.

And then, as Emmett started talking with Jacqueline about his upcoming trip back to Tottenville, it hit me—if Emmett left and I didn’t go back to school with him, *where* was I going to get the blood I needed?

**Episode 1851**

Torin’s sadness reached out and took hold of me. I put my arm around his shoulders, trying to comfort him. “You want to sit down with me? Have a little chat?”

Torin sniffled, still crying. Nodding, he wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. I grabbed a bunch of napkins from one of the tables and led him to a nearby bench.

“What’s going on?” I asked gently.

“I just…” He swallowed, looking down at his lap. “I just miss the Fae world.”

Torin’s weeping had dialed down, but now I was getting choked up. I was definitely an empathetic crier, so I hoped to god I didn’t start sniffling just to match Torin’s vibe.

“I get that, but… you can’t be serious about going back. I want you here!”

Torin glanced at me, letting out a little broken sound, followed by, “I just—I just don’t really know what to do right now. I…” Fresh tears spilled from his eyes, his chest heaving. “I just miss Astrid so badly. When she died, part of me died too.”

*Poor Torin*, I thought. My eyes stung. Shit, and now I was crying too! *Of course!*

I gave his shoulder a squeeze, and he offered me one of the napkins I’d given him.

“Thank you,” I said, blowing my nose.

“I know that everyone is celebrating right now,” he went on, after we had both sufficiently blown our noses. “And I get why, but for me… I’m just constantly reminded of her. I’m sorry I’m being such a bummer.”

“You shouldn’t feel guilty for feeling the way you do,” I said. “I didn’t know Astrid nearly well as you did, and I miss her too.”

“Right?” Torin whispered. “She was so sweet. The best.”

I wrapped my arm around his shoulders tighter, pulling him close. I was still sniffling, but at least my voice was even. “I can’t imagine how unbelievably hard this must be for you, Torin. Astrid was a wonderful person, and everyone here knows that she died trying to protect the pack. She died a hero, and she will *always* be remembered for that.”

Torin stared off at the glowing fire, taking a shuddery breath. “I try to focus on that, but it’s hard. I don’t know what to do next…”

I squeezed his shoulder. “Astrid wouldn’t want you to spend the rest of your life mourning her loss, though. She was always full of life, funny, hopeful—she’d want you to live like that. Eventually.” I nudged him. “You’re a healer, Torin. Maybe you need to spend some time healing yourself.”

Torin smiled sadly. “That one was good.”

“Thank you, I just thought of it,” I said, and he chuckled.

My heart ached for him.

“I still think it’s best that I go back to the Fae world, though,” he mumbled.

“Nobody’s gonna stop you from doing what you think is right,” I said. “But what’s waiting for you back there?” I pointed at myself. “I’m your friend, and I’d love for you to stay. My dad will miss you too, for sure—you’re his cooking buddy. Then there’s the rest of the pack—Rishika, Zainab, Lola, everyone. You’ve made so many friends here. Even freaking Xavier and Greyson asked me how you’re doing, and they are *horrible* with emotions.”

Torin sniffed. “They really are. Greyson brought me corn of the cob earlier, dumped the plate on my lap, and said, ‘let me know if you need anything else,’ before quickly walking away.”

That was *so* Greyson.

“See? You’ve made so many friends here,” I said. “You’ve even become an honorary werewolf.”

Torin looked around, sighing. “It’s true, I have a lot of friends.” He puffed out his slender chest. “And I am a werewolf… Sort of.”

I grinned.

Torin’s smile faded as he glanced at me, staring down at the used-up tissues on his lap. “Would you guys really miss me if I left?”

I leaned forward, kissing his cheek, then his forehead. “Of course we would. And I would miss you most of all.”

Torin brightened. “I’d miss you too, Cali.”

“Don’t make any rash decisions, then. How about you take a moment to think about what to do next?” I asked. “And you need some rest.”

I escorted Torin into the house, then upstairs to his room. We didn’t start crying again, so that was a win. When he lay in bed and I threw a blanket over him, he looked up at me with huge, vulnerable eyes. “Thank you for everything, Cali. I promise I won’t do anything without telling you.”

I kissed his forehead again and left the room, pretty proud of myself for keeping the waterworks at bay. It was quite a feat, considering I did feel a little shaky from the wine cooler I’d had earlier.

*Would I have a higher tolerance to alcohol if I became a werewolf?* I wondered.

I was about to come down the stairs when I noticed Greyson coming up. “I was looking for you, love.”

My heart started racing at the sight of him, just like always. “Right! I—”

I nearly tripped over the stairs, and Greyson grabbed me by the shoulders, arching an eyebrow.

“How are you stumbling after just one wine cooler?” he asked.

“How do you know it was just one?” I teased.

“I didn’t, but now I do,” he said with a low chuckle, and a shiver ran down my spine.

*Wow*, I thought, as Greyson led me back down the hall. I wasn’t sure where we were going, but I let myself go with the flow.

“How’s Torin?” he asked, in that same low voice.

“Not very good,” I said sadly. “But he told me you brought him corn on the cob.”

Greyson shook his head. “I realize some people have sacrificed more than others, and celebrating the defeat of Letifer doesn’t bring the same feelings to everyone involved. Especially Torin. He’s done so much for us. I hate what he’s going through.”

Greyson’s empathy was making me feel mushy all over again.

“He really misses Astrid,” I whispered.

“I know.” Greyson pulled me into his arms, kissing the top of my head. “How are you doing?”

My body responded to his closeness in an instant. His grip around my waist got tighter, and he nuzzled at my temple, making my heart rate spike. Flustered, I mumbled, “I’m happy that the worst is behind us.”

“I agree,” he said. “In fact, I want to show you something.”

Greyson led me into his room, taking a seat on his bed. I swallowed, blinking rapidly.

*Oh my god, does he want me to join him? Right now? I couldn’t possibly…*

Interrupting my internal rambling, Greyson reached down and began to undo the belt of his jeans. My cheeks flushed until he gestured to where the witch mark had been. “Look.”

I squinted. What was he talking about? I got to my knees to try to get a better look. “What?”

“It’s fading,” he said.

I couldn’t contain the gasp that escaped my lips. He was right! All that was left of the witch mark was a faint outline.

“Does that mean you’re cured?” I asked, too afraid to hope. I traced it with my fingertips, and Greyson bit his lip, staring down at me.

I suddenly realized the position I was in, and my cheeks were on fire.

“I don’t know for sure,” he said. Was he breathing as unevenly as me? “But it would make sense. With Letifer defeated, the dark magic behind this thing must be retreating.”

I gulped, my fingers light on his skin. “I’m so glad you’re okay.”

He reached out, tipping my chin up. I swallowed roughly. That immediate pull I felt toward him had always been there—from the moment I’d fallen on him at my very first werewolf barbecue. I felt like jumping into his arms right now, and it had nothing to do with me being the slightest bit tipsy.

This was all him.

“You should put these back on.” I pulled up at his jeans, trying to ignore what I’d walked right into. He held my eye contact as he put everything back into place.

“Have I told you how grateful I am for you?” he whispered, resting his hands on my shoulders to gently pull me upward. He spread his legs a little, bringing me to stand in between them. His knees touched the side of my thighs, one large palm resting on my arm, the other brushing my hair over my shoulder.

“Why are you grateful?” My voice caught in my throat, Greyson’s touch like an anchor on my vibrating body. I was shaking at the contact, at the intensity of his silver eyes on me.

Rising to his feet, he kissed me on the cheek, his warm breath making goosebumps break out all over me.

“You saved me, Cali,” he said in my ear, his voice so liquid and smooth I felt my stomach drop. He met my gaze again, running his thumb across my jawline. “You saved all of us.”

I rested my hands on his bare chest. The feeling of his pounding heart under my palm made me weak at the knees, warmth and comfort spreading all over me. This gorgeous, courageous, sweet man was all mine.

I was so lucky to be here with him.

“You’re amazing,” I said, staring at his mouth.

Moving my hand to the back of his neck, I stretched up onto my tiptoes to reach him. He leaned down to meet me halfway, and our lips locked in a kiss.

**Episode 1852**

XAVIER

I was making the rounds, making sure everybody was okay.

Making sure everybody remembered that *I* was the one who’d been in charge—the one who was Alpha—when the greatest threat to the pack was defeated.

I knew that I shouldn’t push it, but this was the best strategy—to stake my claim over this victory, to keep everyone aware of how crucial my role had been in all this. There was a weight off my shoulders now, and I was feeling more confident than before. I’d demonstrated my ability to lead—extremely thoroughly.

I liked the way this felt.

It was like everything had fallen into place. Like everything was the way it was supposed to be, before Greyson had stumbled back to the pack, before Ryker had sabotaged me. Now, my path to becoming Alpha was clear. I remembered a saying I’d heard once—*don’t fix something that isn’t broken*. Under my rule, the pack was no longer broken—it was stronger than ever before.

Why mess with that?

And if Greyson objected… Well, I wasn’t compromised by silver this time. I would be all too happy to show my brother what I was truly capable of. I knew that I would win—that I *could* win. I looked around for my brother, ready to tell him exactly that, but I couldn’t find him anywhere.

I couldn’t find Cali anywhere, either.

I growled under my breath.

*Could they be together?* The thought made my stomach drop, an unsettled feeling spreading all over me. I hated this emotion—the idea that Cali was out there with my brother instead of me.

I made a beeline for the house, determined to find them. Maybe it was just a coincidence that they were both missing. Maybe they weren’t even together.

But even if they were…

I vowed not to get upset over it. I vowed not to lose my shit, because this wasn’t the time.

I needed to maintain the pack’s good impression, and this wasn’t the right time to wreak havoc. The best time for that would be when I had to challenge Greyson.

When I got to the porch, though, I was distracted. Kira was sitting by herself on the swing, looking out into the distance. She was brooding, which caught my attention. I decided I might as well check on her, too—she *had* risked her life and proven herself a very valuable ally.

Plus, she wasn’t all bad.

She wasn’t bad at all.

“How you doing?” I asked, leaning against the rail.

Her sharp eyes flickered to me. She shrugged half-heartedly. “Eh.”

“You’ve gotta be more specific,” I said.

“I mean, I’m alive.”

“I noticed.”

“And now I’m wondering what I should do, where I should go,” she admitted.

I frowned. “Oh?”

“Are you sure you want to hear about my existential crisis?” she asked me wryly.

Cali and Greyson were nowhere to be seen, which pissed me off to no end. But I couldn’t just dump Kira like this. She was going through something, and even though I wasn’t very good at feelings, I could at least sit my ass down and listen. She’d spent so much energy to help us, and she’d been through so much shit, just in general. It was the least I could do for her.

“Hit me,” I said, sitting down next to her.

“When I was forced to be Iñigo’s witch,” she said, “I spent so much time plotting to free myself, and to get revenge for Geoff’s murder, that I never really had a chance to imagine a life away from all that. And now that it’s arrived, I feel a little lost.”

I wondered if I should pat Kira on the back. For comfort or something. I’d seen Cali do that to people. This would’ve been much easier if I was shifted—the way wolves comforted was licking and nuzzling and cuddling. Since I definitely did *not* feel comfortable doing any of that to anyone other than Cali while I was still human, I decided to cut straight to the chase.

“You should stay with the pack,” I said. “Your efforts during the fight were invaluable, and you’re kinda fun sometimes.”

She scoffed. “Even when I lather you up with smelly healing ointments?”

“Even then.”

She shook her head, the humor leaving her expression. “I appreciate the offer, but you already have a witch. And based on the way Big Mac and Mrs. Smith are, what with their engagement and all, I doubt that will change anytime soon.”

I took a moment to process Kira’s words. Having one witch was a good standard for a pack. But two? The Redwoods would be immensely powerful if I was the undisputed Alpha *and* we had two witches.

“I want you to think about staying with us,” I told her. “It’s important to me.”

Kira shot me a sideways glance. Then she nodded, standing up. “We’ll see. Thank you for checking on me. I won’t just up and leave without telling you first.”

I scoffed. “You’d better not.”

She smirked, looking over to the yard. “I should go get another beer.” She arched an eyebrow, still staring off in the distance as she gestured forward. “By the way, you might wanna nip that in the bud before it has a chance to grow. If it hasn’t grown already, that is.”

I followed Kira’s gaze. She was talking about Ava, who was huddled by the fire, nursing a beer. The triumph I’d felt just moments ago vanished. Every time life seemed to be going my way, Ava had to come and screw things up. Why the hell was she still here? What was holding her back? She could go anywhere she wanted, and unlike Kira, I didn’t want her in our home.

I stood up.

“Good luck!” Kira called after me.

It felt like I would need it. Ava had a way of twisting things up. It was time to once again make it clear to her that she wasn’t needed. The way she smiled at me when I walked up to her was infuriating, actually. She beamed as if we were good old friends, instead of…

Whatever the fuck it was that we were, with all this bad blood between us.

“Xavier!” she exclaimed, before I could speak. “Are you having a good time? Basking in your glory, are you?” She smirked, looking around. Then, lowering her voice, she added, “Everyone is talking about what a good job you did.”

I scoffed. “Can’t imagine anyone told you anything. Nobody trusts you. Nobody wants you here.”

Ava arched an eyebrow as if she knew a secret I didn’t. It made my blood boil. “That’s not true, Xavier. You didn’t just kiss me because you thought I was dying, did you?”

I scowled. “You’re delusional. You can hold on to that memory for as long as you want, because it’s not going to happen again.”

Ava’s cockiness vanished. Suddenly stiff, she stared at me, her blue eyes blazing. “The mate bond isn’t broken, Xavier.”

I rolled my eyes, shaking my head, but then I noticed the seriousness in her gaze. It made alarm bells go off in my head.

In a quieter, gentle voice that sent chills down my spine, Ava added, “You feel it too, don’t you?”

My chest tightened with anxiety. A menacing doubt took hold of me as I thought of the strange pull I felt toward her, the dream I’d had, the way she was looking at me right the fuck now…

“I know you’re the right Alpha for the Redwoods, you know,” Ava whispered. “I trust you, Xavier.”

She was saying exactly what I wished so goddamn desperately for Cali to tell me.

I resented her for it.

I wasn’t about to let her mindfuck me like that. I was done with her. I had been done for a really long time.

“Stop it,” I said.

“What?” she asked. There was such a purity to her face, her beauty making her look almost innocent. *Almost*. I knew the truth, though. I knew the ways that she’d hurt me. I knew that there were some things that you simply couldn’t come back from. For god’s sake, she had murdered my mother, and I had murdered *her* to avenge that death.

What more was there for us to fucking discuss here?

The mate bond was gone, and whatever weird dream I might have had, whatever weird pull I may have felt, it just didn’t matter.

It hadn’t mattered in a really long time.

Cali was my mate. My one and only. And she would be only mine in the end.

“Whatever it is you’re thinking, fucking stop it,” I told Ava. “Nothing you say or do will change my mind.” I squared my shoulders, looking her dead in the eye. “The barbecue will be over soon enough. Make sure you’re gone by morning, otherwise I’ll have to do something about you myself.”

**Episode 1853**

GREYSON

With one kiss, Cali was shaking in my arms. I pulled her back onto the bed, her soft body underneath mine, my lips on hers. She spread her legs, and I hovered over her. She clung to me, her legs wrapping around my waist. Her mouth was open for me, every inch of her trembling, her fingertips digging into my bare shoulders.

The way she wanted me made me fucking dizzy.

It was overwhelming to think about how much she meant to me. She was *everything*.

“Greyson,” she rasped when I broke the kiss, my lips trailing down her neck, my palm moving up and down her side until her top trailed upward and I got to feel a bit of shivering, warm skin.

“I love you so much,” I murmured, resting my forehead against hers. “You brought me back from the brink, Cali. You helped me fight the dark magic in me. I wouldn’t be here without you.”

She looked dazed, her whole body vibrating, and I fucking loved that I had this effect on her. “I mean, same, thank you, you’re welcome, I love you,” was her rambling, flustered response.

Smirking, I kissed her cheek, then her brow, nuzzling her temple while I kept my palm there, on her side, moving up and down. Her hands were on my chest, tracing it shakily.

“I missed this so much,” I whispered. “Kissing you, touching you, making you feel good…”

I met her gaze. Her pupils were blown wide. I brushed my nose over hers.

“Does this feel good, Cali?” I asked, gently sliding her shirt up her abdomen before I traced her bellybutton with my index finger.

Her pelvis twitched as she choked out a, “*Yes*.”

“I want to take these off,” I muttered, tugging on the waistband of her jeans, “put my mouth between your legs, see how wet I can get you. Make you come as many times as you can take. Just as a thank you. Can I do that for you, Cali?”

She was panting, hard. I stared into her eyes, my chest heaving, the way I felt about her like a tight coil in the pit of my stomach. When she moaned and grabbed my face for another kiss, I felt like the king of the world.

And then—

*BANG!*

The sound had come from outside. I was on high alert in an instant.

“What the *fuck* was that*?*” I snapped, taking Cali by the hand and pulling her with me as I rushed to the window.

“What is it?” she asked, frantic and frightened. “What the hell happened this time?”

I saw Xavier on top of a table in the yard, his glass raised, and then the pack roared with laughter when there was another *bang*.

“Firecrackers,” I said incredulously, watching the smoke. I turned to Cali, what-the-fuck annoyed. “These fuckers lit up celebratory firecrackers.”

Cali blinked in shock.

Again.

And *again*.

And then we both burst out laughing.

“Unbelievable,” I said under my breath, rubbing my face. I was still smiling, relieved, but when I turned to Cali again, she no longer shared my mood. She was looking out the window, at Xavier on top of that table, making some kind of speech.

She was suddenly so stiff that the moment was entirely lost.

My brother, that intolerable, whiny, narcissistic little bitch, had ruined my life *once again.*

And yet, as the older sibling, I was supposed to be the bigger person.

“We should…” I cleared my throat. “We should probably join the party and celebrate with the pack.”

Cali sighed, glancing at my face. Then at my abs. Then literally down at my pants. Her whole face went red, and she bit her lip. “I guess we should.”

At least it really looked like she wanted to stay here with me. I felt like the master of the universe, which was a huge ego boost. And a hard-on boost. I excused myself to go to the bathroom, splashing cold water on my face. After I got my shit together and she did too, we headed downstairs to join the others.

*I’m going to go talk to Artemis*, she said through our mind link, when we reached the yard.

*See you later, love*, I replied, squeezing her hand before letting go.

Giving me a shy smile that made my heart ache, she walked off.

Meanwhile, my bratty little brother was still on that table, back on his bullshit, talking about the greatness of the pack and sucking his own dick, desperate for all of us to hear how great he was.

Sometimes I had to wonder whether we were really related.

As Xavier continued with his speech and the others—the fools—kept indulging him, I realized that with the threat of Letifer no longer around to serve as a means to unite me and Xavier, the tension surrounding the pack, Cali, and the *due destini* were only going to make matters worse.

Especially since Xavier had already made his intentions clear about remaining Alpha.

I just hoped that Cali didn’t get caught in the crossfire. Seeing us fight tore her apart. Not that I enjoyed it, either, but I’d been able to bear it so far.

Though I didn’t know how much longer that would last.

“Greyson, there you are,” a soft voice said, interrupting my thoughts.

I felt Sabine’s palm on my arm and turned to face her. She seemed a little sad, but at least she looked physically okay.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

She stared at me, sighing. “I just want to apologize for voting for Xavier. That was—”

“Let’s just forget about it,” I grumbled. “I should apologize too for attacking you when I was possessed.”

“You don’t need to,” she said. “But I wanted to because I want you to understand that I did it because I let my personal feelings get in the way. Even though I wasn’t around when you needed me the most, you are my son. Voting for you to be Alpha while you were injured would only have put you in further danger. I didn’t want to lose you again.”

“We really don’t have to talk about the past,” I said. “It’s not—”

“I was only thinking about your best interests when I voted, Greyson. Not the pack’s. Can you forgive me?” she whispered.

I felt my eyes tighten for a reason that I wasn’t about to contemplate.

“I don’t blame you,” I said. “Truth is, I was compromised, and not at my full power. It took me a while to see that, and I shouldn’t have been in denial. Either way, the threat is gone. Things worked out.”

I looked at a still-talking Xavier.

Things had worked out, but I wasn’t sure where they were going.

My brother’s ego looked like a massive balloon over his head, and I wondered if I had subconsciously predicted this. If I had known, on some level, that power would bring out the worst in Xavier, and that was why I’d resisted stepping down so much.

“Either way, I’m still sorry,” Sabine whispered.

She pulled me into a hug, and after resisting for a moment, I checked myself. *Why not give her what she wants?* It wouldn’t cost me anything, and actually…

It felt good.

My *mother* hugging me felt good.

“Go,” I said, kissing her cheek. “Enjoy the party.”

She smiled up at me like I hung the moon. “You should too.”

I smiled tightly. Having a good time seemed unlikely while Xavier was still talking at everyone gathered. By now, he was on book 5, rhapsody 7 of his epic poem, “Look How Cool I Am.”

All in all, as I listened to Xavier tooting his own horn, my mind said *murder*, but my heart said *brother*. Which was my enteral predicament. Suppressing the urge to roll my eyes, I stepped away from the gathering by the fire.

This was still my pack, but I felt removed. I had been an outsider, once, when I’d taken control of the pack and had needed to work hard to earn their trust, and now it felt like I was back at square one. Xavier wasn’t going to let the Alpha thing drop, and I still hadn’t decided what to do about it.

I’d certainly enjoyed the power, the leadership role, though I had struggled a little with the emotional responsibility. I’d never truly wanted to be Alpha—I’d only done it only to protect the pack, and Xavier. By now, though, the number one thing holding me here was Cali.

I could imagine giving up being Alpha, but never Cali.

No matter what the *due destini* curse threw at us.

As for my brother, things with Xavier had never been great, and I doubted they ever would be. Even without Cali in the picture, there was too much bad blood between us—on some level, we would always be rivals. Maybe it could all be easy. I could just decide that Xavier could keep the pack—he might not be as good an Alpha as I was, but he might be okay. He could keep his leadership role, and I…

I wished Cali would just come with me, leave it all behind, and I could keep her.

I smiled at the thought, a sense of longing overcoming me. Then reality came crashing back. I couldn’t do any of that.

At the same time, in the distance, I heard someone calling my name.

*Greyson.*

Confused, I looked around, at the woods.

The three witches stood there, waving at me.

Chloe, Posie, and Lauren.

I glanced around, surprised, agitated. Did anyone else see them? Or was this another vision?

*Come to us, Greyson*, their joined voices said.

And then all three beckoned me toward them.

**Episode 1854**

VIOLET

Charlie’s kiss had ignited something inside me. A hunger, a need, the mate bond between us vibrating to life and energizing me, lighting me up from the inside out. I pushed him against the wall, kissing him hard, and he responded with just as much enthusiasm.

I was feeling pretty bold here, like a runaway train, elated to be with my mate after we’d survived so much danger, and the relief I felt made all my exhaustion vanish.

Charlie and I were together.

We were alive.

We were in love.

And right at this moment, everything was amazing.

I tugged on Charlie’s shirt, and he took it off in a second, tossing it somewhere behind him.

“You’re beautiful,” I whispered, and he grinned, reaching for my shirt as I fumbled with his belt buckle.

“Wait,” he said, raspy. “We should lock the door. Just in case.”

I nodded vehemently as he tried to do just that, frowning when he realized the lock was broken. Before I could get upset about that, though, he just grabbed a chair and braced it against the doorknob.

“Wow,” I said, impressed. “Look at your problem-solving skills.”

He laughed, kissing me again, picking me up. I wrapped my arms around his neck, my legs around his waist. He started carrying me toward the bed. I stared into his eyes, licking his lower lip as we neared the mattress. He took in a sharp breath, losing focus and stumbling.

We both fell onto the mattress, drunk with happiness and desire. I pulled him on top of me right away, eager for the pressure of him, for the closeness. He nibbled across my neck, and I arched my hips upward for our lower bodies to meet, for me to feel him. Did he know how much I loved him?

The groan he let out left me breathless. The friction between us had me going dizzy, and I wanted more. I wanted so much more I didn’t even understand, and I whispered that to him, reaching for his belt buckle.

“Wait,” Charlie said again, gasping.

What was it this time?

“Your phone.” He pointed at my jeans’ front pocket. The phone was vibrating in there, and it took a moment for me to process what was happening. Phone. Buzzing. *Crap*.

Who cared about the phone, though?

I wanted my mate. Right now. This felt like the perfect moment for our first time.

“Ignore it,” I said, leaning up to kiss him again.

“But that’s the third time it’s rung tonight,” Charlie said. “Maybe it’s an emergency. Weren’t the Redwoods into some serious revenant trouble?”

Charlie’s comment made me come to my senses. There was a part of me that was a little offended that he could think so clearly while we’d been getting so intimate, but at the same time I was grateful that at least one of us was keeping an eye out for the real world. The thought that he was still spooked and ready to protect me after everything we’d been through made reality crash over me even harder.

Taking a deep breath, I picked up the phone. And frowned.

“What the hell?” I mumbled. “Why is Marta of all people trying to FaceTime me? If anything had happened with the pack, it would be Xavier calling.”

Charlie seemed confused as well. “Maybe she butt-dialed you?”

“*Three* times?”

He shrugged.

Well, Marta could wait. Staring at my mate’s red-bitten lips, it felt like I couldn’t. I was about to toss the phone away when it stopped ringing and then started again a second later.

“Violet, maybe it *is* important,” Charlie said sheepishly.

“It had better be,” I mumbled under my breath. My wolf was whining for more contact, for more Charlie, but my brain needed to focus. I was about to answer the phone when Charlie stopped me.

“Hold on,” he said, and gently fixed my shirt before smoothing my hair back. “We don’t want them to see you all frazzled.”

Blushing, I smiled at him. He was so sweet.

Taking a deep breath, I answered the video chat. “What’s happening, Marta?”

Instead of Marta, though, it was Lilac’s grinning face that greeted me.

I gasped, almost dropping the phone. “*Lilac?*” I choked out. “How come I can see you?” I turned the phone to Charlie, stunned. “I can see him!”

Charlie nodded, clearly taken aback, while my brother smirked. “I can see you too… What are you guys up to?”

“Um, things. Stuff,” I stammered.

“Wow, that’s exciting.” Lilac’s tone was sarcastic, and Charlie rubbed his face, flustered. *God*, Lilac was a teasing little brat, even as a ghost.

“Seriously, why are you visible?” I asked. “Have you been kissing Marta?”

Lilac grinned. “Yes, but that’s not why you can see me. Marta got me back from the spirit world, in the flesh!”

I paused, staring at Lilac cautiously. It sounded too good to be true. “Right. But for how long?”

He shrugged. “I feel like it’s forever?” He threw his head back and raised his hands in victory. “I’m alive again, Violet!”

I stared at him, gaping. “Lilac,” I whispered shakily. “That isn’t a thing to joke about.”

Lilac faced me, and to my utter shock, his expression turned serious. His voice softened, and his eyes were gentle. “I’m not joking. I’m back, Violet,” he said, and I knew he was telling the truth.

This time, I was certain that this was no joke.

It was everything I’d wished for, finally coming to life. Literally.

“You’re alive,” I whispered, rubbing the screen with my thumb.

He nodded, letting out a laugh that broke a little when he wiped the corner of his eye. Lilac was crying, and that was all it took for me to burst into tears. Charlie held me tight, kissing the top of my head, while I stared at the screen, at Lilac, feeling so happy.

I was so happy he was here again.

It felt like everything had fallen into place.

Like an aching part of me, a part that had been bitten off and killed, had returned.

Now, I could be whole again.

“Now, now, no more crying,” Lilac said, blowing his nose with a tissue.

I chuckled, shaking my head as I wiped my eyes. “Is Marta there, Mr. Tough Guy? I want to thank her.”

“She’s upstairs,” he said. “I went to make a milkshake. And to have a moment with you. Just us.”

“Well, I’ll have to add thanking her for letting you steal her phone to my list of things,” I said, and he grinned.

There was so much to be thankful to Marta for. She probably had no idea what it meant to me to have my brother back. It was something I never thought would be possible.

“Marta saved everyone, Violet. You should’ve seen her. Better than Wonder Woman!” He smiled. “You should come home soon to see me in person. Letifer is gone now, so it’s safe. No more revenants.”

I grinned back at him. “Really?”

“Yes, so when are you coming back already?” Lilac asked, bringing the phone close enough to his face that I could only see his eye. And then he shook the phone. “I need my sister!”

I laughed at his dramatics. I felt the exact same way about him.

I turned to Charlie, who gave me a soft smile. “I promise we’ll both come back as soon as we can get out of this camp without causing a riot.”

“I’ll keep you posted,” I told Lilac.

“Sounds good to me,” he replied. “By the way, hi, Charlie! Good to officially meet you.”

Charlie grinned at my brother. “Good to meet you too, Lilac.”

I stared at my brother’s face, still fighting to believe what was happening.

“I love you,” I whispered to Lilac.

“I love you too, sis.”

When we ended the call, I turned to Charlie, grinning from ear to ear.

“I’m so happy for you,” Charlie said, kissing the side of my head. He made a move to get up, but I gripped him by the elbow.

“And where do you think you’re going?” I asked, smirking.

He looked confused. “I thought you’d want to head back ASAP? I was going to go talk to Romilly and look into it.”

I beamed, elation and excitement coursing through me. My brother was back from the dead, and my mate and I were finally safe, with no revenants running after us. “A few minutes’ delay isn’t going to hurt. And since we started something…”

I pulled him down, and he grinned against my mouth when I kissed him.

I hadn’t felt so carefree in a long time, and I poured it all into this moment between us. Charlie whispered, “I love you so much,” in between kisses, his palms hard on my hips. I couldn’t get enough, my hands roaming all over his bare chest, down his abs, his sides, then lower. He was warm and beautiful and—

And then the doorknob rattled.

“You have *got* to be kidding me,” Charlie whisper-hissed after we broke off the kiss. “Can’t we get a break?”

I stared at his frazzled expression and burst out laughing. I couldn’t help it—he looked so offended. His stern expression broke down, and he laughed too, shaking his head at himself.

“What’s going on in there?” Aisha’s voice asked from outside. “Why is the door locked? Wait, where’s my key?”

There was some muffled arguing behind the door, and Charlie and I broke apart. He grabbed his T-shirt and put it on, and I smoothed out my hair.

“I’m coming, don’t break the door!” Charlie called, pulling the chair away. He opened the door, revealing a surprised Aisha and Reggie.

“Oh,” Reggie said, looking between us. “Well. At least you’re both here.”

“What’s going on?” Charlie asked.

“We’ve been looking for you,” Aisha said, her expression serious. “They found Zachery.”

**Episode 1855**

ARTEMIS

“I’m not tired,” I said, pouting.

“Either way, you should take a nice hot shower. You need it to relax. It’ll help you sleep,” Rishika said.

I couldn’t believe this. Was she blowing me off? I’d thought that since the battle was over, Rishika and I would be able to reconnect, spend some quality time together. I was happy for the pack, happy for Cali, happy that everybody was okay. But all I cared about right now was the wolf who was standing in the bathroom doorway, insisting that I showered and slept.

*Slept.*

This was not playing out the way I’d imagined. I’d imagined kisses and handholding and my mouth at the freckle on her left collarbone. What I got instead was someone who wanted to tuck me in for a nap after disinfecting me. What a shame.

“You know, I won’t drop dead if I don’t sleep. I’m tough. I took care of myself just fine while I was in the Fae world,” I said.

“Uh-huh,” Rishika said, herding me to the tub in full wolf mode. “But maybe it’s time to let yourself be taken care of.”

I had no idea what she meant by that. Werewolves were weird. They were also extremely stubborn, so I just accepted my fate. I took off my tattered clothes, threw them into the trash bag Rishika was holding like a dutiful wife who wouldn’t let me kiss her, and then stepped into the tub.

“There,” Rishika said. “Was that so hard?”

I eyed her up and down, biting my lower lip and cocking my hip to the side as I rested my forearm on the tiles. I was obvious in my attempt to entice her. “Care to join me?”

Rishika barely registered my question, her eyes fixed on my face instead of my bare body. “I’ll shower later.”

And then, as I washed my hair and grumbled under my breath about werewolves that couldn’t take a hint, Rishika went on and on with various unnecessary questions.

“Would you like some tea?”

“Should I get you more food? Some potato salad, perhaps, you like that!”

“Maybe a slice of apple pie—you deserve something sweet after all you’ve been through!”

My response to all her suggestions was a resonant *no*. There was only one thing I wanted, and I was being pretty obvious about it.

“Okay,” she said in the end. “I’ll be right back!”

Annoyed, I slid the glass barrier back after I was done with the bath. I was greeted by Rishika holding a large fluffy towel, smirking at me. There was something in her gaze that made my stomach flip, my body heating up under her attention. I stepped closer, and she engulfed me with the towel. I stared at her lips, leaning slighting forward.

“This is a nice bath cloth,” I said, complimenting her choice like a good girlfriend would. I was certain that she’d finally get the hint and kiss me already.

But *no*.

“I found it in the closet with Xavier’s fancy plates and curtains,” Rishika said happily, quickly patting me down before she ushered me out of the bathroom.

She was like a tornado, and there was no kissing in sight. It made me want to grab her and shake her, and also cry a little. It made me want to tell her, “I survived literal dark magic, don’t I at least get a kiss? I want a kiss, you werewolf tease!”

But I said nothing.

I didn’t want to seem as needy as I truly was, but my interest peaked up again when she said, “Go ahead, crawl into bed.”

I raised an eyebrow and did as I was told.

“These feel good,” I said.

“I stole those sheets from Xavier’s secret fancy stash as well, right along with the towel,” Rishika told me, tucking me in. She kissed me on the nose—*just on the nose*—and said, “Close your eyes now.”

Was she being serious right now? “But I’m not tired.”

She snorted. “I said, close your eyes.”

I huffed, closing my eyes, no longer possessing the energy to argue. And then the inevitable happened.

I fell asleep.

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I had no idea how long I’d dozed off for, but I awoke to the scent of lavender and gardenia. My eyes flickered open, only for me to see candles illuminating the room. Was I dreaming? I looked around—where was Rishika?

I slumped back.

What was the point of all this without the woman I loved? Why would I dream about candles and romantic settings if Rishika wasn’t here to enjoy them with me? I was about to pinch myself awake when the bathroom door opened.

Rishika emerged. She was wearing a set of purple undergarments that looked exquisite on her. I held my breath, staring at her, taking in every inch of her until I felt woozy. The sly grin on her face as she leaned against the doorway was gorgeous.

“I’m sorry, am I dreaming?” I asked.

She chuckled. It sent a wave of pleasure through me. “I hope you had plenty of rest, because you’re going to need it.”

*Oh my Fae gods!*

I was speechless as Rishika sauntered over, then sat on the bed beside me. I just sat there, staring at her dumbly. I simultaneously didn’t want her to ever take any of these clothes off, but I also *really* needed her to.

“You’re so beautiful,” I whispered.

Rishika reached over and stroked my cheek, her touch soft. When she brushed her lips over mine, I gripped her wrist, keeping her close, the urge to lock myself around her and never let go immediate. Feeling greedy, I deepened the kiss.

“I can’t believe I have you back,” she whispered, breaking apart. “I can’t believe you’re okay. That we’re both here, together.”

I realized there was no point in hiding how I felt. How longed for her. How much I loved her. So I told her the truth.

“Even when Letifer was at his strongest, I never lost sight of you, Rishika,” I said. “You were the only thing that brought me back to the real me, if only for a little while. I’m really sorry for putting you through all this.”

She took a deep breath, her eyes kind. “Artemis…”

“No, I mean it,” I said, and took her hand. I brought it to my lips, kissing the top of it before placing it over my pounding heart. “I feel like myself again, and I know that it’s thanks to you. I love you, Rishika.”

“Me too. So much.”

Rishika’s dark eyes glistened with tears, and my sniffles turned into the urge to cry. I didn’t stop myself, though, didn’t deny my feelings. She kissed the corners of my eyes, and I kissed hers, tasting each other’s tears. My heart was pounding so hard I felt like it could fly. To see this powerful woman so vulnerable, so caring, and to know that it was because of me… I had never felt this way about anyone. Ever.

“I don’t know what the future holds,” Rishika said in a shaky voice, tucking my hair behind my ear, “but I don’t want to think about that. All I want is to enjoy the present, Artemis. With you.”

When Rishika kissed me this time, it was full of power. Full of yearning and desire, and I responded with equal fervor, lost in the sensations. This incredible woman was all mine—in my arms as I touched her all over, everywhere I could.

I slid the pretty purple underthings off her body, had her settle back on the bed. I kissed her neck, her collarbones and her perfect breasts, the sides of her waist, her stomach that was heaving because of me, her legs that spread wide for me as she said, “*Please*.”

There was nothing I could ever deny her.

I kissed the insides of her quivering thighs. I kissed where she wanted me, where she was melting for me, and she threaded her fingers through my hair, looking down at me, her hips arching up to meet my lips, her chest rising and falling like crazy. She shook under my tongue, trembled and writhed, and after I pushed her over the edge once, I kept going. Our fingers intertwined, and I knew I was loving this as much as she was.

Maybe even more.

She pulled me up and kissed me on the mouth—again and again, like she was saying thank you—then pushed me back on the bed and said it was her turn. Her turn to kiss me, touch me, feel me, make me feel loved. We loved each other, and in this moment, there was no other person that I wanted to be with.

I was myself, and Rishika had pulled me out of the abyss, one kiss at a time.

“I love you,” I said again when we came up for air, and she laughed.

I got so many kisses that night. I gathered them all greedily, and I could only ask for more. When we lay back on the bed, spent, I brushed my mouth over the top of her head, taking in her sweet scent, my arms wrapped around her.

Rishika was right. Whatever the future held, I knew that I wanted her there.

I stroked her arm up and down as we relaxed. Rishika’s eyes were half-closed, her long lashes fluttering, a smile on her lips. She was so stunning, this moment between us so amazing that I felt like my heart was about to burst.

Suddenly, I had to wonder—was this what it was like for Cali with Xavier and Greyson? Her mates?

And then a thought hit me like a mountain’s worth of rocks, cold dread settling all over me.

Like most werewolves, this perfect woman in my arms probably had a mate out there.

And I wasn’t that for her.

What would happen if Rishika’s mate showed up?

**Episode 1856**

I was about to go check on my sister when I saw the light shut off in Artemis’s room. And then I started to hear sounds I didn’t really want to coming from behind the door.

“Nope,” I blurted out, then turned on my heels and hurried away as fast as I could.

I was glad for Artemis and Rishika and all the hard work they seemed to be putting into each other—in their relationship. Not with whatever was going on right now. They didn’t need me knocking on their door, especially since Artemis seemed to be doing just fine. Best to let my sister and her girlfriend have some time together. Climbing down the stairs, I giggled to myself at the newness of it all—I had a sister who wasn’t possessed! She had a girlfriend who loved her! We were all alive!

The wine cooler was still making me feel a little buzzed, not gonna lie.

Just as I reached the last step, though, Big Mac popped out of nowhere and my giggle turned into a yelp-y kind of scream.

She arched an eyebrow at me. “Something wrong?”

“I was just…” I stammered. “I was just startled.” And I was feeling that wine cooler. Though Big Mac probably would’ve still scared me without it.

“I’m glad I ran into you, actually,” the witch said. “There’s something I want to discuss.”

I swallowed. That didn’t sound good, and the wine cooler agreed with me.

“I’m sorry!” I blurted. I wasn’t sure why I was apologizing, but I figured it was the best way to deal with Big Mac. “I never meant any harm!”

The witch scoffed, leading me to the living room. “Why are you saying sorry? You didn’t do anything wrong.”

I frowned, taking a seat next to her on the couch. “Are you sure?”

Big Mac arched an eyebrow. “How much have you had to drink tonight, Cali?”

I waved her off. “Eh, nothing much. One wine cooler. Anyway, please do accept my apology as a pre-apology for the next time I do something that makes you want to blast me.”

Big Mac snorted. “I have to admit that I’ve had my doubts about you, Cali—”

“Yes, I’ve been getting a hostile vibe from you for a really long time now—”

“—but you did okay, today.”

I paused, shocked. “Okay” in Big Mac’s language meant “great.” “Spectacular,” even.

“You may never be completely in control of your Fae powers, but you proved yourself today,” Big Mac went on. I was totally stunned.

*Is Big Mac being…* nice*? Why? Oh my god, is she trying to make me feel comfortable before she KILLS ME?*

My thoughts were getting a little out of hand there, so I reined them in. I shouldn’t be so suspicious—Big Mac might have been a witch, but she still had feelings. After all, why would someone like Mrs. Smith fall for her if she didn’t?

“So, let me get this straight,” I said, fascinated. “Are we friends now? Like, can we share secrets? Each other’s clothes? I am taller than you, though. Wait!” I gasped in excitement. “Can I talk to you about my mates?”

Big Mac arched an eyebrow. “I wouldn’t push my luck if I were you.”

“Fair enough,” I said.

Big Mac stood up. “I just thought you should know that, is all.”

She was at the doorway when I spoke up again.

“You know, you’re the one who deserves a really big thanks here,” I said. “If it weren’t for you, there would be no orb, and Letifer would still be out there.”

Big Mac’s lips twitched up in the smallest hint of a smile before she headed out.

I was convinced that we were best friends now.

With a bounce to my step, I went to the kitchen to find my parents and let them know about my new BFF. Dad and Mom were sitting at the table, eating Dad’s famous apple pie.

Mom’s face lit up when she saw me. “Did you talk to Artemis, sweetheart?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Don’t worry. She’s asleep with Rishika. We can talk to her later.”

Mom looked relieved.

“Take a seat,” my Dad said. “Have some pie.”

He set up a plate for me with ice cream on top, and all three of us ate our dessert with matching grins.

“So,” I said, “what are you guys planning to do, now that both your daughters are safe and sound?”

“I want to focus on planning the Thanksgiving dinner,” Dad said happily. “Torin and I have been looking forward to it.”

I didn’t tell my dad that Torin was considering leaving. Instead, I asked, “I know, but what about after that?”

There was a long pause.

Dad looked at Mom blankly. “Christmas?”

Mom smiled a little. “I think Cali is suggesting we return to Minnesota.”

That was what I was thinking, but that didn’t mean I didn’t want them here. “Of course not—you can stay as long as you want. I just thought you had to get back.”

“You don’t have to pretend, sweetheart,” Mom said, sighing. “I imagine it’s been hard to have your parents hovering around.”

I looked from my mom’s understanding face to my dad’s stricken one and took his hand. “You can stay here as long as you like. Please don’t be upset over this.”

I did want my parents here, of course, and I would miss them if they left. But it looked like Xavier was after the throne, and I didn’t want my parents to get caught up in more *due destini* drama. I wanted them somewhere safe and stress free.

“I appreciate that,” Dad said gently. “I think we’ll be ready to go after I figure out whether or not I’m a werewolf.”

I agreed, nodding, and Mom said, “By the way, Tom, could you go check on Torin in the morning? He’s so upset over poor Astrid, he could use some cheering up.”

Dad got up, instantly mumbling something about friendship as he covered the apple pie up. “You’re right. I’ll make him another pie tomorrow too. Sweet potato? I should plan out the ingredients.”

Once Dad was gone, Mom patted my hand. “Don’t worry, sweetie. I’ll talk to your father and make him understand. You’re a grown woman now—you don’t need us hovering.”

“It’s not about hovering,” I said. “It’s really about the dangers and the drama and the—”

“It’s okay,” Mom said firmly. “Every bird must leave the nest, and very parent has to say goodbye.” She squeezed my shoulder. “I just want you to know how proud I am of you.”

We shared a hug, and I breathed in her perfume. This felt like comfort. Eventually, she mentioned taking a nap and went upstairs. I stayed in the kitchen, mulling over how that whole thing had gone down.

*I don’t want to upset Dad*, I thought. *But maybe Mom is right—maybe I do need some independence?*

Then again, it wasn’t like my parents had been holding me back all this time. With everything that had been going on, I’d barely been able to spend any time with them. I just did my own thing while they put themselves in danger for the pack. I had brought them into this situation, and it would just be for the best if they took a break from it.

I could hear laughter from outside, and people talking—and Xavier’s voice was the loudest. His whole vibe spelled trouble, and I had no idea how to deal with him when he was like this. So… obsessed with himself.

*This whole Alpha situation won’t be easy*, I thought to myself, scowling. Taking a deep breath, I was walking to the exit to join the others when I ran into Ravi on the front porch. He gave me an odd, intense look.

“Cali.”

“Ravi?”

“I think I need to talk to you,” he said, looking a little frazzled. This was unlike him—usually he just stood there, watching everybody and looking cool.

“What’s up?” I asked, weirded out. “You look…”

Ravi looked around, fidgeting. “What?”

“A little jittery?” I asked. “Did you have a wine cooler? Because they can hit you like a train.”

“I’m fine—”

“Oh, is it the blood transfusion?” I asked, curious. “How much blood did you give to Ava? Are you feeling faint? Maybe you should drink some orange juice—”

“It has nothing to do with that,” he interrupted, still giving me that intense look.

“What’s up, then?” I asked. “You’re freaking me out, dude!”

He took a deep breath. “You’re a *due destini* mate.”

I blinked. “Yes?”

“You know a lot about mates. Because you have two of them.”

“Sure?” I said. It sounded like a question, because I didn’t quite get how I’d become an expert in mates. Like, what was next? Becoming a relationship therapist when I still had huge issues in my own relationships?

Looking around nervously, Ravi asked me, “What does the mate bond feel like?”

I squinted at him. “Why are you asking that?”

Ravi’s voice lowered to a whisper. “Because I think I might have one.”

**Episode 1857**

GREYSON

Nobody else at the barbecue seemed to have noticed the witches.

I wasn’t even sure if they were real. I had hallucinated a lot lately, so the lines between fantasy and reality were getting pretty blurry. That was probably a red flag for my brain as a whole, but I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to do about it. Go to werewolf therapy? If that was a thing, Xavier definitely needed to book an appointment. His megalomania, self-absorption, and narcissism were getting a little too much for me to bear at the moment.

*Greyson…*

Right, the witches were calling me. I should probably deal with that sooner rather than later. And try not to freak out if they weren’t real.

Taking a deep breath, I reached the edge of the trees, where they were lurking. They greeted me all at once, in that same mystical tone.

“Are you real?” I asked.

Posie looked at me funny. “Of course we are.”

I arched an eyebrow. “You never know, these days.”

Lauren smiled. “We’re just here to congratulate you on the defeat of Letifer.”

I cleared my throat. “That was the whole pack, not just me. And I’m still getting used to the idea of not being at war…”

Chloe’s expression darkened. “We understand. War is a horrible thing.”

I had enough nightmares to prove that.

“Will there be peace in your pack now?” Lauren asked me in a low voice.

“The war with Letifer is over, but that’s about the only thing I can guarantee right now.” I glanced over my shoulder, to where Xavier had gathered everybody around the fire, still boasting. He was going on about how great everything was, and how good it would be for everyone if he remained Alpha permanently, just assuming that everybody would go along.

At this point, his behavior was pathetic.

“A pack can only have one Alpha, Greyson,” Posie said, then.

I turned to face her, my voice harsh. “I know.”

Chloe tsked. “Touchy.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, reining in my temper. “What is it that you want from me?”

Lauren gently said, “We understand how much you’ve been through, and we have extended you a helping hand before. Will you accept that offer now?”

I paused, narrowing my eyes at them. I knew how tricky magic and promises to witches could be.

“Tell me exactly what you’re offering, again,” I said cautiously.

“It’s simple. We’re offering you your heart’s desire. A chance to change your destiny,” Posie replied.

I instantly thought of Cali. She was my heart’s desire. She’d been it for me from the very moment I’d recognized the mate bond between us. I remembered the dreams—visions—I’d had of a life with Cali. She and I had been so happy together. Free, elated.

And Xavier had been nowhere in sight.

I reveled in the idea for a moment, allowing myself this little indulgence, but soon all my thoughts came to a halt and I came crashing back to earth. Cali was a *due destini* mate, and she was doomed to be unable to choose only one mate. If she did, one of us would die.

And as much as I wanted to kill my brother, I didn’t want him dead.

“I know what I truly want,” I mumbled. “But it’s impossible. The *due destini* curse is too powerful. You can’t possibly undo something like that.”

Chloe stared at me. “To be fair, we *did* say we could, but you didn’t accept our first offer.

I snorted. “Yeah, because it was a shitty offer. You could fix the *due destini* curse, but I wouldn’t be able to see or talk to Cali again? What kind of deal would that have been?”

Posie smiled sweetly. “One that broke the curse, Greyson.”

I shook my head. “Breaking the curse means nothing if I don’t have Cali.”

“Well, things are different for you now,” Chloe said. “The war is over. You can make a final decision on whether you want to go through with breaking the curse. Though I guess you could also break it in the only other way possible.”

“But that way isn’t easy,” Lauren added.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t rather break it in the first way we proposed?” Posie continued.

“What do these ways even entail, exactly? And what the hell are you even saying right now?” I demanded. “If you want to have a serious conversation with me, be clear, be *specific*—none of this passive witch bullshit. In fact, bring me all the ways that you could break this curse in writing, analyzing their pros and cons. How about that?”

All three of them rolled their eyes.

“That’s not how witchy things work!” Lauren said.

“Right,” I scoffed. “I forgot that witches are allergic to being straightforward. Do you get paid to be vague, or…?”

“I’d watch my tone if I were you,” Lauren snapped.

“Apologies,” I said dryly. “I was repeatedly possessed by dark magic today, Lauren. My patience is not what it used to be.”

Chloe sighed. “Aw, he’s right. Poor thing.”

“Poor thing,” Posie repeated, nodding.

I felt like punching myself in the face just to end this disastrous and extremely weird interaction. I didn’t need these witches. I just needed Cali, and she was back at the house.

“Look,” I said patiently. “The only thing you need to know about me is that I will never cut Cali out of my life. If you understood anything about love, you would get that.”

Chloe smiled at me, probably the same way she would at a naïve child. “When you’re ready, just call our names, and we will come.”

“Good lord, *why* would I call for you?” I asked, fed up. “I don’t want you to visit me again! I don’t even know what you want to do to supposedly help me, and none of this makes any sense! At this point, all I want is for you to leave me alone.”

Posie lifted her hand. With a little wave, she said, “Here’s another taste of what you could have—as if we haven’t given you enough of those already.”

“No!” I groaned. “I don’t want any more visions, keep them—”

“Greyson?” Cali’s voice startled me.

I turned to see her standing right next to me. How had she managed to sneak up on me? I took her in; she looked more beautiful than ever, but also a little older and more mature. Had the war been that rough on her?

“I’ve been looking all over for you,” Cali said, taking my hand.

Her playful tone made something warm bloom inside me. She balanced on her tiptoes, brushing her lips over mine, gluing herself against me. I wrapped my arms around her waist, keeping her close, shivering at the contact. I could feel the power of our bond, and I smiled against her lips.

When Cali pulled away from the kiss, I was lightheaded. She smirked up at me, licking her lips before breaking away from me and tugging on my hand. “Come on, we’ve got so much to do, and I don’t want to waste time.”

“So much to do for what?” I asked as she led me away.

Cali smiled. “For our future, silly. Have you forgotten? We’re going to spend the rest of our lives together.”

I was stunned. My heart started racing ten times faster than before as I fought to wrap my head around her words. It was as if everything I’d ever hoped for had come to life in just a moment. But wait—did this mean she’d actually chosen me? That we would run away together, away from the pack and all its problems?

What about my brother? What had happened to Xavier?

“What about the *due destini*?” I asked her quietly, too afraid to hope.

Cali’s brow furrowed. “What are you talking about?”

I suddenly noticed that Cali was wearing a tank top, even though it was supposed to be winter, and on her shoulder…

There was a Luna mark. Something I never dared imagine on her. It felt too far-fetched. A real dream.

“Cali,” I breathed, shaking. “What’s going on?”

Cali smiled at me enigmatically, then faded away a moment later. I choked, trying to reach her, to hold on to her, but all I touched was air.

And then the witches were there again, taking her place. They looked as cryptic as ever.

*Of course.*

Of course this was their doing.

“This is what you could have,” Posie said. “Tell us when you make your choice. But don’t wait too long.”

Before I could ask them how the hell I could make a choice when they wouldn’t even tell me what the hell I would be choosing or losing to get what I desired, the witches shimmered and disappeared.

They left me standing alone, my stomach queasy and my head still boiling.

Could I truly get what I wanted most?

Was changing my destiny possible?

And if so, what would be the price?

**Episode 1858**

MARTA

Vander stood like a ranger-dressed specter in the middle of the room, and I stared at them, dumbfounded.

“Wait—what do you mean, consequences?” I said. “What kind of consequences?”

The nature being looked frustrated as they looked down at me. “Well, I can’t tell you *exactly* whatkind, because the consequences vary case by case. But you have done something that has upset the balance between the natural and the supernatural world, Marta, and therefore there have to be consequences. That’s just how things go. The world demands payment. There has to be a counterbalance.”

“But what are you saying?” I asked. “What should I do—”

“Don’t do anything. Just stay alert!” Vander said tersely. “That’s really all I can say now. I have to go.”

“*Go?*” I surged to my feet. “You can’t just drop that kind of information and then take off. Vander! You have to—”

“Wish I could stay, can’t linger!” Vander tipped their ranger hat and promptly disappeared, leaving not even a trace behind.

I stared at the spot where they’d stood for a moment longer. *Did any of that make sense?*

If Lilac were here he’d probably say Vander was super touchy because of all that cosmic balance stuff. I guess I understood, since Vander was the Keeper of All Nature or whatever. And they were the one who warned me to stop kissing Lilac because it made him corporeal and drew energy from the other side…

Yeah, I probably should have stopped doing that.

But what exactly had Vander meant by “consequences”—as if that wasn’t extremely vague? I didn’t like the thought of being punished. I’d been punished enough. I’d been stuck in a ghost house with an unhinged poltergeist for decades, and I hadn’t even done anything wrong! Then Letifer had tried to kill me, use me, then kill me again. I kept going from one way of being punished to another. I was sick of it.

At least Vander had also congratulated me on pushing Letifer through that portal, right?

I flopped back on the bed just as Lilac came back in, tossing my cellphone on the bed.

“When did you take that?” I asked.

He ignored my question. “Why do you look so gloomy? You’re a hero, you should be out partying or, like, we should throw you a parade,” he said.

“I think a parade sounds a little excessive,” I said, staring up at the ceiling.

Lilac appeared in my view holding a milkshake. “Everyone in the world should be grateful you did that. You saved a lot of people, Marta, even if most people won’t ever know it.”

I nodded slowly. “That’s true, I guess. You’re right,” I added, trying to focus on the bright side of Vander’s visit. “And it’s okay that most people won’t know about what happened. That’s how things are, sometimes.”

“But no parade?”

I rolled my eyes. “No.”

He sat down on the bed, my body shifting toward his. Leaning over me, Lilac grinned. “Okay, no parade. But how about a kiss?”

He closed the distance between us.

Kissing Lilac now felt so different than it had before. It had been fun before, but had kind of replicated the feeling of holding my breath. Kissing him had been an energy exchange, and it had always taken something out of me, and I’d always walked away from it feeling slightly dizzy. But now things were different. Now there was no fear of him fading away, and I slipped my arms around him and my hands into his hair, feeling the silky strands slide through my fingers. He was so real, so physical, and I felt own body responding to him.

Lilac’s hands were at my back, like he was holding me in place, but they started to move slowly upward, his fingers moving along my spine. In another moment it might have tickled, but now it just drove me crazy.

I pulled him down into me, and I don’t know how it happened, but suddenly I was on top of him. I straddled his slim waist, and his chest was so solid beneath me. My breath caught as he looked up at me with parted lips.

We should stop—

I stopped myself. There was no reason to stop now. The universe wasn’t in jeopardy anymore. Nothing was being thrown off-balance by us kissing. As Lilac coaxed my mouth open—slowly, carefully, almost experimentally—it occurred to me that we could do this all night.

My whole body felt lit on fire by the thought. Beneath me, Lilac’s breathing was growing ragged, and it rocked my body against his as his belly rose up and down. This made my own breath hitch as heat pooled within me, ebbing ever lower.

I couldn’t even begin to remember how long it had been since I’d felt like this, and I closed my eyes as his hands ran over the sides of my hips.

“Lilac,” I whispered. Then, “Lilac?”

I opened my eyes and looked down, confused. Beneath me, Lilac had stilled and seemed almost frozen. Even in the dark, I could see that his eyes were wide with fear.

“Are you okay?” I asked, my heart thumping. He nodded mutely. “Did I… Did I do something wrong?” I asked, rolling off him and inching away across the bed.

“No!” he said quickly, sitting up. “No, not at all. You’re amazing, Marta. I’ve never been so happy to be alive as I am right now,” he said, smiling slightly.

“Then what is it?” I asked when he didn’t go on.

He looked down, fidgeting with the blanket. “Um, it’s nothing. It’s just that I—um, well.” He looked up at me, and I was struck again by how dark and beautiful his eyes were. “You know, I’ve never gone all the way before.”

My eyebrows shot up, and I nodded. I’d forgotten, especially with the way he’d just been kissing me. It didn’t matter; I wasn’t exactly the most experienced in the world.

“There just wasn’t a lot of opportunity to date in the afterlife. Not until you came around,” he added, smiling. “So… yeah, I’m a little nervous.” He looked down. “I just don’t want to screw anything up.”

My heart was still beating hard, but this time it was for a different reason. I was so touched by Lilac’s confession. My memory of my own youth was a little foggy, but I’d been a teenager in the late 1960s, and the boys of that era had taken a different approach to sex and communication.

I didn’t really know too much, but I wanted Lilac to at least be what I wasn’t really my first time: comfortable. I wanted him to feel comfortable with *me*. I was about to tell him to lie back and just relax and kiss me again—and as my eyes scanned down his perfect body that was *exactly* what I wanted to do—but I stopped myself. He had been willing to be honest with me, so I should be willing to listen. Lilac was truly corporeal for the first time in years. And now *this*. This all had to be very strange for him.

“How about this?” I said, moving a little closer to him. “I think you should set the pace.”

He frowned up at me. “What do you mean?”

“Just take things as slowly as you want. There’s no hurry. Or go quickly, if that’s what feels right. I don’t mind either way, as long as we… get to the finish line together,” I said, feeling my face on fire.

Lilac looked unsure for a moment, but then his face broke into a smile. “That sounds good to me.” He leaned forward and kissed me, gently at first, but then the kiss grew in intensity until it was searing hot. He pulled back, breathing hard. “I hope you’re not feeling tired, Marta, because there are a *lot* of things I haven’t done yet, and I’m just dying to try them out.”

Laughing, I reached for him, ready to pull off his shirt, but before I could, the window next to the bed creaked. We looked over and watched as it slid open on its own.

“What the hell is that?” Lilac asked quietly, watching it.

A freezing blast of air gusted into the room, and I pulled away, shivering. “Who’s doing this? Is this a prank? Who can do magic like this?”

But before either of us could hazard a guess, an envelope wafted into the room on another cruelly cold breeze and settled onto the floor in front of the window.

Lilac stood and stepped over to pick it up. “It’s got your name on it,” he said, turning to me.

I took the envelope and pulled a letter from inside. It was typewritten.

“What does it say?” Lilac asked.

“*Dear Marta Zhao, we have been informed that you have engaged in unsanctioned necromancy resulting in a cosmic imbalance. We understand that this was done with impunity despite warnings given by Vander, the Keeper of All Nature*.” My stomach clenched, and my mouth started to go dry.

“Go on,” Lilac urged.

I took a shaky breath and continued to read aloud. “*We further understand that this necromancy was practiced without a license. This is in violation of Article Seven of the Edict of Supernatural Law, Clause Fifty-Seven. You will be brought up on charges and allowed to stand in your own defense. Your hearing is set for the fourth of next month.*”

**Episode 1859**

XAVIER

I stood near the bonfire, the heat of it contrasting with the bitterly cold night air, half-listening as Sage spoke to a crowd of wolves.

“—and there were two of them right on top of me, so I had one pinned on the ground, but the other one was coming at me, right?” She paused and checked to see that her audience was listening. “And then there was this huge explosion right in front of me, and the damn revenant’s hair caught on fire!” she said, her eyes going wide. “Kira must have sent some kind of firebomb. He didn’t even notice his damn head was on fire until I dropped kicked him into the flames.”

Everyone laughed, and Zainab—six beers deep—cheered, but I stopped listening completely. I was thinking about Ava, and what she’d said to me about our mate bond still being intact.

It was my mother—who’d died at Ava’s hands—who’d taught me the words to break the mate bond. I supposed having Silas father her two sons had made her particularly aware of how important it was to have an escape hatch, so she’d made both Colton and me memorize the words. She’d been insistent about it, long before I’d even begun to know why I’d ever need to use those words. But sure enough, I’d found out.

And when I’d used the words, I’d been certain they’d work. I thought that they had.

But… could the words have been wrong?

I stared into the fire, frowning. The possibility that my mother could have been wrong bothered me, but that wasn’t all. This wasn’t the first time I’d wondered about Ava and whether something remained of our mate bond, and I didn’t like that at all.

Things were finally starting to go well for me. I was Alpha of my pack, and I was going to keep it that way if I had anything to say about it, and Greyson could go to hell. And I was on my way to getting Cali—for good, this time. I deserved her. I’d kept her safe throughout that last hellish battle, just like I’d sworn I would. Even Greyson had to acknowledge that I’d gone above and beyond.

I knew that the *due destini* made it so Cali couldn’t actually pick between us—though, if she could, it would make things a hell of a lot easier for me. But would losing my brother be worth it? Even if I had Cali? I wasn’t sure.

But I wasn’t getting my hopes up for that kind of outcome anyway.

One way or another, we were going to figure something out. In my heart, I knew that Cali and I were meant to be together. I could feel it, deep down in my bones. It was fate or destiny or some metaphysical shit like that. It was *going* to happen; I *knew* it was.

I just had to be patient, which wasn’t exactly my specialty.

“Xavier!”

I looked over to see Mace striding toward me, a beer in each hand. He offered me one and clinked his bottle against mine.

“I wanted to tell you thanks for hanging in there,” he said gruffly. “You did good, man. Taking on the Alpha role in the middle of a crisis like that can’t be easy, but you proved that you were capable of it. Brought your pack through it. You did good.”

I nodded and raised my bottle. “Thanks, man.” I took a pull of beer. “I just wish Greyson could feel the same way and stand the fuck down.”

Mace swallowed his drink. “I’m not choosing sides,” he said, holding up his hands. “You both have your strengths. And your weaknesses.”

I snorted, irritated.

Mace ignored it. “But whichever of you ends up being Alpha, the Redwoods are going to be okay.” He took another long drink and looked around at the gathered packs. “I do wonder how it’s going to go down, though.” He glanced over at me. “I wonder which one of you I’ll see at the annual council meeting.”

I gripped my beer and cast my thoughts back. “I haven’t been to the council meeting in a few years.” I shook my head. “There was no need to go for a while there. The pack was so scattered after the pack wars. After Silas and all the shit he did.”

“Well, you gotta start thinking about it,” Mace said, taking on a lecturing tone that annoyed the hell out of me. “You or Greyson, whoever ends up Alpha. The Alpha has to appear. It’s not worth the consequences if you don’t make it.” He shook his head, looking somber. “It doesn’t pay to be an outsider.”

I rolled my eyes and looked away. “I know about the council, Mace. Don’t worry about me.”

Mace tipped his beer back, finishing it, and pulled another out of the back pocket of his jeans. “Fine, fine. Just don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

I was about to shoot back something snide, but I stopped myself when I saw Greyson striding toward us across the lawn. He was bathed in the flickering light cast by the bonfire, and he had a strange smirk on his face.

Mace hailed him as he walked closer. “Look at this! Two potential Alphas! All right, all right, all right, let me get a look at the two of you,” he said, slapping Greyson on the back and shoving him into place next to me. “I want to see you both before one of you kills the other one.” He looked back and forth between us for a moment. “Makes me wish I brought a camera.”

Greyson raised a brow. “How much have you had to drink, man?”

Mace shrugged sloppily.

“Maybe you’ve had enough,” Greyson said. “No one’s killing anyone else, right Xavier?”

I didn’t answer, but I did silently wish that Greyson would just drop dead and save us all a lot of trouble. A jolt of anger shot through me as I suddenly wondered whether Mace would have felt it necessary to lecture *Greyson* about the importance of attending the council meeting, or if that was especially for me.

Glancing around, I scanned the gathered crowd for Cali. I didn’t see her, and I wanted to leave to go find her—especially now that Greyson was back.

“I was just talking to your little bro about the annual council meeting,” Mace said. His voice was getting louder and louder. He’d definitely had too much to drink. “Just telling him how important it is for the Alpha to be there.”

I bristled, clenching the fist I wanted to slam into Mace’s stupid, smug face.

But Greyson just nodded. He turned to me and slung an arm around my shoulders. “You should listen to Mace—being an Alpha is a lot of responsibility.”

I stared at Greyson. What the fuck was wrong with him? Why was he acting so… *weird*? He was speaking almost vacantly, like he wasn’t really paying attention to the conversation. Was *he* drunk, too?

Mace nodded and leaned forward, toasting Greyson with a third beer he’d pulled from yet another pocket of his jeans.

I rolled my eyes and shoved Greyson’s arm away. “How the hell would you know about the council meetings, Greyson? You’ve never even been to one as an Alpha.”

“What?” He looked over at me, blinking, like he was trying to focus. “Yeah, that’s true, but I remember when Silas used to go.”

I snorted with disgust. “Well, that’s great if that’s a really fuzzy memory for you, man, but given what we just lived through, bringing Silas into this conversation is a pretty piss-poor sales pitch.”

“I’m just saying…” Greyson said, holding up his hands like he wasn’t trying to start anything.

But I didn’t buy it. “I don’t need this Alpha lecture series bullshit from either of you,” I said, glaring at both of them. “And weren’t you the one,” I added, turning on Greyson, “who didn’t want to get into all the Alpha stuff right now? Your words, man.”

Greyson shrugged but didn’t answer. I knew he was just trying to get under my skin, but it still drove me fucking crazy. The way he just strolled into conversations and tried to take over. *Everything* he did pissed me off, and I was itching to strike back. I wracked my brain, thinking of what I could do or say that would piss him off.

Then it came to me.

“Anyway, I’m looking forward to the council meeting,” I said, smirking. “I’m going to have something you don’t when I show up.” I waited until both Greyson and Mace were looking at me. “I’ll be with my Luna.”

Greyson’s face went pale, but Mace frowned.

“Your Luna?” he asked incredulously. “Who?”

“Cali,” I said, watching the effect of this announcement on Greyson’s face. “She’s already said yes.”

**Episode 1860**

CHARLIE

“Wait—” I frowned. “Zachery was *lost*?” I stared at Aisha in surprise. I’d been pretty distracted by everything going on—and especially by Violet—so I hadn’t really had a chance to think about Zachery since we’d seen him last, but I hadn’t known he was missing.

I shot a glance over at Violet, who was also looking pretty baffled.

“What happened?” she asked.

“Well, he was caught outside the boundaries, trying to leave camp without permission, so Pepperdine dragged him back here. They freak out about kids going rogue at the best of times, and you know how everyone’s all wound up about the attack—” Aisha broke off and shot Violet a weighted look.

“What?” I asked, anxious to know what else was going on.

Aisha darted a look at Reggie, then up at me. “Oh, well… Pepperdine has been talking too… He’s dealing with some parents and instructors who aren’t too happy there were werewolves helping out during the battle.”

*Hypocrites*, I thought.

She shifted on her feet, looking deeply uncomfortable. “There’s a debate, I guess, about whether they should be pursued.”

*What, not a “thank you”?* Violet said to me, not looking up.

Silently, I agreed with her. We had put ourselves on the line—both to the revenants and the hunters—in order to save people. I used both my hunter and werewolf sides… Couldn’t they understand not everything was so cut and try?

I sighed. “Thanks for the update, Aisha.”

*And I’m sorry as hell that it interrupted us.*

Violet gave me a tiny, suggestive smile. *Not half as sorry as I am.*

Aisha and Reggie led the way out of the cabin. Violet and I followed them across the central square to the main building, with the administration offices.

“This is where Zachery’s being held,” Reggie said, tipping his chin toward the door.

Everything about this surprised me, but nothing was more surprising than when I walked in and found Zachery in one of the larger offices, one of his hands cuffed to the heavy chair he sat in. Zachery was filthy, like he’d fallen a few times during his run through the woods, and he looked up at us furiously when we walked in.

“What’s with the cuffs?” I asked warily, looking at Romilly. “I thought he was just caught trying to run away? I didn’t think you’d get the book thrown at you for that.”

Romilly’s mouth was pressed into a thin line. “It was a lot worse than that,” she muttered grimly. Then she stepped forward, into the middle of the office. “Okay, quiet down. Now that everyone’s here, we’re going to start the interrogation.”

I glanced around. It *did* seem like everyone was there. Or nearly everyone. Pepperdine was there, of course, glowering. My mom was leaning against the wall on the far side of the room, her expression dark. Sophie was there, looking spooked—her eyes kept darting toward the door, like she was planning her escape. And Chad was there, too, looking uncharacteristically nervous.

Next to me, Violet was still and tense, and she kept her eyes on Zachery. Even though he was cuffed, she was watchful.

“Okay,” Romilly began somberly, “there’s no getting around this.” She turned to Zachery. “You’re here because you’ve been accused of breaking the Hunter Code. You endangered the lives of your fellow hunters when you failed to lock the tunnel and pursued action against a camper, Violet—”

“I was trying to kill a *werewolf*!” Zachery broke in angrily. He jerked his hand so the cuffs rattled against the metal arm of the chair, and he glared around at the gathered crowd. “A damn werewolf! Since when is that against the Hunter Code? Werewolves are the *enemy*!” His eyes went to Violet, and he spat on the ground at his feet.

On instinct, I stepped partway in front Violet, blocking her from Zachery’s eyeline, and slipped my arm around her. I could feel the tension in her muscles—she was in full fight-or-flight mode.

“She would have killed me if she’d had the chance,” Zachery added savagely.

This seemed to piss Violet off, and she stepped around me, her eyes flashing. “That’s a lie! I saved your life during the battle—you know I did!”

“You can’t prove that!” Zachery shot back petulantly. He sounded like a pouty kid, and when he turned to face Romilly, he looked like one, too. “She can’t prove that. It’s her word against mine. Are you going to trust me—a hunter—or her—” He looked at Violet with narrowed eyes, “—one of the *monsters*?”

I surged forward, ready to protest—or just punch Zachery in his fucking face—but Pepperdine beat me to it.

“Wolf or not,” he growled, looking around the room at everyone, “this girl is under the protection of the hunters, and the Code applies to everyone. If you’re mad about it, you go through *me*.”

*Glad he had a change of heart*, I thought bitterly. But as long as Violet was safe, Pepperdine could have all the change of hearts he wanted.

“But I’m innocent,” Zachery said, his face going pale. He shook his head, the cuff rattling as he turned to the crowd, appealing to them. “This werewolf’s trying to set me up. *Why* is she being protected? Ask yourselves that. Why was she allowed to infiltrate the camp? Ask yourselves what’s really going on here!”

There were some low mutterings from the collected crowd, maybe in agreement with Zachery’s wild conspiracy theories, and I felt my stomach clench. Protected or not, there were a lot of hunters who would never trust a werewolf, no matter what Pepperdine—or the facts—said. What Aisha said earlier proved that.

I reached for Violet and shot a glance at the exit. I was just wondering how fast I could get her out of here when Chad stepped forward, his hand raised.

“I saw the whole damn thing. I know who’s to blame.”

I stared at Chad, alarm bells going off in my head. He’d been more than decent to Violet, getting her to safety after she’d been hurt, but he was still Chad. Was he one of those hunters who would never accept the idea of a good werewolf?

My heart was beating hard, and under my hand I could feel Violet’s pulse racing as Chad looked around at the assembled crowd.

Then he turned to Pepperdine. “I saw Daisy—Violet—when she was standing by Zachery. She wasn’t threatening him at all, and Zachery just went after her—with a silver knife.” There was a collective gasp, and Violet flinched at the memory. Chad glanced at her. “If she hadn’t been so quick to get away from him, Zachery wouldn’t have just gotten her arm, he would have killed her where she stood. The dude looked like he was out of his mind.”

Pepperdine looked at Romilly, who nodded gravely.

“Your eyewitness testimony is all we need to move forward with the process.”

“What process?” Zachery demanded, looking wild.

Romilly turned to him. “You’ll be kicked out of hunter camp, and you’ll likely never get your hunter badge.” She narrowed her eyes. “Those who break the Code have no place among true hunters.”

Zachery stared at her, still with shock. But only for a moment. Then he lunged for Violet. He was still cuffed to the heavy chair, but he dragged it behind him as he came for her, spit foaming on his lips as he screamed, “You *bitch*! Look what you’ve done to me! I’ll kill you!”

I stepped in front of Violet, ready to kill Zachery myself. But I didn’t need to—the other hunters were ready, and leapt into action.

Pepperdine grabbed Zachery and wrestled him back into the chair. Pepperdine was small, but freakishly strong, but it still took him a long moment to properly subdue Zachery. The camp leader who taught hunter history unlocked the cuff attached to the chair and wrestled Zachery’s other hand into it, so that he was properly handcuffed, then the two of them, along with the surly cafeteria cook, frog-marched Zachery out of the office.

“You conniving *bitch*! You set me up! You’re going to regret this! I’m going get you! I’m going to make you *pay*! You’re going to be begging me for mercy by the time I’m done with you! All of you! All of you, but especially you, *Daisy*! You little werewolf *bitch*!”

Everyone near the door scuttled out of the way as Zachery passed through, screaming like a lunatic the whole time. He kept screaming as they moved him down the hall, but the sound eventually grew quieter and, as we heard a door slam, disappeared completely.

I breathed a sigh of relief into the silence. Zachery’s devolution as a human had come as a shock to me, but I hadn’t realized exactly how unhinged he was until now. Violet was grasping onto my sweatshirt, trembling with fear or anger—or some combination of the two.

“Hey,” I whispered, pulling her close, “at least it’s over. We don’t have to deal with him anymore, right?”

Violet looked up at me, then past me, her eyes growing wide.

I turned to see what she was looking at and saw my mother striding toward us. I resisted the urge to step away from Violet’s embrace.

When my mom stopped in front of us, it occurred to me that she was working hard to keep her emotions under control. She looked at me, then at Violet, taking in how closely we were holding each other.

She looked back at me. “Tell me the real story. Now.”

**Episode 1861**

“You think you might have a *bond*?” I repeated back to Ravi, baffled. I felt confused, like I’d missed a part of the conversation. “A *mate* bond?”

Ravi nodded gravely. His dark eyes looked worried, and I could tell that—whoever the bond was with—he wasn’t exactly ecstatic about this development.

I frowned. I knew he and Joss had been together before she died—but had they been mates? I hadn’t thought so, but maybe that was part of his discomfort with the idea?

“Well,” I started gently, “this feeling you have, is it different from what you felt when you were with Joss?”

“*Very* different,” Ravi said, his voice low and fervent.

“Okay… How is it different?” I asked.

He furrowed his brows, thinking. “I don’t know if I can quite explain it.”

“Is it a crush? Do you like this person? Is it a physical attraction? Something like that?” I offered.

He shook his head. “It’s more than just physical attraction. It’s *way* more than that.”

I understood what he was saying. I was attracted to both my mates, but what I felt for them went way beyond sexual attraction, or even lust. I *needed* to be with them. It was fundamental—almost primal.

“Listen, Ravi,” I said, “I know I have this… *unusual* mate situation, but it really doesn’t make me an expert. I don’t know about every mate bond, so I can only speak from my own experience.”

Ravi nodded, his eyes wide, clearly ready to hear whatever I had to say.

“If what you’re feeling is a real mate bond,” I said, “I think you’ll know it.”

He hesitated. “What do you mean, *I’ll know it*? Know what?”

I cast my eyes around the festive landscape of the yard with the barbecue pit and the snack table and the coolers of beer. I wasn’t really looking at anything, just searching for a way to describe the bone-deep knowledge I had that my mates were my mates. It was hard to find words to explain it.

“Just trust me on this—it’ll become very evident,” I said. “In my experience, you can’t just turn off what you’re feeling, or ignore it and hope it’ll go away. If it is a real mate bond, it’s not going away, even if it makes your life way too complicated.”

Ravi nodded slowly, taking this in.

“I get the feeling a mate bond wasn’t necessarily what you were looking for, Ravi,” I said carefully. “But maybe this is a good thing?”

He looked up quickly. “A good thing? What the hell does that mean?”

“Think about it: you lost Joss so abruptly, and it was just brutal. It was hard on all of us, but it nearly destroyed you.” I shrugged. “You weren’t looking for this, but maybe this is the universe’s way of making it up to you. Giving you someone who can help you heal.”

Ravi’s dark eyes smoldered as he stared out onto the dead lawn. “Then the universe has a very sick sense of humor.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

A muscle in his jaw twitched. “I think my mate bond is with Ava.”

My heart thudded. “*What?* With *Ava*? Are you serious?”

He nodded, his eyes on the crowd near the bonfire.

I followed his gaze, scanning until I found her. Ava had been nothing but trouble for the pack since the second she’d stepped out of that enchanted mirror. No, earlier than that, considering she’d personally murdered Xavier’s mother.

Of course Ravi was worried—how could he possibly be happy with the thought that Ava might be his mate?

On the other hand—and I felt almost bad thinking of it—maybe it would kind of help me out. Having Ava mated with Ravi could make things easier for me. It was hard to ignore the fact that things didn’t feel quite… *settled* between Ava and Xavier. And I would’ve far preferred to see Ava focus her attention on someone *besides* my mate.

But… I looked over at Ravi, who was still looking pensively out at the bonfire, and felt my stomach clench. The poor guy. He was so nice, and he didn’t deserve that, even if it would make *my* life easier. I didn’t want her to sink her claws into anyone.

“Do you know if Ava feels the same thing you do?” I asked.

“I don’t know for sure,” he muttered. He shook his head. “I’m not sure of anything right now. Only that when I was near her, I felt this strange pull toward her. There was this connection I’d never felt before.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I only offered that blood transfusion out of a sense of duty, you know? Obligation. You can’t just stand there and let someone die, not when there’s something you can do. But—I didn’t know! If giving Ava my blood means that we’re mates—for life… I’m not sure I can deal with that.”

“I know,” I said softly.

“That girl is a piece of work,” Ravi continued, growing agitated. He looked over at me. “You get it.”

I nodded. “I do. She’s betrayed the pack more than once. She worked for Silas and Iñigo—who’ve both tried to do serious harm to the pack.”

“She did seem to help in this battle, though,” Ravi said thoughtfully, his eyes on the fire.

“Yeah,” I acknowledged. “But… I don’t know. Can she ever really be trusted?” Ravi looked over at me, and it occurred to me that I wasn’t really helping. “You should go talk to Big Mac and Kira. Maybe this is just a blip, or a weird side effect of the transfusion. Blood can do strange things. My Fae blood has been used for magical stuff a lot. The witches will be able to tell you more.”

Ravi nodded slowly. “Yeah, maybe. I’ll think about it. Right now, I just need another drink. Possibly all the drinks.”

I watched him walk toward the fire, angling toward the witches. But then I noticed that Ava was standing with Big Mac and Kira, speaking to them. My eyes narrowed. Why was she even here? Why hadn’t she left our pack alone?  
 But then something else caught my eye and drove all thoughts of Ava away. It was Greyson, and as he walked toward me, I felt a thrill pass through my body. *That* was a real mate bond. I couldn’t explain it, but it was there, connecting us like an invisible thread.

“Brought you this,” he said, offering me a red plastic cup.

I accepted the cup and took a sip. Coke spiked with whiskey. I looked over at Greyson as he sipped his own drink. He was looking at the bonfire, but hazily, like he wasn’t really seeing anything. He seemed strangely distracted.

“Is everything all right?” I asked.

“Fine,” he said shortly.

I didn’t believe him. “Did you and Xavier argue again? I saw you two talking to Mace by the fire. What were you talking about?”

“Nothing,” he said, shaking his head. “I mean, we talked, but that’s it.”

“You weren’t arguing?” I asked, still suspicious.

“I’m not thinking about Xavier right now,” he said distractedly.

I frowned. “What are you thinking about?”

He turned to me, his grey eyes blazing. “You.”

The pull I felt—deep down in my belly—was visceral, like a hook wrapped around my spine, urging me toward this tall man with muscles like steel cables. His light hair waved softly in the wind, and his eyes smoldered as he stared down at me, the intensity of them warming me from the inside out.

A *big* part of me—the part below my belly, where blood was starting to pool like hot lava—wanted to grab him by the shirt and drag him inside and upstairs to the bedroom and show him that I was thinking about him, too. That I had been since earlier when I’d been on my knees for him. But I took a deep breath, and then another drink. It made me feel buzzy with excitement.

I stared down into the cup. “Hang on, are you trying to get me drunk?” I looked up at Greyson, grinning. “Hoping to take advantage of me? Get me wasted and into a compromising position?”

He smiled. “No. You know that’s not how I want you, love.” He looked out again, breaking off the charged moment. “We’re mates. We’re meant to be together.”

I frowned up at him. Something was up with him. I didn’t usually have to work so hard to keep his attention—but he seemed to have something on his mind that kept dragging him away. And given the somber look in his eyes, it must have been something serious.

“Greyson,” I said, stepping in front of him so he’d have to look at me. “Are you sure everything’s okay? You seem distracted.”

He blinked and looked down at me, like he’d forgotten for a moment that I was even there. And when he smiled, it was a strange smile. Enigmatic, like he was keeping a secret. “No, but it will be. Soon.”

I stared up at him. “What are you talking about? What will be?”

**Episode 1862**

GREYSON

My mind was in a million places all at once. I was thinking about the witches’ offer, but I didn’t want to tell Cali about it—not yet, anyway. I was still thinking about it, and I wanted to really consider all the implications before I mentioned it. But Cali was still looking at me, waiting for an answer to her question. There *was* something on my mind, and she wasn’t going to let up until I told her what it was.

“Greyson?” she asked, giving me a beady stare. “Were you and Xavier arguing about this Alpha stuff?”

“We might have had some words,” I started evasively, and watched as Cali’s frown deepened, “but I tried to keep things cordial.” I shrugged. “But you know Xavier. He’s not all that interested in cordial. Even for the sake of the pack,” I added sourly.

Cali sighed and glanced out at the bonfire.

I looked down into the drink in my hand. “He said something else, too.”

She looked up at me. “What was it?”

“He said you agreed to be his Luna. But I wanted to hear it from you.”

Cali stared at me, stunned. “He said that?”

I nodded. “Yeah. Did you?”

She blinked. “I—he talked about the idea, but I never agreed to anything.”

“You didn’t?”

She shook her head. “I was worried—I *am* worried that accepting the role of Luna from either of you would be too much like making a choice. That it would tip the balance of the *due destini* and maybe put one of you in danger.”

“You think it could?”

“I don’t know,” she said quietly, looking scared. “I really don’t, but I don’t want to find out. I just couldn’t risk it.”

I breathed again and felt relief flooding through me. I hadn’t even realized until the moment she’d denied it how afraid I’d been that she was going to confirm Xavier’s story. Even though it had seemed like a longshot dream of Xavier’s, it had still scared the shit out of me. Cali meant everything to me.

“Why would he say that I said that?” Cali wondered, speaking to herself.

I snorted. “Are you kidding? He was probably just trying to get a rise out of me.” I shook my head, glaring toward the bonfire. “Some Alpha he makes, just lying for the hell of it.”

“Greyson.” Cali’s voice was sharp, and I looked over at her. “Are you going to challenge Xavier again? For Alpha?”

*That* was the question, and I tossed back the rest of my drink—straight whiskey—instead of answering. The fact was that I didn’t like fighting with my brother, which I knew was the opposite of how Xavier felt. I didn’t know what had created that difference between us. Maybe it had something to do with him being my younger brother, but he was always ready to have a go.

But I wasn’t worried. No matter what, I knew I could easily beat him, and I felt confident that I’d win any contest against him. Xavier was strong, there was no denying that, but he’d have to get pretty fucking lucky if he was going to beat me.

My eyes wandered past the bonfire to the trees, and—without meaning to—I found myself scanning the shadows for the witches. They weren’t there, of course—they never stuck around long after they delivered their weird predictions—but my thoughts went back to their offer.

My hand tightened around my empty cup. “No, I’m not going to challenge Xavier. If he wants to try to challenge me, that’s on him, but the pack has already had their say about this. His time is temporary.”

“Greyson,” Cali started, her voice quiet.

“I’m not going to say anything tonight. He can have tonight. He brought us into battle, and we won. He earned this,” I said, tipping my chin toward the fire and the gathered packs. “That’s only fair.”

“Good.” Cali sighed. “I’m glad to hear that.”

“But if I did challenge him,” I added, glancing over at her, “you know I’d win.”

She rolled her eyes when I winked. “Okay, now I *definitely* need another drink. Maybe one of those wine coolers.” She headed off in the direction of the coolers, where the drinks were on ice. “It’s so funny—I feel like they barely have any alcohol in them.”

“Slow down there,” I said, catching up with her and taking the red cup from her hand. “You know you don’t do all that well with any more than about half a drink in your system.”

“*You* gave me that,” she said, pointing at the cup I’d just taken from her.

The drink I’d made for her was about 99% coke and about 1% whiskey, but I didn’t mention that to her. “I’m just looking out for you, love.”

She rolled her eyes again. “I do just fine, Greyson. I can hold my liquor.”

Her cheeks were flushed pink, and her eyes sparkled in the light of the bonfire, and she was just too cute for her own good, so I hated to ruin the moment by pointing out how patently wrong she was about that.

But the moment was lost anyway when she tripped over the uneven ground and stumbled forward. I lunged to catch her, but Xavier appeared out of nowhere and caught her deftly in his arms.

“Careful, Cali,” he said smoothly.

Cali looked up at him, her eyes wide as saucers. “I’m fine,” she said, her voice a little higher than normal.

She shot a glance over her shoulder at me and took half a step back, out of Xavier’s arms, but Xavier didn’t release his grip on her. He looked over at me, glowering.

I stared back, resisting the urge to pull a Cali move and roll my eyes. It was clear Xavier hadn’t gotten over our earlier conversation and was ready to pick it back up. I sighed, tired of the back and forth. “Was there something you needed, Xavier?”

He didn’t answer, but he kept his glare trained on me.

Fine. If Xavier wanted to have this little dominance pissing contest, that was fine with me. I had all night. I took a step toward him, crossing my arms.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see that the rest of the party had gone still as statues, and it wasn’t hard to guess why. Two Alphas, facing off against each other? No one was going to want to get in the middle of that.

Xavier tilted his head. “You sure you don’t want to solve all of this right now?”

I smirked, finally seeing the humor in the situation. “And what makes you so sure you’d win, little brother?”

Xavier gave a low growl, deep in his throat and—on instinct—I’d just put my hand out to block his attack when I heard a voice calling above the crowd.

“*Hey!* Whatever this is, you two need to stop it! Right now!”

I looked over to see my mother striding over, her eyes flashing angrily. She came to stand between us, a hand on each of our chests.

“This is a *celebration*!” She pushed hard on my chest, and after a moment it occurred to me that she was trying to separate us, but her strength wasn’t quite up to shoving back the likes of Xavier and me.

I took a step back, mostly to appease my mother, but also because she was right. This was a celebration, and fighting for dominance in the middle of a party was stupid—and an asshole move.

“Come on, you two.” Cali stepped forward, a smile forced onto her tense face. She was clearly going for an upbeat tone, but her pale face gave her away. “Can’t we enjoy one night without you two getting into some kind of fight about something?’

“For real,” someone in the crowd muttered. It was hard to tell, but it sounded like Zainab.

“I mean, we just defeated an ancient enemy more powerful than any of us have ever seen.” Cali looked around, like she was looking for support. “We should be happy!”

The pack nodded, and there were even a few cheers, but before Cali could go on with her pep-rally speech, Lola walked over to her and bent close, whispering something in her ear. Cali leaned in to listen.

Looking over at Xavier, I shook my head. “She’s right, Xavier. You need to back off.” I turned to my mother, who was still looking tense. “It’s nothing to worry about. No one’s fighting tonight. We were just blowing off some steam.”

Xavier, apparently not agreeing, glared at me. He wasn’t backing off.

*This isn’t over*, he hissed.

It was a cheap line, but effective, because it got under my skin.

But I just smirked back at him. *No it’s not. I’ll let you know when it is.*

**Episode 1863**

VIOLET

Frozen, I stared at Iris.

The real story? *What does she mean?*

The accusation rang in my ears, and I swallowed hard. What the hell was I supposed to say to that? We’d already told the truth countless times. I felt Charlie’s arm tighten around me. This was going to be a hard one to talk our way out of.

I felt weird with Charlie’s arm around me too. Iris knew we were dating, but she’d never made a comment about it… Her eyes seemed to be doing it now.

I bit the inside of my cheek, thinking hard about what to say, but it was hard to concentrate. When I thought about Charlie, my thoughts kept drifting back to the moment earlier before Aisha had barged in, when Charlie and I were kissing in the cabin. And where it would have led if we hadn’t been interrupted.

But, as it happened, I didn’t need to come up with an answer, because Charlie spoke up first.

He squeezed my hand. “What do you mean the real story, Mom?”

Iris flinched, then sighed in a resigned way. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. It was way too easy to talk you into it before. You just told me what I wanted to hear.”

“What?” Charlie asked. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Iris pointed at me. “She’s poisoned your mind with the world of werewolves.”

“*Mom*.” Charlie’s tone was a warning.

“I helped Charlie,” I said, anger coursing through me. “When you and your kind *never* would have.”

Iris gave me a long, cool look, her eyes scanning over my face before turning to her son. “Do you have any idea what you’ve done? Zachery will be completely ousted from the hunters.”

“As he should be,” Charlie said, growling. “He hurt Violet. He knew exactly what he was doing. He knew who she was and tried to kill her.”

“Charlie—”

“No, Mom, I’m sick of your bullshit. I’m not poisoned to the werewolves or to the hunters,” he said. “I’m *loyal*. That’s what it comes down to. Real fucking loyalty.”

*Thank you*, I mind linked, squeezing his hand.

“I know you don’t like what I am or what your son is,” I began, trying to keep my breathing even, “but I love him. He saved me.”

“And she saved me.”

Iris’s eyes met mine, and I lifted my chin. I would stand by Charlie no matter what, she had to know that. After a long moment she said, “I don’t have much of a choice, do I? You two insist on defying me.” She waved her hand. “I get it. Life is more complicated than we want it to be. And as for you,” she said, turning to me. My stomach tightened with nerves as she took a step closer to me, but when she spoke her voice was low and almost gentle. “You fought beside my son. You protected him. That’s all that really matters.”

I looked up, shocked, into Iris’s face, which had gone impassive again. Had I heard right? Was it possible that she was finally coming around to me, after being so dedicated to hating me?

“I’m glad you think so, too,” I finally managed. Recovering myself a little, I nodded around the office, where a few hunters still lingered. “I hope this is just the beginning, and that hunters will come to understand that werewolves aren’t what they think they are. I hope that hunters and werewolves can be allies in the future.”

Whatever Christmas-card moment I thought I was building ended abruptly when Iris snorted with derision and rolled her eyes.

“I wouldn’t hold my breath on that, Violet.” She clapped her hands in a business-like way. “So, I guess since the revenant problem is handled for the moment, camp doesn’t have to close down after all. You can stay and keep learning.” This last sentence was directed at her son.

“Well,” I started, shooting a glance at Charlie, and then back at Iris, “I’ve actually had some news of my own. My brother is… back home, after some time away.” I figured it wasn’t worth getting into the details with Iris. “It was unexpected, and I have to go back to Oregon to see him. I think it’s time for me to leave. Anyway,” I added with a shrug, “it’s not like I was acing hunter camp.”

Iris nodded. “Of course, of course. You’ll want to go be with your family,” she said quickly.

“Wait, you’re *leaving*?”

I looked over to see Sophie standing nearby, looking shocked. “Yeah, it looks that way—”

“But you *can’t*!” she said. “We haven’t even had a chance to try out all those wacky weapons in the armory yet! I wanted to see you throw a mace!”

I laughed, but beneath that I felt genuinely moved that Sophie looked so upset at the news of me leaving.

“I’ll keep in touch, I promise,” I said, pulling into her a hug.

“You’d better,” Sophie said, hugging me tight. “I don’t have enough badass friends. I can’t afford to start losing the ones I’ve got.”

“Let me have your phone.” She pulled it out, and I entered my phone number. “There,” I said. “Now you can text me or FaceTime me whenever, okay?’

Sophie nodded. “I will.”

“And when I get back home, I’ll ask if we could try a student exchange program or something with my pack,” I said excitedly. “If you wanted to come visit me!”

Sophie’s eyes lit up. “Oh! I would *love* that! It would be fascinating to see the dynamics of a wolf pack up close. And I could get field credit!”

I laughed again. I was really going to miss this pretty girl who’d tried to steal my mate. More than I’d ever thought I would.

“Hey, um—Daisy?”

I looked over to see Chad walking over, looking a little uncomfortable. “It’s Violet, actually.”

“Oh, right. Okay.” He nodded. “Violet. Well, I wanted to tell you that you’re a good fighter and a hell of a hunter… whatever species you are.”

I could feel Charlie tense a little at Chad’s words, but I just smiled. “Thanks, Chad. You’re not so bad yourself. Thanks for helping me.”

He smiled. “There’s something I’ve always wondered—does it hurt to shift?”

“Chad!” Sophie hissed.

“What?” he asked. “I really want to know! It looks like it would be really painful. She doesn’t have to answer if she doesn’t want to.”

He looked back at me, still looking uncomfortable, and it occurred to me that he was doing his very awkward best to not address the fact that it was his testimony—on a werewolf’s behalf—that had gotten another hunter kicked out of camp.

“Sophie has my number,” I told him. “We’ll all sit down and talk about it sometime, okay?”

He nodded, his face cracking into a smile. “Okay. Cool.”

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By the time Pepperdine and Romilly shooed us out of the offices and back to our cabins, word had gotten around that I was leaving. I was surprised that everyone knew, but I shouldn’t have been—gossip spread like wildfire at camp. But now it felt like everyone I’d known at camp had assembled in my cabin to watch me pack my stuff.

“Well,” Aisha said, handing me a spare pair of boots, “I’m sad to see you go, Dais—Violet. Sorry. That’s going to be hard to remember. It’s been really…” She cast around for the right word. “*Interesting*, having you around. But I hope none of this stuff is going to be on the hunter licensing test.”

“Can you imagine?” Reggie said, rolling his eyes. “This is just the kind of thing Pepperdine would throw into a practical exam, though, right?”

“No way.” A girl with a long black braid shook her head. “This is pure theory. It’s going on the written exam. *Explain how the Hunter Code applies to sentient supernaturals with whom you’ve made a battlefield alliance*, or some shit like that.”

“Oh my god,” Aisha said, dropping the boots on my bed and turning to Reggie, “you’re totally right. We should all agree to just not answer those. He can’t fail us all, can he?”

“I don’t know,” said a boy with a head full of blond curls. “The last year my sister came here, she was one of only three Pepperdine certified. He’s brutal.”

The conversation devolved into a debate about what was likely to be on the hunter licensing test, and how strict Pepperdine was likely to be in light of recent events, but it was all a dull buzz in my ear. None of it had anything to do with me anymore.

I tossed the boots and the last couple of pairs of socks from my drawer into my duffel bag and looked around. Charlie was standing in the corner, a little apart from the rest of the group, and his eyes were trained on me.

I zipped my bag shut and walked over to him.

“It’s been quite a night, huh?” I said quietly, putting my hands in his.

He nodded but didn’t speak. He looked unhappy, like he was fighting some kind of battle inside his head, but his expression gave nothing way.

I stared up at him, baffled. How was it that I’d been making out with this guy an hour ago, and now I wasn’t even sure what he was thinking?

“So.” My heart pounded in my chest, but I looked up at him frankly. “Are you coming with me?”

**Episode 1864**

AVA

“Big Mac?” I asked again, trying to regain her attention.

“Yeah?” she said distractedly. Xavier and Greyson were in the middle of some kind of Alpha pissing contest, and Mrs. Smith had just stormed over to break it up, and Big Mac was watching everything closely.

I sighed, feeling irritated. I knew she was highly protective of Mrs. Smith, and seeing her put herself between two Alphas was probably putting Big Mac on edge, but I still needed some questions answered. “I was asking what exactly you did during the battle.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, still not looking at me. “Helped win the damn thing, for one.”

“No. What did you do for me? To heal me?” I clarified.

She finally looked at me, her expression confused. “I didn’t do a damn thing. It was that vampire, Emmett. He saved your life, Ava. It’s not complicated. Pretty straightforward, actually.”

“I’m looking for a few more details, here,” I pressed. “Specifically about the blood transfusion.”

“Yeah, it did what it did. Saved your ass,” Big Mac muttered, her eyes on Mrs. Smith.

Big Mac gave an irritated sigh and looked at me. “You’d lost a lot of blood, girl. It was the only option, really. And it was lucky that Ravi happened to be a match.”

*A match.*

I ignored the way my cheeks flamed with heat at those words. “And that’s all it was. Just his blood into my body? And a vampire did it, not a witch?”

“What? Yes. What else would it be?”

“And you didn’t add a spell to the blood or anything like that?”

Big Mac narrowed her eyes, truly focusing on me for the first time. “I can’t help but notice that you seem to have a very specific concern, Ava. Why don’t we just skip the bullshit and you tell me what this is really about?”

There was something about Big Mac’s penetrating stare that always made me uncomfortable. “I-I’ve just been feeling a little… *odd*, since the transfusion.”

“Odd?”

“Yeah, odd. Is it possible that something else happened?”

“Like what?”

“Like… for example…” I pretended to cast around for a random example. “An accidental mate bond?”

Big Mac stared at me for a moment, then laughed. “I’ve heard a lot in my life, but that’s the first I’ve heard of that. An accidental mate bond?” She shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

“So what is it, then?” I growled, feeling anger flare up. “What’s this weird connection I’m feeling with him, out of nowhere?”

“Maybe it’s just a side effect of the transfusion. Most people feel something after something like that happens.”

“What side effect?” I demanded.

“Gratitude,” Big Mac said sourly. “He saved your life, girl. You’re lucky he’s O negative. He’s a universal donor.”

My shoulders—tensed with anticipation from when I’d thought Big Mac was going to tell me what was actually happening—relaxed again. When she’d called us a match, she’d been referring to blood type. Nothing more.

But then I felt a strange tingle on the back of my neck, and my shoulders tensed again. I turned to see Ravi walking toward us, and something strange happened to the world around him—it was like everything on either side of him turned blurry. He was suddenly the only thing I could see clearly.

Which was confusing as hell, but I tried to play it cool as he approached.

He nodded at Big Mac but avoided my eyes. “How’s it going?”

Big Mac stared at him. “What?”

“Just wondering…” He glanced around. “If you were enjoying the party.”

Oh. He was feeling something too. I’d never seen him look this nervous.

“You got a drink?” Ravi asked, pointing to the beer in Big Mac’s hand. “There are good drinks.”

Big Mac stared at him for a moment longer, then rolled her eyes, looking disgusted. “I’m going to find Sabine. You two should just have a little chat and settle whatever *this*”—she pointed between us—“is.” And with that she stormed off, leaving us alone.

Ravi looked at me quickly, then away. The air between us was charged and uncomfortable, but Big Mac was probably right. We had to figure this out.

“How about we have a drink and talk?” I suggested.

Ravi nodded. “Okay. Wouldn’t be the first time we shared fluids.” He smiled, but his face flushed like he was embarrassed, and he looked away again. “I’ll go grab a couple of beers.”

He walked away quickly, leaving me alone. I looked out over the lawn, taking in the party. There battle was over, and there were a lot of happy—and drunk—werewolves. There were also a few vampires, a couple of witches, and a family of Fae, all celebrating the defeat of Letifer together. It was—without a doubt—the weirdest werewolf pack I’d ever been around, but there was something kind of special about it. And it made me weirdly happy to see it. It almost made me wish I could be a part of it.

But that wasn’t possible. Xavier had made it perfectly clear that he’d rather I left the pack completely. And then he’d had to go and announce that Cali was going to be his Luna.

My breathing grew heavy as I remembered the moment. It had felt like a slap in the face. And it wasn’t even that it felt like he’d been trying to hurt me—me, his first mate, the woman who *should* have been his Luna. It was that he hadn’t even been thinking about me at all.

Even our kiss had been nothing to him. He wanted to forget it.

“Here you go.”

Ravi’s voice pulled me out of my thoughts.

“Thanks,” I muttered, taking the icy cold bottle of imported beer.

We stood in silence for a few long seconds.

“So,” I said, taking a long drink of the dark lager, “are we going to talk?”

Ravi wasn’t looking at me again. “About what?” he asked evasively.

I narrowed my eyes. “I think we both know. Something happened with that blood transfusion, didn’t it?”

Finally, Ravi looked at me, his dark eyes inky black in the dimness. He nodded and tipped his head, motioning for us to walk even further away from the group. “This doesn’t need to be public information,” he said quietly, leading us back toward the house.

He sat on the porch steps and looked moodily down at his beer.

“What if we *are* bonded?” he demanded.

I dropped down to sit next to him on the steps. “Why are you saying it like that? Like it would be a punishment? I can think of worse things in the world than having me for a mate. Am I too ugly for you?”

Ravi looked over. I got the feeling it was supposed to have been a quick glance, but his eyes lingered, scanning over my face, my hair, my body. Taking me in.

Instinctively, I felt my own body react to this, warming and tensing. Ravi was definitely *not* ugly, and I did my own assessment, taking in his dark, messy hair, his bronze skin, and his sculpted shoulders.

Ravi looked away, back down at his drink. “No, that’s not it. I’m not complaining about how you look. You look really good. But—” He looked back up at me, and his eyes were cold. “You fought against us. You worked with Silas.”

I stared at him in disbelief. “I was under Demeter’s compulsion. I never wanted to do all those things.”

Ravi shrugged. “So you say.” He tossed the rest of his drink back in one big swallow. “All I’m saying is that I hope we’re not bonded, because I don’t even like you.”

All awkwardness vanished, and suddenly all I could feel was fury. It was pounding in my ears. Who the hell was this asshole to judge me? “Well that makes two us, because I don’t like weak men.”

“*Weak?*” Ravi’s dark eyes flashed. “What the hell—”

“You were susceptible to the Orb’s influence because you’re *weak*,” I said, speaking every word clearly to really dig the knife in. “And it’s pretty rich of you to accuse me of betraying the pack—you *stabbed* Big Mac!”

Ravi stood, furious, and turned to leave, but I stepped in front of him.

“I’m not done yet,” I snapped. “I’ve still got lots of reasons not to like you either—”

Ravi put a hand on my shoulder, and for a moment I thought he was going to push me aside, but an instant later his mouth was on mine, and he was kissing me, and it was like an explosion detonated inside me.

It felt as though my whole body had just come alive after a long sleep, and I could feel his blood throbbing through my veins. My mind was a whirl of light and color and no thoughts at all, so I did the only thing I could—I wrapped my arms around him and kissed him back.

**Episode 1865**

“What’s this?” I asked as Lola handed me a cup.

“Just water,” she said, dropping into the lawn chair next to me. “You’ve had enough of the hard stuff.”

I made a dismissive noise, but swayed a little as I did, which just made her roll her eyes. She might have been right, so I took a drink of the water. It was probably best not to overdo it.

“So, like I was saying, I walked over and there you were, standing between the Alphas,” Lola started dramatically, gesturing grandly. “Your eyes blazed, Cali, your hands were on each of their perfectly sculpted chests, pushing them apart.”

“Lola, stop.” I giggled. “That’s not how it happened.”

But she ignored me. “They would fight to the death for you—their beautiful mate—but you wouldn’t let them touch one hair on each other’s heads. Not now, not *ever*,” she finished, sotto voce, her eyes narrowed.

I burst out laughing. “I mean, I guess you’re not completely wrong, but it sure as hell didn’t feel funny while it was happening.” I shook my head. “Those two…”

Lola leaned back in the lawn chair, laughing. “I really hope they aren’t going to kill each other, but if they don’t, they’re probably going to drive you crazy.”

“That’s true,” I said, still giggling. Drinking always made me feel silly, especially when I was with Lola. I looked down into my drink. “Hey, do you remember that time Doug Schwartz tried to sneak his dad’s whiskey into winter formal senior year?”

Lola snorted into her root beer. She nodded, wiping soda off her face. “And Mrs. Garcia stopped him with it at the door.”

“He told her it was lemonade, so she took that giant drink of it—”

“And didn’t even flinch.” Lola shook her head in remembered admiration. “Mrs. Garcia was a total badass. I miss her.”

I leaned my head back in my chair and looked up at the fire, which burned brightly just in front of us. The rest of the party carried on around us, with the werewolves getting more and more drunk and more and more rowdy, but Lola and I sat a little apart from it, watching. It felt nice to sit quietly with her.

“I know it was hard when you lost your wolf, and when you—you know—became a vampire, but you were really great out there today, Lola.”

“You, too, girl,” she said, smiling over at me. She looked out at the carousing werewolves. “What a day, huh? It almost feels weird to be sitting here, having a party after everything that happened.”

“What? Are you kidding me?” I shook my head. “What would be the point of defeating evil incarnate if you couldn’t enjoy a night partying with friends afterward?” I asked, taking a sip of my drink.

Lola smiled. “I’m really proud of you, Cali.” I looked over at her. “You’re really coming into your own. It can’t be easy, being torn between Alphas, but you’re always ready to step in and be the adult when everyone needs it.”

My eyes pricked as tears started to form. “Thank you,” I managed. “It’s really nice to hear that from you, Lola.”

She nodded. “I know you’ve been through a lot—with the *due destini* thing, and all the other weird shit that’s happened around here—but I hope you know that I’ll always have your back.”

Tears started to fall down my face, and I pulled Lola into a slightly too enthusiastic hug. “I know you do. Thank you.” I buried my face in her shoulder. “All I want is for everyone to be happy.”

Lola patted my back patiently. “I know, Cali. I know you do.”

As I leaned back and wiped tears from my eyes, my gaze flickered over to Greyson, who was standing a ways away. He was holding a drink and watching the pack as they partied. He had been so cryptic when we’d spoken. When I’d asked him if everything was okay and he’d said, *No, but it will be. Soon.*

I still had no idea what that meant. I just hoped he wasn’t planning anything stupid.

Beyond Greyson, the back door opened, and Rishika and Artemis walked out, returning to the barbecue.

“Looks like someone’s been having a good time,” Lola said, nudging me hard in the ribs with her elbow.

I rolled my eyes. “I’m glad. Artemis deserves to be happy, too.” I stood and waved at the two of them, beckoning them over.

“I’m going to go get some snacks,” Lola said, standing and heading to the other side of the fire.

When Rishika and Artemis walked over to join me, I threw my arms around Artemis—I was a bit of a drunk hugger.

“I’m just so happy to have you back,” I said, my face smushed against her shoulder.

“Yeah, me too,” Artemis said, standing with her arms pinned awkwardly to her sides.

“It was just so terrifying when you were under Letifer’s control, Artemis,” I said, leaning back so I could look into her face. “It was so, so, *so* scary.”

“Yeah, I know. It was scary for me, too,” she said, laughing a little. “But I’m fine now. A hundred percent better.” She glanced over her shoulder with a fond smile. “Rishika’s been taking great care of me.”

“So, does that mean you’re going to be sticking around here?” I asked, looking back and forth between them.

Artemis shrugged. “Where else am I going to go?”

“I mean, now that the portals between the worlds seem to be open again, I was just worried that you might be thinking about going back to the Fae world. You know,” I said, pushing my hair out of my face, “like you go there and forget what happened, or something like that.” I was rambling now, but it was hard to stop myself.

Artemis looked over at Rishika again. “No. I know exactly where I want to be, and it’s right here.”

I clasped my hands together as I looked at the two of them, but after a moment it occurred to me that they’d forgotten I was even there. They’d taken Lola’s and my abandoned chairs and were holding hands and staring at each other like lovestruck teenagers, so I took the hint and left them alone.

I walked over to Greyson, feeling like I needed some answers about what had been happening between him and Xavier earlier. Why were they acting so tense all of a sudden? He’d said he wouldn’t fight Xavier, so why had it looked like he was about to fight Xavier? It had looked like they were seconds away from blows before Mrs. Smith had stepped in and stopped it.

“Cali,” Greyson said, smiling as I walked over to him.

His smile made my stomach flip like flapjacks, and all the thoughts I’d just had became a muddled mess. No matter what else was happening, I always reacted like this to his physical closeness. I always had, even before I’d known he was my mate.

But I’d come over here with a purpose, and I gritted my teeth, trying to remember what it was.

“Greyson, what was that earlier, with Xavier?” I asked firmly.

He shook his head. “Don’t worry about it, love. I told you, I don’t have any plans to fight.”

“But what *was* that?”

He shrugged. “Xavier just gets under my skin sometimes. It’s nothing new. We were just… standing our ground.” He smiled at the frustrated look on my face. “I would never do anything to hurt you, Cali, and infighting among the pack would count as hurting you. I always put you first, I hope you know that.”

He reached out and brushed a loose strand of hair back behind my ear, and even the faint brush of his fingertips against my cheek sent a thill of desire thrumming through my body.

Again, I tried to focus, but it was getting harder and harder. “I just want everyone to be happy,” I said in a quiet voice. “The war might be over, but there’s a lot of clean-up to do before we can get back to normal. A pack house burned down, and there are literal bodies to bury. The Blue Bloods aren’t going to stick around forever.” I looked around. “Who’s left?”

The massive amount of work—both physical and mental—had just occurred to me, and I frowned as I started to list the tasks in my head, organizing them into categories.

Greyson looked at me, watching me carefully, as though he was guessing a little of what was going on in my brain. He lifted his drink as though to toast me and smiled. “You know, Cali, you would make a really great Luna.”

I stopped making lists and looked over at him, shocked. Had I heard him right? I looked into his eyes, my heart fluttering. Could I ever be his?

**Episode 1866**

LOLA

The food and drinks for the party had been well stocked, which was a good thing, because I was ravenous. I grabbed a bag of potato chips and shoved a handful into my mouth, then chased them with another handful of cookies. I’d just opened a bag of cheese puffs when Jacqueline walked over, shaking her head.

“What’s your problem?” I muttered, my mouth full.

“You may be a vampire, but you still eat like a wolf,” she said, making a delicately disgusted face. She glanced up at Emmett, who had walked over with her, to see if he’d caught her joke.

I rolled my eyes. “Whatever. You’re just jealous because you probably don’t even eat the good stuff. I’ll bet you never even tried the blood pancakes at Tottenville.” I shook my head, lost for a moment in the pleasant memory. “I don’t know what the cafeteria ladies did to those pancakes…”

Jacqueline made an impatient huff through her nose. “No, I never ate the pancakes. I’m watching my macros. And type AB is delicious all on its own.”

“Oh.” I swallowed a mouthful of potato chips and cookies and looked over at Emmett. “That reminds me—the supply of blood packs up at the house is looking kind of low. Can we stock up again?” I thought for a moment. “And how do you do that?”

Emmett shrugged. “At the school, we have an arrangement with a local blood bank, but here…” he looked around and shrugged. “I hadn’t really thought about it. I’ll be leaving soon anyway.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” I said, so surprised I stopped with a cheese puff halfway to my mouth. “Are you sure I can’t get you to change your mind?”

He shook his head with a little smile. “No, I think Tottenville needs me more, Lola. So, as for the dwindling supply, Jacqueline and I won’t be using it anymore. That should make it last longer.”

I looked at Jacqueline. “Are you leaving, too?”

*Please say yes.*

She looked at Emmett, then at me, aloof. “I don’t know. Maybe. I haven’t made a decision yet. It’s kind of fun here.” She glanced around at the party. “And with so many warm-blooded guys to flirt with.”

Her eyes lingered on a someone, and I turned to see who she was looking at.

Jay.

*Dammit.*

I turned back to Jacqueline, my own eyes narrowed. “You know, a vampire school is the proper place for vampires. Not a werewolf pack house. So, maybe you *should* just pack up your little coffin and head on out with Emmett.”

Jacqueline rolled her eyes. “Don’t be so petty, Lola.”

Petty or not, I didn’t want Jacqueline around, making eyes at Jay for the rest of my life. But then my thought from earlier resurfaced, and I looked up at Emmett. “Do you have any tips about how to… you know?”

“How to what?”

“Get *blood*.”

Emmett grinned at me. “You could always try the old-fashioned way, Lola,” he said with a roguish wink.

He and Jacqueline looked at each other, laughing—sharing the joke—but I didn’t smile. Feed on victims? *Human* victims? The thought made me sick to my stomach.

Still laughing, the two of them walked away, back toward the house, and I stared after them. Could they be serious, or were they just messing with me?

I dropped my cheese puffs and turned, scanning the crowd, and when I found Jay, I hurried over.

“Hey,” I said. “Can we talk for a second?”

Jay didn’t look up. Someone had dragged the ping pong table out from the basement and set up an epic game of beer pong, and Jay was up.

He was standing at the end of the table lining up his shot, and he didn’t look over as he spoke. “Can it wait a second, Lola?”

“It’s important,” I said impatiently.

“More important than this?” he asked. He was biting his bottom lip, the way he did when he was really concentrating.

“*Yes!*” I exploded, my heart beating hard. “It’s more important than beer pong! It’s a matter of life or death!”

Jay looked over, his expression concerned. “Okay.” He tossed his ping pong balls to Zainab and—grabbing my elbow—led me away. “What’s going on?”

“It’s the blood,” I wailed.

He frowned. “The what?”

“The blood supply. Emmett’s leaving to go back to Tottenville, and I’m going to have to find my own blood supply after he leaves. I’m not ready to be that kind of vampire, Jay!” I put my hands over my face. “This is what I was always afraid of. I hate the whole idea of it, but I’m worried that if I get hungry enough and desperate enough, I’m going to become the sort of monster that we used to hunt. The worst sort of vampire.”

Jay’s arms went around me and he pulled me in close. “Hey, stop, Lola. Don’t talk like that. You’re not alone in this. If Emmett got his hands on those blood packs, then other people can do it, too.”

“How?” I moaned.

“Lola, ever hear of the world wide web? We’ll google the shit out of this. We can figure this out. We will find a way to get you the blood you need to survive, without hurting anyone in the process, okay? There are options, we just need to figure out what they are.”

He was making some good points, and I let myself be comforted by his words. “You think so?”

“I know so. And besides, Mad Scientist Emmett isn’t the only vampire we know,” he said, stroking my back.

“Who else?” I asked curiously.

“I could get ahold of Mikah. He’s been in the game a long time. He’ll know what options there are.” He pushed me a little away and tipped my chin up, so I was looking at him. “I’ll do whatever you need, okay?”

“You will?” I asked, though I believed him. I knew he was telling the truth.

He nodded. “Of course I will. That’s what it means to be mates.” He leaned forward and kissed me.

I think the kiss was *supposed* to be gentle and reassuring, but I didn’t want gentle and reassuring. I clutched Jay to me and deepened the kiss, delving my tongue deep into his mouth.

“You know,” I whispered, pulling back slightly, “blood isn’t the only thing I’m hungry for.”

Jay’s body tensed, and I felt another—very important—piece of his anatomy hardening against my thigh.

I smiled. “I suggest a strategic retreat to the bedroom.”

Jay nodded enthusiastically. “Yep. Fine. Yes. Sounds good to me. Let’s do that. Now.”

In the bedroom, we barely got the door closed before Jay’s hands were on my shirt, ripping it off. I went to work on his belt buckle and then the buttons of his jeans. As soon as they were off, he shoved me against the door and gave me a hot, demanding, conquering kiss. I felt boneless, like he was the only thing holding me up.

His hands slid up, molding to my breasts, his thumbs squeezing my nipples so hard I nearly squealed, but the pain was pure pleasure, and I bit down on his bottom lip.

He growled and pulled himself away, then unbuttoned my jeans and yanked them off with fast, impatient movements. With nothing separating us but my panties and his boxers, he ground his hips into mine.

“Fuck, Lola,” he breathed. “*Fuck*.”

“Yeah, let’s do that,” I murmured, rocking hard against him.

On some feral instinct, I bit him hard on the shoulder, and he jerked in surprise. Then his eye narrowed, and he ripped my panties down and drove his cock into me so forcefully I gasped.

“Yes,” I moaned, dropping my head back against the door. “*Yes!*”

We moved in rhythm, rocking in earnest as we built up, higher and higher, toward something very, very big, and very, very good.

“Jay, please. *Yes!* *Please!*” My nails dug into his shoulders, scratching, drawing blood, but I was almost there, almost there—

Jay shifted just slightly, so he was pressed more tightly against my sex, and it was all over for me—I was flying, and colors were exploding all around me. I was gasping, screaming, rocking and arching and begging for him to nail me to the wall.

Waves of orgasm were still rolling through me when Jay started to shudder. His muscles coiled like knotted rope, and he clutched me, pressing me hard into the door.

“*Lola*,” he whispered.

I held him tight as he came, feeling in it the release of all we’d carried through the battle and everything leading up to it. We had both *needed* this, and, finally finished, Jay looked into my eyes, kissed me gently, and lifted me into his arms.

“We never made it,” he said, carrying me over to the bed.

“The door was fine,” I murmured, cuddling into him. I was already getting sleepy.

He hummed his agreement and brushed my hair out of my face as I settled myself on the pillow. “Lola?”

“Hmm?”

“I love you.”

I smiled as I drifted off. “I love you, too.”

**Episode 1867**

XAVIER

Werewolves partied harder than any other being—supernatural or otherwise—but it was getting pretty late, and the after-battle party was finally starting to wind down. Everyone who was left was quieter now—they were gathered around the bonfire, talking and drinking in small groups of twos and threes—or else they’d coupled off and disappeared upstairs into bedrooms for hookups they would probably regret once the sun came up.

But that part wasn’t my problem, and as I looked around, everyone seemed happy and content. Even relaxed, which—after the last few days—was pretty mind-blowing. And I felt the same way. Things were finally falling into place for me. It had been a tough road, but the threat of Letifer and Silas had finally been neutralized, the Redwoods and the Blue Bloods were working well together, we had won the battle with minimal damage to either pack, and my house hadn’t burned down.

That was what I’d call success.

I tossed back the last of my beer as I felt a little prick of anger, remembering my fight with Greyson from earlier. I was still pretty pissed about his attitude about Alpha—and just his attitude in general—but I was going to try not to think too much about it. However much he bitched and moaned, I knew I’d earned the right to lead my pack. I’d risked my life—again and again—when Greyson had been compromised and dangerous to us all. And—*dammit*—I’d gotten more votes. That meant that the pack trusted *me* to lead them.

There was a mean little voice in my head that reminded me that the pack might not still feel that way now that the battle was over, but I ignored it and focused on my next step, which was making it crystal clear to Greyson that I wouldn’t tolerate his bullshit dissention in my ranks. The last thing I needed was him hanging around, trying to undermine my authority.

For a moment, I allowed myself a little fantasy that consisted of Greyson getting pissed when the pack wouldn’t accept him back as Alpha and just packing his bags. I thought of him throwing them into his car and speeding away, out of my house and out of my life, leaving me with the pack—and with Cali. I smiled. That was the dream. *That* was life as it was meant to be.

Speaking of Cali… I looked around, scanning the remaining pack members. I hadn’t seen her in a while, and when I finally spotted her, I felt a flash of irritation. She was standing with Greyson, and she was leaning in as he spoke to her.

But then, as I watched, Greyson turned toward the house and walked away.

Seizing the moment, I walked toward her.

“You know you look beautiful in the firelight, don’t you?” I growled softly, stepping next to her and slipping my arm around her waist.

She looked up quickly, surprised, and her cheeks flushed pink. Then she chuckled. “Yeah, there’s nothing like a barbecue pit to make a girl’s skin glow. *Meat Pit* is actually the name of my highlighter, didn’t you know?”

I looked into her dark eyes, and when I saw that she was genuinely happy, it made my whole body feel warm in a way that had nothing to do with being drunk. She was happy because the pack had won the fight and we were at peace. She was happy because I was happy. I hadn’t always appreciated it, but I was damn lucky to have a mate who cared so deeply.

“It’s been a good night,” I said, pulling her a little closer.

She nodded, smiling up at me. “Yeah, it’s been a good night.”

My own smile grew into a grin as she leaned into me, her body fitting into mine like a puzzle. “I can think of one way to make it even better,” I said, and leaned down to kiss her.

Cali moved away. She did it gently and kindly, but she stepped out of my arms, and out of my reach.

“Something wrong?” I asked, confused.

She bit her lip. “Xavier, there’s a part of me that wants to do exactly what you’re suggesting, but…” She shook her head. “This isn’t the time or the place.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Why not?”

She sighed. “I’m tired, Xavier. More than that. I’m exhausted. Physically *and* mentally. And I’ve made enough hard choices for one day. Don’t force me to make any more.”

She was right. It bugged the shit of out me, but I knew she was right. But—at the same time—I hated the thought of heading upstairs and going to sleep without her near me. I just wanted her close.

*Will you sleep with me tonight?*

She raised her eyebrows. “Xavier—” she started, protesting my mind linked request.

*Just to sleep*, I assured her. *Nothing more. I just want you near me. I want to be with you*. She was still hesitating, but I could tell she was folding, so I took a step toward her and caught her around the waist, pulling her closer. *I just want to protect you.*

She looked up at me, and her eyes looked almost bottomless in the dark. She nodded. “Yes, I’ll sleep with you tonight,” she whispered.

I breathed out, feeling strangely relieved. It felt like I’d just passed a test I hadn’t even realized I was taking.

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From my perch on the bed, I’d watched Cali get ready to sleep, puttering around the bedroom in her shorty pajamas, darting into the bathroom a hundred times because she’d forgotten to floss, then because she wanted to brush her hair again, and then because she decided to do a face mask on a whim, and then for a million other reasons.

But it wasn’t long before she was asleep in my arms, breathing deeply, and I looked down at her, my eyes traveling over the soft curve of her cheek. Her perfect skin shone in the moonlight filtering into the bedroom. *This* was exactly as it should be. This—Cali and me, together. Happy, complete. The Alpha with his Luna beside him.

Cali wasn’t officially my Luna yet, but it was only a matter of time. It was the next natural step.

I sighed and looked up at the dark wooden beams crisscrossing the ceiling, and my thoughts drifted to Mace’s lecture about the annual council meeting. It would be held soon—it was always held in winter, around New Year’s. It would be a perfect place to introduce Cali as my Luna. I smiled into the dark. She would be the most beautiful Luna there, and probably the most powerful, considering the power her Fae blood gave her.

Having Cali as my Luna would change things for the Redwood pack. Things had been hard for us, but with the two of us leading, we’d be respected by everyone. My opinion as Alpha would be sought out by other Alphas. I’d become the kind of leader Silas had always wanted to become, but I’d do it the right way—by earning respect, instead of taking power with dark magic.

My smile grew as I let myself play out the scenario. I’d get the credit for saving the Redwood pack. For bringing us back from the brink of extinction. Greyson wouldn’t even be mentioned. And maybe—eventually—Cali would forget about him, too.

These were satisfying thoughts, and I let myself delve into the daydream, but I was pulled roughly out of it by a scuffling sound outside the window.

It was distant—almost unnoticeable—but my sharp ears picked up the sound and put all my senses on alert.

My eyes trained on the window, I eased out from beneath Cali’s arm, careful not to disturb her sleep. I paused for a moment when she stirred, but she just rolled over and slept on. I padded over to the window and looked out into the black night beyond the glass. The night was cold—I could feel it through the window—but completely still. The trees weren’t moving. I couldn’t see anything, and there was no more sound, so I slowly lifted the window sash to hear better.

Outside, the night was absolutely silent—so quiet it was weird. The silence was eerie, and it pressed on my ears. I braced my hands on the sill and leaned out, looking right and left, cursing my eyes for not adjusting to the dim light faster.

I couldn’t see anything, but I didn’t stop looking. I was sure I’d heard *something*. I shook my head in frustration. After the party, I’d let everyone go to bed, but I was regretting it now. I should have put someone on watch. I shouldn’t have let my guard down.

Then I heard the sound of a twig snapping, and I whipped my head around in the direction of the crack. My heart pounded as I honed in on a pair of eyes, glowing in the darkness below.

**Episode 1868**

XAVIER

My heart pounded as I stared at the pair of glowing eyes.

*No, not again.*

Immediately, I sprang into action, even as my heart sank. Of *course* this wasn’t over so soon. We’d let our guards down, and now we were under attack all over again. More revenants were coming. I didn’t know how, but I would’ve known those glowing eyes anywhere. Letifer had waited until we’d grown complacent, and now he was here to wipe us out—for good.

I opened my window and drew in a deep breath. The scents of pine and moss and wet dirt and dying leaves floated on the air, but I couldn’t smell any revenants. But the eyes I saw were far off, out on the tree line, and there was no wind to carry any intruder scents over to me.

My fingers curled around the edges of the window as fury pulsed through me. How many times had Letifer gotten the drop on us because we’d let our guard down? How many times could we make the same mistake and be surprised by what happened next?

I was such an idiot. I should have known better by now than to expect things to be truly over. Everyone else might’ve been eager to put all of this behind them, and I didn’t blame them one bit. But that didn’t change the fact that the pack was my responsibility, and I hadn’t fulfilled my duty as Alpha. If I had, I never would have left us vulnerable to yet another attack.

Cali rolled over with a groan. “Wha’s goin’ on?” she mumbled, her voice thick with sleep.

I knelt down next to her and brushed her hair away from her face. “Nothing. Go back to sleep, tiger.”

I wouldn’t worry her until I knew for sure what was outside the pack house. She’d been through hell—we all had. But if I could protect my mate from whatever fresh hell was on our doorstep now, I would. Even if I was only delaying the inevitable.

I pressed my lips to her brow, savoring her scent and the sweet little hum she let out as she slipped back into sleep. God, I wanted nothing more than to curl up in bed with her and forget the rest of the world existed, forget all about those glowing eyes.

But I wouldn’t be the Alpha I’d promised to be if I let this threat go unchecked. So instead of doing what I wanted, I quietly stepped into the hallway and headed straight for Greyson’s and Rishika’s rooms.

I rapped sharply against each of their doors before poking my head into their rooms. “Get downstairs, now!”

Rishika stumbled out of bed. “What’s happening?” But I was already moving onto Greyson’s room.

To my surprise, my brother didn’t fight my order. At least, not that I heard. I didn’t wait for either one of them to respond before continuing downstairs to the kitchen. I needed a plan. If Letifer was already getting the drop on us, then we didn’t have another second to lose.

In the kitchen, I found a mess of beer, wine, and liquor bottles scattered across the countertops—all empty.

“Fuck,” I rubbed my face. It was bad enough that we could be under attack, but half the pack had to be drunk right now. We were in no state to ward off an attack.

*Of course, that’s probably exactly what they wanted. And we walked right into it.*

*I’m such a fucking idiot.*

My stomach clenched in response, agreeing with my assessment. At minimum, I’d made a grave error by accepting our victory without questioning if things were truly over. *Should I have been more careful? Should I have waited, perhaps sent out scouts to run the forest and make certain that all the revenants were permanently dead?*

I blew out a breath. Whatever I could or should have done, there was no use worrying about it now. I couldn’t go back in time and fix the things I’d overlooked. Now, the best I could hope for was that if we rallied quickly enough, Greyson, Rishika, and I could still put up a strong fight before anyone got hurt.

I waited for Rishika and Greyson down in the living room. Surprisingly, there were no pack members passed out there, and it offered more privacy than the kitchen. Rishika’s hair stuck out in a hundred different directions when she walked in, Greyson on her heels, and she blinked at me sleepily.

“What’s going on?”

I hesitated, looking from her face to my brother’s. Greyson was slightly more put together, though he also looked tried. Staring at him, I felt an echo of that exhaustion in my own body. Were we ever going to get to rest? Truly recharge from everything we’d been fighting?

My brother watched my face, looking more curious than anything else.

I quickly explained what I’d seen. “I think maybe we were too hasty. We assumed that Letifer was dead and gone, and now we’ve been lulled into a false sense of security and the revenants could be coming for us.” I grimaced down at three half-empty blue Solo cups scattered across the coffee table. I could easily smell the stale beer still inside them. “And our defenses have never been lower.”

Rishika straightened. “The revenants? They’re back?”

“They could be. I want the three of us to run recon so we can—

“Wait.” Greyson held up a hand, a crease furrowing between his eyebrows. “Walk me through it again. What exactly did you see?”

*Did I fucking stutter? What part of “there’s a revenant in the woods outside the house” did he not understand?*

I didn’t have time to waste on getting everyone up to speed. I’d probably already spent too much time on it, and that was going to cost us. Just like my failure to protect the pack properly was going to cost us dearly too.

“I already told you,” I growled, “I saw glowing eyes, and now I’m worried there are more revenants lurking out there, waiting for us all to fall asleep.”

I saw movement in the corner of my eyes, and then Cali was standing in the doorway, rubbing her eyes. “What’s going on? Glowing eyes?”

I thought she’d fallen asleep again! I gritted my teeth, but pressed forward. If she wanted to be involved, well, now she would be. I walked to the window and pointed to the tree line. “There. That’s where—”

Suddenly, a doe bolted out from the tree line, dashing across the lawn, its eyes flashing in the moonlight as it glanced toward the pack house and then disappeared back into the woods.

Realization slammed into me. *Those* were the eyes I’d seen.

There was no threat. Just a deer.

Relief and embarrassment mixed in a nauseating cocktail, and then my brother let out a laugh. “Wait, *that’s* your revenant?”

Embarrassment took center stage as Greyson clapped me on the shoulder, still chuckling to himself.

“Xavier, maybe you should get some rest. You’re clearly starting to crack under the pressure of being Alpha.”

I gritted my teeth together and looked around the room. Rishika’s eyebrows were nearly disappearing into her hairline, but she was smart enough to not say anything. Cali didn’t say anything either, but the pity on her face spoke volumes. I fucking hated it, and I hated even more that she and Greyson were both here to witness this.

“The deer means nothing,” I snapped. “It doesn’t guarantee that’s what I saw. I’m sorry to have woken you, but I’m not going to apologize for being careful with the pack’s safety.”

Cali bit her lip, looking from my face to Greyson’s. “I’d better get back to bed.”

Rishika nodded. “Me too.”

They disappeared upstairs, clearly intending to leave Greyson and me alone to talk. Great. This night was just getting better and better.

Greyson smirked, merriment dancing in his eyes. “Well, that was… quite the display.”

“I did the right thing. If there had been a threat, we would have needed to be prepared.”

And then the smirk disappeared. “Part of being an Alpha is recognizing when a threat needs to be addressed and when it’s worth panicking everyone—”

“You think I don’t know that?”

He shrugged. “I’m not convinced you’re capable of telling the difference right now. What we faced in that battle… Well, nobody would blame you for seeing revenants in every set of glowing eyes you came across. Maybe you need to take some time to process.”

“I’m *fine*,” I snarled. “It was one mistake, and I only made it because I’m committed to protecting the pack!”

Greyson’s eyes narrowed. “Face it, you don’t have what it takes to lead this pack—and the battle is over, which means your temporary Alpha-ship is revoked. You served this pack well when they needed leadership, and I appreciate that. But I’m healthy again, and I’m taking back the pack. Starting now.”

**Episode 1869**

AVA

Ravi’s mouth was… a revelation.

“Ah!” I gasped. I threw my head back against his pillows on a moan. Instinct told me to slam my eyes shut, to lose myself in the sensation he was pulling from my body, but I kept them open. I didn’t want to miss one damn minute of watching his head between my legs, his mouth tirelessly working me to completion. “Yes—right there. Oh, god. Don’t stop! Don’t you dare—”

His lips, shiny with his spit and my own slick, wrapped gently around my bundle of nerves, sucking hard—and I shattered. My soul left my body. I was all sinful pleasure and weightless joy and nothing in the world had ever felt better.

When I came back down, Ravi’s skilled lips were trailing their way up my naked body, kissing and sucking, nipping and laving at every erogenous zone I had—along with a few I hadn’t even known I possessed.

But Ravi knew. Somehow, without me telling him or guiding him, he knew exactly how to make me come undone.

His mouth crashed into mine once more—the same maddening trigger that had brought us to this place—and I moaned as I tasted myself on his lips. My back curved off the mattress as I tried to press myself against his naked body.

Never in my life had I felt so desperately needy. And when he finally, *finally* sank into me, our moans echoed through the room.

Apparently, I wasn’t the only one who felt on the verge of losing their mind. Ravi set an easy pace, his hands braced on either side of my head, his body caging me in, and it felt like electricity was pulsing through all my pleasure centers. It was so fucking perfect, so fucking good, and yet I wanted more.

As if he’d read my mind, Ravi shifted slightly and pulled one of my thighs up higher above his hip. He sank deeper the next time our bodies met, and I thought my head was going to explode. “Pleasure” didn’t even begin to describe it. It all felt so goddamn amazing, I could have been caught in the middle of one long orgasm.

“Fuck,” he groaned, nipping at my throat. “You feel so good. Why do you feel so good?”

I could only whimper in response. Tension had been bubbling low in my belly since he’d sunk inside me the first time, and his words threatened to make me boil over.

Ravi’s thrusts became uneven, and he reached between us, his thumb grazing over my clit. “*Again*.”

As if I would refuse.

He thickened inside me, and I broke with a cry as another dose of ecstasy slammed into me. I was only vaguely aware of his own cry of completion. I was too far gone.

Ravi collapsed onto his bed next to me, panting, while I stared up at the ceiling and tried to catch my breath. And then the real world rushed back in.

*What the hell was that?*

My mind helpfully supplied a few adjectives. *Amazing. Mind-blowing. Electric. I swear, he’s got a magic dick or—*

My eyes slammed shut as I fought back a groan. This whole thing, as satisfying as it had been, was completely out of left field for me. Before the fight against Letifer, Ravi had just been some guy, a werewolf whose right to be a member of the pack was dubious at best, considering his history with the Redwoods.

So, we had a lot in common, I was now realizing. But not once had I ever considered him as someone worthy of my time. I didn’t trust him, didn’t particularly *like* him. I honestly had never even bothered to get to know him, and yet now we knew each other more intimately than I knew most of the other people in this pack.

As the afterglow receded and both of us caught our breaths, I still found myself unable to believe that I was in this situation. I wasn’t quite sure what had come over me. It was like the moment Ravi’s lips had landed on mine, I’d completely lost all my senses. Well, all except the ones that had told me to climb him like a fucking tree.

For so long, I’d only had eyes for Xavier—longer than I could remember, really. Once a werewolf met their mate, they were pretty much incapable of wanting anyone else. And Xavier *was* my mate. So what the hell did this thing with Ravi even mean?

I wanted to glance over at Ravi, to get some idea of what he was thinking, but I couldn’t quite bring myself to do so. In the moment, everything had felt perfect and explosive and wonderful. I’d felt connected to him in a way I hadn’t felt since things with Xavier and me had been good, which felt like a thousand years ago.

But Ravi wasn’t my mate. I barely even knew him. And now I didn’t know what to do.

*He’s not my mate… But that sure as hell felt a* lot *like a mate bond.*

Which was impossible. And wasn’t something I wanted, anyway. I wasn’t interested in Ravi, didn’t want a mate bond with anyone except Xavier.

I finally gathered up the courage to face Ravi, to tell him in no uncertain terms that this was some kind of huge misstep of my judgment and that it would never happen again—but when my eyes met his, all my anxious thoughts disappeared.

Ravi’s breathing—like my own—had slowed and steadied. The silence between us was oppressive, practically a living thing, and he was staring right at me. His eyes were wary and gentle at the same time, like he was trying to peer inside my head, though he suspected he wasn’t going to like what he found.

And god dammit, he was handsome.

The moonlight streaming in through the window caught the angles of his face and the curve of his long eyelashes. My breath hitched all over again, and I felt that humming, hungry connection between us again. Suddenly, all I wanted to do was gently push him onto his back, sink down on him, and lose myself in him all over again.

I shook off the thought as soon as I had it. *Idiot. This must be the booze talking. You don’t actually have any real feelings for Ravi…*

*Right?*

And then I realized he was still staring at me. I wanted to look away, to grab my clothes and get the hell out here before things somehow got *more* awkward, but I couldn’t.

Finally, he broke the thick silence between us. “So, what do we do now?”

I blinked. Was he asking if I wanted to have sex with him again? Or… no. No, he was asking what this meant, right? I cleared my throat, trying to hide my instinctual cringe. I felt so…. discombobulated. Like I was an awkward, gangly teenager all over again.

And since I was none of those things, it wasn’t even remotely acceptable for me to act like it.

“Um… what do you mean?” I asked, cool as a cucumber. “Sure, that was fun. We both clearly needed to blow off some steam after that crazy battle.”

I forced myself to look away and sit up.

“Thanks for… this,” I said. “It was nice, but I should probably get back to my own bed. You seem like the snoring type.”

I meant that last part as a joke, but somehow it came out sharper than intended. God, I needed to get the fuck out of here before I hurt myself.

“Ava.” Ravi’s fingers wrapped loosely around my wrist, and the second I tugged against his grip, he let go. “Sorry, just—wait.”

I froze but refused to look at him.

“Are you seriously going to pretend you didn’t feel that too?” he asked. “Because that… There was no way that was just me.”

No, it hadn’t just been him. I’d felt that *tug* of a deeper connection between us, just as sure as I was feeling it right now, but I couldn’t even begin to get into all of that. Like, I physically could not do it. So I just smirked. “The sex was good, yeah, but sex with me is always good.”

“Seriously? You’re going to joke about this?”

I felt his gaze on me, heavy and demanding and incredulous.

“Ava, look at me.”

Nope. I couldn’t do that. Because if I looked at him, it would only make this incessant *thing* between us even more difficult to ignore. And I clearly couldn’t stay, so I rolled out of bed and pulled my clothes on with jerky movements, aware of Ravi’s eyes on me the entire time.

Still avoiding his eyes, I leaned down and gave him a peck on the cheek. “Thanks!”

And as soon as I closed his bedroom door behind me, I allowed myself to cringe.

“Thanks?” I muttered under my breath. “Way to go, Ava.”

I crept back into my room, closed the door behind me, and started pacing back and forth across the floor.

*But seriously, what the actual hell just happened?*

My pacing brought me up against my bedroom window, and I took a moment to glance out. The lawn was silent and empty—a welcome change after all the action it had seen recently.

Then I caught a flash of movement out of the corner of my eye, and I was rooted in place as disbelief crashed into me.

“*Iñigo?*”

**Episode 1870**

CHARLIE

Violet stared at me expectantly, her words ringing through my head.

*Am I going back to Oregon with her?*

It was a simple enough question, and yet… I didn’t have an answer. Looking at her and trying to imagine us living apart for even one day felt impossible. There was no way in hell I’d allow us to be separated again. We’d tried that once, and in the end it had been just too painful for us to be apart. Of course I *wanted* to go back with her.

But it also wasn’t as simple as whether or not I wanted to go back with her, was it? For one, my mom and Romilly were probably going to want to make sure I stayed at camp, especially after I’d created so much trouble for them, and further trouble had introduced itself to the camp. The way the instructors told it, things had never been so bad at hunter camp before. And I wasn’t exactly loved by everyone here, but I *was* considered an asset to the camp. A strong hunter capable of protecting other campers—even if that meant occasionally bringing out my werewolf side.

Would Mom and Romilly let me leave?

I knew, logically, that I could leave if I truly wanted to, regardless of what my mother or father or Romilly said. I was an adult. I could make my own choices—and, if push came to shove, I could choose Violet.

But I was so tired of fighting with my parents about my werewolf side, about Violet, and I knew that just up and leaving to return to Oregon with her while things were so unsettled here at camp wouldn’t help my parents’ views of my mate. They’d probably assume she was using some kind of werewolf compulsion to make me go back with her.

Plus, did I even want to leave the camp? Not for my parents’ sake, but for my own? Sure, things had been kind of terrible, what with hiding my werewolf side. But that was out in the open now, and for better or for worse, being a hunter was in my blood. It was part of my family history. I didn’t know that I was ready to just leave it all behind to go be with my mate, even though I did love her and want to be with her. Even though she deserved peace and safety after everything she’d been through since coming out here to Minnesota to be with me.

“Charlie?” Violet pressed. Her teeth worried at her lower lip. “Are you going to answer me?”

I forced a smile and leaned in, brushing my lips over the teeth indentation she’d left behind. “I need to talk to my mom and Romilly first, but I hope I’ll be able to come with you.”

Her face fell. “You *hope*? So you don’t know if you want to come back with me?”

“No, I do want to be with you, I just—”

“You don’t need your mom’s permission to live your life, Charlie.” She looked angry now, and more than a little hurt.

“I know,” I said quickly. “And I’m not going back on my word. I promise you, we’ll be together. I *want* to be with you. Right now, it’s just a question of whether I’ll be able to go back with you now, or whether I’ll come along a little later. That’s all. But I promise—we *will* be together, one way or another.”

She nodded a little stiffly. “I understand. I don’t want to keep you from what you need to do. It’s just that I don’t want to be separated from you again.”

I pulled her into a tight hug, breathing in the scent of her hair as I stroked a hand down it. “I don’t want that either,” I murmured in her ear. “But even if we do have to separate—even just for a little while—I’ll hurry back as soon as I can. We’ll be together again before you know it. I promise.”

When she pulled out of my arms, her smile was a little stronger. Though it still wasn’t anywhere near the joy I wanted to see on her face. “I need to finish packing. I’ll… I’ll see you later.”

My heart twisted. She looked heartbroken at the mere thought of us being apart. I realized then how hard it must have been for her to let me go to camp, how hard all of this had been for her. But she’d dealt with it anyway, because she loved me. I was the luckiest guy in the world—and it was long overdue for me to repay her kindness.

I needed to talk to my mom. The thing was, I didn’t even know if I *wanted* to stay here without Violet. Sure, there was an uneasy peace now with the truth about who I was, but I still felt more than a little uncomfortable staying here, at a school where they trained people to literally kill people like me. The thought of staying here without Violet’s support made my stomach clench.

I caught her wrist and then pulled her into a sweet, lingering kiss. I tried to pour all the words for what I felt into that kiss, and when we pulled away we were both a little breathless. “I’m going to talk to my mom and Romilly. I’ll be back as soon as I can, okay?”

She pulled me into another kiss in response, a deeper one that had me pressing her against the dresser. I kept one hand safely on her hip, and the other sank into her hair, tilting her head back so I could drink her in. Her hands moving over my chest pulled a low, satisfied growl from my chest.

*Keep it in your pants, Charlie.*

Reluctantly, I pulled back. The lust simmering in Violet’s blown pupils made me want to forget my mom, forget Romilly and all my concerns about this place and just enjoy being with my mate. But we’d have time for that later.

“I’ll be right back,” I said again. Then I physically forced myself to walk out of her room and toward Romilly’s office. The November air was crisp and chilly, thankfully. It took the edge off, even if it did leave me shivering.

I ran into Sophie on the way to Romilly’s office.

Her expression brightened. “Hey!”

“What are you doing out so late?” I asked.

“I was actually coming to say goodbye to you and Violet. I’ll be sad to see you both go.”

“Oh, um. I’m actually not sure if I’ll be going back with her.”

Sophie’s brows lifted. “Really? I thought—”

I realized how my words sounded just a beat too late, and I rushed to clarify, “At least not quite yet. I’ll be with her eventually, but I may need to sort some things out here first.” I didn’t want Sophie thinking Violet and I were on the rocks or anything.

She nodded. “I mean, I’m not gonna lie, I’d love it if you stayed. Just having you around makes me feel a hundred times safer here.”

I forced a smile. How nice would it be to actually feel safe here? “I actually need to get to Romilly’s office, but Violet’s in her room if you want to say goodbye.”

“Great. You won’t leave without saying goodbye, will you?”

This time, my smile felt a lot more genuine. “I promise to find you first.”

I continued on to Romilly’s office and stopped in front of the closed door. Taking a deep breath, I knocked.

“Come in.”

I was surprised to find Romilly inside the office, but not my mom. They were nearly a package deal here, weren’t they?

Romilly looked up and smiled. “Oh, Charlie, good. You’re here. I was actually hoping to speak with you.”

I slid into the seat in front of her desk. “I wanted to talk to you too. Violet is heading back to Oregon, and I’d like to go with her. Do you think the camp still needs me here? I mean, I assume my mom will want me to stay, but—”

She held up a hand. “This is precisely what I wanted to talk to you about. I want you to go back with Violet.”

I blinked. “Really? But the camp…”

“I want you go back *for* the camp,” she clarified.

“I don’t know what that means.”

She leaned forward, resting her elbows on her desk and steepling her hands in front of her. “I want you to go back and spend time with Violet’s pack and report back to me.”

My jaw dropped. “Wait, you want me to be some kind of spy?” I shook my head. “No way. I won’t do it. They’re good people.”

“They’re still werewolves.”

“I don’t understand. They’re all the way out in Oregon. It’s not like they could be any kind of threat to the camp here.”

She shook her head. “No, I don’t think they’re a threat. But you’d be providing us with a unique opportunity to learn more about werewolf nature, to keep tabs on everything that’s stirring in the werewolf world. So you’re free to go—*if* you promise to send regular updates. Do you agree?”

**Episode 1871**

I woke to sunlight streaming in through the windows of Xavier’s bedroom. I stretched my legs and flexed my toes, slowly savoring the sensation of my limbs slipping across the mattress, of the luxury of waking up slowly.

Letifer was gone. There were no more threats hanging directly above our heads—at least not for the moment. For the first time in far too long, I woke up relaxed and hopeful for what the day would bring, rather than dreading whatever terrible thing was coming next.

It was nice.

I rolled over, right into a patch of sunlight, and my head twinged with dull pain. *Ugh… I should have drunk more water last night.*

But hey, what a luxury to wake up with a baby hangover. It meant I’d been drinking, that I’d had something worth celebrating. A tiny headache was a price I was more than willing to pay.

I slowly lifted my head, noting that Xavier was gone. When had he left the bed? Or had he ever come back to bed at all?

I tried to rack my brain for an answer. I remembered him abruptly getting out of bed last night and then going downstairs. And I remembered the tension I’d found in the living room when I’d followed him down there. Tension that had only worsened when it had turned out that Xavier’s “revenant” was just a deer.

I winced again, but not because of my head. I didn’t blame Xavier one bit for being overprotective after the nightmare we’d just been through.

He was just trying to make sure we weren’t left defenseless, and even though he’d turned out to be wrong about the deer, he wasn’t wrong in theory. If Letifer had somehow survived, attacking in the middle of the night, right after our celebrations, when we were all either asleep or drunk, would have been the way to go.

Still, it was easy to tell Greyson and Rishika were annoyed that Xavier had roused them for a deer.

I sighed and pulled on some clothes before making my way downstairs. The dull pulsing in my head needed a glass of water, and I wanted to make sure things hadn’t gotten any worse after last night’s mistake.

I padded down to the kitchen, my stomach tightening with unease. Hopefully word hadn’t gotten around about the whole deer thing. Things between Xavier and Greyson were already reaching a boiling point without adding that particular fuel to the fire.

As happy as I was to finally put Letifer behind us, it would be silly to think that things were going to be happily ever after now. There was still so much unsettled business for the pack, especially regarding the question of who would be Alpha now.

And whatever way that question was answered, I had a feeling it wouldn’t be pretty.

The kitchen was empty, and I immediately headed to the sink to chug down a glass of water and make some coffee. My mind helpfully played through all the tense conversations I’d had with Greyson and Xavier recently, which only made my stomach feel even more uneasy.

Xavier was so determined to be Alpha, and on top of that, he’d been pressing me to become his Luna. I still didn’t know what to think about it all. I’d dreamed of becoming the Luna of the Redwood pack since I’d first met and fallen in love with Xavier, but so much had changed since then. It wasn’t just about what Xavier wanted, or what I wanted. There was Greyson to think of now, too, and the *due destini* was never far from my mind.

Would saying yes to becoming Xavier’s Luna be too much like formally choosing one of them? Could it kill Greyson?

I took a seat at the breakfast nook next to the window, sipping my coffee and mulling things over as the pack house slowly came to life. About ten minutes after I heard movement upstairs, Artemis and Rishika appeared in the kitchen, both groaning and holding their heads.

“There’s coffee,” I said, by way of greeting.

Artemis gave me what I could only assume was a grateful grunt before she ambled over to the coffee pot and poured a cup for herself and another for Rishika. Artemis took a seat across from me, and Rishika sat down next to her.

“Good morning,” I chirped.

Artemis flinched. “Not so loud, Cali. Your voice is like thunder inside my head this early.”

Rishika patted her back, and we exchanged an amused glance. I hid my smile behind my coffee cup as I took another sip.

Soon most of the pack had streamed into the kitchen for some life-giving coffee or tea. The kettle was kept busy, along with the percolator. A few brave souls were even heating up toast or eggs. Everyone was clearly in the throes of a wicked hangover, but spirits were high. People were smiling, laughing—the weight of our fight against Letifer was no longer weighing them down, and everyone seemed the better for it.

I settled against my seat, enjoying the vibe of the room. Maybe now life could finally get back to normal.

My parents joined us, and we all squeezed together to accommodate them at the table.

Dad rubbed his head. “You know, I went to college in the seventies, and I have *never* seen anyone party as hard as I did last night.”

Rishika raised her mug. “Welcome to the pack.”

My mom smiled. “And did you two have a nice time at the party last night?” She gave Artemis the full *wink-wink*, *nudge-nudge*, and my sister’s face colored.

“Oh, gross, Mom,” I groaned on my sister and Rishika’s behalf, but I still couldn’t stop smiling. This was the family dynamic I’d been hoping for ever since we’d found out that Artemis was my sister.

My dad spotted Torin making a cup of tea and gestured him over. Torin didn’t seem half so perky and excited as the rest of the group, and it was no wonder.

“I’ve got a bunch of ideas for Thanksgiving,” Dad told him. “I wanted to run some thoughts by you, if that’s okay?”

Torin’s face lit up. “It’s more than okay!”

I smiled at my dad, watching their interaction and feeling grateful to him for drawing Torin into his plans. Since we’d lost Astrid, I’d been worried about Torin. He loved cooking, though, and spending time with my dad, so hopefully Thanksgiving would be enough to convince him to stick around for a while longer.

The kitchen was packed to the brim now, with all of us taking up every possible chair or flat surface to sit on. Some pack members had started to mosey down the hall to the living room, too. It was great to see everyone lounging together, to see the slow way they enjoyed their mornings.

“Thanksgiving *and* the full moon?” I overheard Sage saying to Zainab. “Tomorrow night is gonna be amazing!”

My parents were chatting with Torin about Thanksgiving, and on the other side of my mom, Rishika and Artemis were talking quietly.

“I still can’t believe Xavier screwed up so badly last night,” Rishika said, rubbing her face. “I mean, come on. It was a *deer*. I really needed that sleep.”

I wanted to tell her that Xavier was just trying to keep everyone safe, but I also didn’t want to insert myself into the uneasy Alpha power struggle going on. Defending Xavier now could be perceived as taking a side, and I really, *really* wanted to be Switzerland on this.

So I stayed quiet.

Everyone looked up as Mace filed into the kitchen, followed by the rest of the Blue Blood pack. There was barely room to fit them all.

“It’s time the Blue Bloods went home,” Mace said. “It was an honor to fight with you all.”

As everyone began to say their goodbyes, I noticed Xavier and Greyson slip into the kitchen behind the Blue Bloods. They exchanged goodbyes with the Blue Blood pack members, and then with Mace himself. It was clear that the bond between the two packs had been strengthened by our recent battle.

Mace hesitated in front of Xavier and Greyson, who were standing side by side. I wondered if he wasn’t sure who to address first. Who to treat as the Alpha. Finally, he shook both their hands—Greyson’s first, and then Xavier’s.

“I wish you both—and your pack—well,” he said. Then he and the Blue Bloods filed out the door.

The Redwoods went quiet as Greyson approached the center of the room. “I know that the… situation between Xavier and me has been difficult, but the battle is over now, and I’m ready to step back in as Alpha.”

Then Xavier stepped up, giving Greyson a fierce glare. “Not so fast, brother. I think we all know that I’m better qualified as Alpha, and I’m ready to prove it.”

*Oh no. What is he doing?*

Greyson looked equally taken aback as Xavier continued. “We’ll be fighting to determine who will lead this pack as Alpha. Today.”

**Episode 1872**

MARTA

I jolted awake and found myself lying on my bed, still in my day clothes. Someone—Lilac, probably—had draped a blanket over me. As I sat up, blearily blinking away the last remnants of sleep, reality came rushing back in.

*Oh, shit. The summons.*

My stomach knotted up with anxiety, and just like that, that smothering sense of dread I’d managed to escape while I slept returned tenfold. What the hell was I going to do?

I looked around the room and noticed Lilac sleeping in a chair next to my bed. He was curled up in what had to be a seriously uncomfortable position, and yet he’d stayed all night. My chest tightened, but not with worry. For so long, all I’d wanted was for someone to care about me. It seemed like I’d finally gotten that.

*And he’s still here, even though he’s no longer tethered to me. Even though he no longer needs me to stay corporeal… I hope his shiny new neck doesn’t get a crick in it from sleeping in the chair like that.*

For a long string of seconds, I just watched Lilac sleep. I probably looked like a complete creep-o, but I was kind of hoping he’d wake up. The longer I was awake and alone, the more my head seemed to spin with all the fears and what-ifs regarding my summons.

But Lilac didn’t seem to be getting the message, because he just kept sleeping.

Finally, I cleared my throat. Loudly.

Lilac jolted up in his chair, his eyes flying open. I thought I heard his neck crack he swiveled his head around to see who had caused the noise.

“Oops,” I said, forcing a pained smile. “Did I wake you?”

He looked an adorable combination of confused, alarmed, and groggy, but his face cleared when he saw me sitting up in bed. “Oh, hey.” He cleared his throat. “Good morning.”

“Yes, it is morning.” I wouldn’t say whether or not it was good. It definitely didn’t seem that way.

“I was happy to see you finally conked yourself out last night. I hope you’re feeling a little better today?” he asked.

I bit back a bitter laugh. Oh, if he only knew! I’d been awake a total of thirty seconds, and already I’d worked myself back up to last night’s peak. “*Feeling better?* How can I possibly feel better when I’m facing magic jail?”

Lilac sighed. “Okay, so you’re still worried. Got it.”

“I think it’s a perfectly reasonable response to, I don’t know, receiving a summons to some kind of supernatural trial!”

He lifted himself out of the chair and walked over, sinking onto the mattress next to me. He took my hand. “Marta, try to calm down. Take a few deep breaths. Say a mantra, or something.”

“A mantra?” A disbelieving laugh slipped out of my throat. “Like what? *I’m not going to jail today*?”

Lilac’s lips twitched. “Mm. Yeah, that’s a good one. A little on the nose, but—”

“This isn’t a joke!”

“I’m not laughing.” His lips were still trying valiantly to curve up into a smile. “Okay, I’m laughing a little bit. But I really don’t think you have to worry so much. We still don’t know what’s going to happen. For all we know, what you did is the supernatural equivalent of earning a parking ticket.”

I scowled. “That’s exactly *why* I’m freaking out! I still don’t know anything about this! And I kind of doubt, after everything Vander said, that this is equal to a parking ticket. What if they try to put me into some kind of supernatural prison?”

Lilac watched my face for a moment. There was something in his look that made me think he was trying to peer inside my mind. Finally, he squeezed my hand and stood. “Come on.”

He started leading me out of the room, and I jerked my hand back. “Where are we going?”

“Maybe *we* don’t know anything about this, but you know who might? An actual witch.”

“Oh. Good idea.”

The second time he tugged me along, I followed him downstairs. As soon we made it to the living room, we were immediately met with several pack members milling around and muttering to each other. Clearly, something had happened. Or was happening. But as per usual, I wasn’t in the loop.

*What’s going on now?*

Lilac led me to Big Mac, who was fortuitously standing right next to Kira. I glanced around again, uneasy with the general vibe of the room. “Did something happen?”

Big Mac shrugged. “Just more of the same. Greyson and Xavier are going to fight for the title of Alpha of the pack later today. Everyone’s speculating on who might win and how things might change for the pack, depending on who takes control.”

My eyebrows rose. “Oh. Well, that’s probably a good idea. Those two really need to figure their shit out. I feel like the testosterone is out of control between them, and I’m not even a werewolf.”

“But we’re not here to talk about Xavier and Greyson,” Lilac butted in. “We’re here to talk about this.”

He pressed my summons into Big Mac’s hands. When had he even grabbed that? I hadn’t noticed him taking it. Maybe I’d been too preoccupied with imagining my future prison cell.

“Do you know what this means?” Lilac asked.

Big Mac scanned the letter, her brows rising, and then passed it to Kira, who frowned.

“I was worried something like this might happen,” Kira mused.

Her words were as good as a confirmation—my life was over. “Am I going to jail?”

Big Mac put a hand on my shoulder. “I’m not going to sugarcoat things. This is a very serious accusation.”

*Oh my god!* This was my worst nightmare! *Beyond* my worst nightmare. I turned to Lilac, my eyes burning with tears. “I told you! I’m going to jail!”

I started pacing up and down the living room, ignoring the strange looks Sage and Zainab sent my way. “I have to get ahead of this. I can’t go to jail. I can’t…” My voice broke. I’d spent the better part of fifty years locked up inside Bert’s mansion. I couldn’t live like that again. Not even if I deserved it this time.

And you know what? No, I didn’t deserve it! I’d saved the whole damn world! And sure, I might have accidentally brought Lilac back to life, but so what? What was one soul pulled out of the afterlife in exchange for all the other shit Letifer had done to break the rules of nature? The good I’d done by taking him down had to far outweigh bringing Lilac back.

Whatever happened now, I wouldn’t go quietly. Better yet, I wouldn’t go at all. I instantly began to slap together a plan. “If I pack now, maybe I can hit the road, head to Mexico…”

I stopped with a grimace. What was I thinking? These were witches I was talking about! They could find me anywhere in the world if they felt so inclined!

Big Mac held up a hand. “Marta, slow down. Nothing has been decided yet. This is a summons to the high witch council.” She turned to Kira, and they seemed to have some kind of brief, wordless conversation. Kira gave Big Mac a nod, and then Big Mac turned back to me. “We’re going to help you.”

I stopped. “You are?”

“Of course we are. After all, Kira and I are at least partially responsible for this. We aren’t just going to throw you to the wolves. We’ll defend you at the hearing. Besides, what you did *was* defensible. I think we can make a strong case for you.”

“Really?” I asked breathlessly. Suddenly, I couldn’t quite breathe around the weight of my own hope. “You think we can win this?”

“Yes. But more importantly, we won’t let you go through this alone,” Big Mac said. “This is our fight, too.”

The air rushed out of my lungs, and I sagged in relief. “That would be great.”

Big Mac smiled and gave me what was easily one of the most genuine and most awkward hugs I’d ever received: a loose embrace of her arms and a pat on my shoulder.

Kira held back a bit more, but offered me a smile. “We’ve got your back. You should try not to worry too much until we know whether you truly have something to worry about.”

Big Mac and Kira were strong, capable women, and beyond that, they were brilliant witches. If they truly felt like my case had a chance, then maybe everything would really be okay after all.

Lilac squeezed my hand. “See, I told you. It’s all going to work out.”

I heaved out a sigh and headed toward the kitchen, too relieved to be even a little bit annoyed by Lilac’s “I told you so.” My stomach had been tied up in knots since the moment I’d woken up, and now that the anxiety had receded, I was starving.

“Oh, yeah, breakfast!” Lilac grinned as I pulled out a bowl of cereal and some milk. “Great idea!”

I made my bowl, then settled in by the window to eat. He poured his own bowl with a happy sigh.

“You have no idea how amazing it is to eat again, after all this time.” He took a bite and then held up the box, saying around a mouthful of cereal, “This Count Chocula is the most amazing thing I’ve ever eaten.”

I laughed. “We can do better than Count Chocula—just wait until Thanksgiving.”

Lilac started listing his favorite Thanksgiving foods, and I absentmindedly reached out and toyed with the leaves of one of Orla’s plants, sitting on the windowsill. Then I recoiled in horror.

The leaf I’d just touched was withering and dying right before my eyes.

**Episode 1873**

AVA

I sat in the corner of the downstairs living room, tucked away from the rest of the pack. Of course, word traveled fast in the pack house, especially when that word alleged that the former Alpha and the current one were going to fight it out for their title later that day. It was a showdown that was long overdue, as far as I was concerned.

Of course, Xavier was going to win, and assert his right as Alpha of the pack. He was born to be the Alpha of the Redwood pack, after all. It was destiny at work. It was a shame for Greyson, but maybe he’d take Cali with him once Xavier kicked him out of the pack.

*And then I’ll have Xavier all to myself.*

I smiled at the thought, though some small, insignificant voice in the back of my mind whispered that it was foolish for me to keep pining for Xavier, after everything. I had Ravi now, after all. I didn’t need Xavier—

I cut off the traitorous thought before it could go any further.

I got more than a few odd looks from members of the pack, but I was used to it. Even though I’d lived here in the pack house for several weeks now, I was still largely viewed as an outsider. My role in fighting the revenants had bought me some goodwill, but being downgraded from hostile enemy to “that Samara pack girl who came back from the dead” wasn’t quite the same thing as being included.

Plus, I was sure I did look odd. While everyone else was celebrating, I was sitting alone in a dark corner of the living room. It was the compromise I’d made with myself: This win we were celebrating was partly mine, and I wouldn’t hide away in my bedroom all day. But that didn’t mean I was ready to actually talk to anyone. And every time someone passed by the doorway I tensed, worrying that it was Ravi wanting to talk about what had happened last night.

*I’d rather face another army of revenants.*

It was one thing to fuck him last night and then run away to my room, but we lived together, and I couldn’t outrun him forever. Not that I wasn’t going to try. But our night of passion was long over, and in the cold light of day I had no fucking clue how to deal with our situation. It felt too good to be true, like I’d dreamed it all.

I kind of wished it had just been a dream.

If it had just been good sex, I wouldn’t be worrying right now. Hell, no-strings-attached *great* sex was more than welcome. But what we’d experienced together last night, as explosive and perfect and mind-blowing as it had felt, it wasn’t just sex.

Ravi was right. There was something else there—something… special.

*Ugh.*

I smacked my head back against the couch cushion and resisted the urge to scream. I’d never asked for this, and I sure as hell didn’t want it. I wasn’t interested in getting involved in anything complicated, now or ever. My focus was and had always been on Xavier.

Ravi was just a distraction. Just a super hot distraction…

I swallowed, thinking back to last night. To the powerful way he’d commanded my body, the connection thrumming between us that had only amplified my pleasure. It was like a positive feedback loop—I’d felt everything that had made him feel good, and that had only made my pleasure even more powerful, which had made him feel even better, and on and on it had gone until I’d come so hard I swear my soul had nearly left my body.

I was so screwed. There was nothing normal about what had happened last night. I was kidding myself here.

But I shoved that thought down. I couldn’t deal with it right now. I had bigger problems, potentially. Like, you know, maybe seeing Iñigo outside my window last night. That seemed like it could be a pretty big problem.

If it was real, at least. Which, I wasn’t convinced it was. I’d seen him die, after all. I’d killed him myself. No, it was much more likely that that little vision had been a trick of the light, a combination of the booze and having my brain addled by world-changing, insane sex.

*You were just seeing things, Ava. Iñigo is dead.*

Except… it really had looked like him. I’d seen that same curve in his smirk, that same borderline psychotic glimmer in his eyes as he’d stared up at my window.

On the bright side, if Iñigo was still kicking it on this side of the grave, then at least I didn’t have to worry about sleeping with Ravi. Iñigo would surely put a painful, bloody end to me before anything with Ravi ever became a problem.

*You need to get some rest. You’re getting loopy. The guy is* dead*.*

Some rest probably wouldn’t hurt. I’d tossed and turned the rest of the night after leaving Ravi’s side. Some part of me had refused to settle without him by my side, which was both ridiculous and obnoxious. And yet, no matter how hard I’d tried to ignore that piece of myself telling me to go back to Ravi’s room and pick up where we’d left off, I never had found sleep.

Which was obviously why my brain was willing to believe that a dead guy could still be alive. I was sleep-deprived and stupid. My judgment couldn’t be trusted, and I was better off letting the dead stay that way than allowing their ghosts to take root in my mind.

Except… I’d been dead once. And here I was now, very much alive. Even when Greyson had nearly broken my body beyond repair while under Letifer’s control, I’d been brought back from the brink.

And the revenants had proven that the line between life and death wasn’t as unyielding as we’d all been led to believe.

My stomach coiled tight as I allowed myself to entertain the possibility that Iñigo wasn’t quite as permanently off the board as I’d thought.

*It probably wouldn’t hurt to be one hundred percent sure that it was just my overactive imagination.*

Iñigo was a real pain in the ass—if he truly was alive, I wouldn’t put it past him to wait until I let my guard down to pop back into my life.

*Shit, should I tell Xavier what I saw?*

Almost as soon as I thought of the question, I had my answer: no. At least, not yet. He was busy defending his claim to the Redwood pack against Greyson. He didn’t have time to look into what I had or hadn’t seen outside my bedroom window. He’d undoubtedly take the opportunity to remind me that I’d betrayed them to Iñigo before, and I didn’t really have the bandwidth to deal with his hatred right now.

Besides, I didn’t want to sound as stupid as I felt.

I needed to try to figure this out on my own before I went to Xavier about it. Resolved, I finally peeled myself off the couch and walked through the first floor of the pack house. Various pack members were scattered around, and rather than the light and celebratory feeling everyone had had this morning, the pack now seemed subdued.

*Probably waiting to see how the fight goes.*

I found Kira with Big Mac in the kitchen, and I hovered in the doorway. Big Mac awkwardly hugged Marta, and then Kira headed out of the kitchen, brushing past me on her way to the porch.

“Maybe there’s one person here who won’t think I sound crazy,” I mused.

I followed Kira out onto the porch and joined her as she looked out across the lawn.

Immediately, my eyes were glued to the place where I thought I’d seen Iñigo last night. The lawn was still dewy. If I went over there, would I be able to make out signs of footprints?

Kira must have noticed the intense stare I was giving the tree line, because she asked, “Are you looking for something?”

*It’s now or never.*

“Um… I know this sounds crazy, but I thought I saw Iñigo last night through my window—standing right there.” I pointed at the spot on the tree line, then turned back to Kira.

Her eyes widened. “Are you sure?”

I shook my head. “No. But… I was thinking about going down there to check.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“Thank you.”

We cautiously made our way over to the spot where I thought I’d seen him last night. There was damp mud along the tree line, but no footprints. It was completely undisturbed. I blew out a breath and turned to Kira, “It doesn’t look like anyone was here. I must have just had a little too much to drink last night.”

I laughed, but Kira didn’t join me. If anything, she still looked disturbed.

But there was no sign of anything or anyone, so we had nothing to do but go back to the house. As we turned back, we saw Xavier and Greyson walking out onto the front lawn, followed by the rest of the pack.

“The fight’s beginning,” I said. “This should be interesting.”

**Episode 1874**

GREYSON

This was it. After all the time that had passed and everything that had happened since the Lupo Finale, I was finally going to face my brother and we were going to determine—once and for all—who would be the Alpha of the Redwood pack.

I stepped out onto the porch and proceeded onto the front lawn with Xavier and the rest of the pack following close behind me.

“Greyson!” Cali raced up to me. “Can I talk to you privately, please?”

She looked pale and terrified. I sighed. I had suspected she wouldn’t love this turn of events, but I hadn’t realized she’d be quite this upset.

*Maybe she should take it up with Xavier. He’s the one who demanded we do this.*

Still, I wouldn’t ignore her when she so obviously needed me. “Of course, love.”

She pulled me aside, biting at her full bottom lip. I hated to see her like this. We were supposed to be celebrating finally being free of Letifer—not launching headfirst into a new round of stress. Fucking Xavier. He’d set all of this in motion the moment he’d stopped being able to tell Bambi from an orange-eyed revenant.

The brotherly side of me was more than a little concerned about Xavier’s lack of judgment in that moment. My brother had looked absolutely terrified, yet his determination to face down this newest threat had been nothing short of adamant. It had been… impressive and sad all at once.

And it was then that I’d known for certain: my brother couldn’t be Alpha anymore. He’d done the pack and myself a huge service by taking on the mantle at the peak of the fight against Letifer, and I would always be grateful to him for that, but how could we trust the judgment, the leadership, of someone who now saw revenants around every corner?

No, it had to be me. And since Xavier was pushing for this fight and demanding to turn this not-so-peaceful transition of power into a whole damn spectacle, it apparently had to be *now*.

“Are you sure you really want to go through with this?” Cali asked. “I have a really bad feeling about it. I…” She swallowed thickly. “I think whatever happens today, it’s only going to drive an even bigger wedge between you and your brother.”

I let out a bitter chuckle. *A bigger wedge? How is that even possible? The ship of brotherly camaraderie between Xavier and me has already sailed.*

“Please don’t laugh.” Her voice broke, and she blinked back the tears that were threatening to slip down her cheeks. “Greyson, I don’t think you should do this. It’s not—”

“Love.” I gently clasped her shoulders. “It’s all going to be okay.”

She bit her lip, then shook her head. “I don’t think it will. I just… I just know something really bad is going to happen. This is a terrible plan—making you two fight against each other, with the entire pack watching, now of all times.”

“You have Xavier to thank for that.” I sighed. “If it makes you feel any better, I wouldn’t have wanted it this way either.”

“So don’t do it. Don’t fight him. Please, Greyson, I’m begging you.” A few tears spilled down her cheeks, and I had never in my life felt like such a villain as I did at that moment.

I wished I could tell her that I’d call off the fight. I wanted to do anything to put a smile back on her beautiful face, to ease the fear and anxiety that gripped her. But I couldn’t. Xavier had challenged me to a fight, and if I refused, it would be as good as giving up my claim to Alpha.

I had to do this. There was no way out that would allow me to take my rightful place, to lead the Redwood pack the way I was meant to, the way Xavier didn’t seem capable of—at least not right now.

I squeezed her hand. “I’m so sorry, but this is between Xavier and me.”

Her face fell. “Greyson, no—”

But I was already moving on. I had to focus now. I couldn’t think about my mate’s pain-filled face, not now. As soon as this was settled, I’d make it up to her.

Xavier had led the pack down to the lawn, and a group formed around him while he waited for me to finish up with Cali. She gave me one last pleading look and then disappeared into the larger group.

Guilt gripped my chest. Should I have listened to her?

I pushed the thought aside. I couldn’t think about that right now.

I faced my brother in the center of the ring. He looked determined—and absolutely delighted to be here facing me.

I bit back a growl. Xavier was so goddamn infuriating. Our mate was on the verge of falling to pieces, our pack’s victory was being cheapened, and all he cared about was knocking me to the ground. Well, I wasn’t gonna make it easy for him, and right now I wanted to knock him down, too.

Then I looked past Xavier and saw Cali in the crowd. Her face was twisted with fear, and tears slipped down her cheeks.

Her voice echoed in my mind. *Please, Greyson.*

I scanned the rest of the pack. Not a single face in the crowd looked even halfway as happy to be there as Xavier was. Everyone looked wound up and worried, and a general sense of unease thrummed between the pack members.

*This isn’t how a pack should be feeling the day after it dispatches a serious threat—there’s been nothing but stress and danger hanging over their heads for so long. They deserve some happy times.*

But Xavier just had to have this fight right now, and so the war was continuing for the pack.

It was probably better this way. Xavier wasn’t going to let this go, and once it was settled, we’d all be able to move on. Now, I just needed to give Xavier a lesson he wouldn’t soon forget.

Xavier started circling me. “Anything you want to say first? Any rules?”

I shook my head. Whatever Xavier threw at me, I was ready.

Then, beyond the pack, I caught a glimpse of the three witches standing outside the perimeter. I froze—and with a lurch, I was pulled into a reverie. Suddenly, I wasn’t in the ring anymore. I was in the middle of the woods with them.

I blinked. “What the hell? Where is everyone? I was in the middle of something pretty important, if you couldn’t tell.”

Posie stepped forward. “We’re here to warn you.”

“What do you mean? Last I heard, it was on me to tell you when I’d made my choice.”

She shook her head. “We need to tell you that you don’t want to do what you’re about to do.”

“What on earth are you talking about? I’m fighting for my pack. Why the hell wouldn’t I want to do that? I know I’m the better Alpha. It’s my pack by right, and I’m taking it back. Nothing you can say will convince me otherwise.”

Chloe stepped forward, her brows lifting. “Nothing?” She glanced at her sisters. “Perhaps we should show him?”

She waved her hand, and a shimmering vision of the pack house appeared. Everyone was gathered on the lawn, like now, but it couldn’t have been more different to the fight I’d just been pulled out of.

Everyone was dressed in black, and at the front of the group, Tom and Orla were hugging each other and weeping.

And in front of them stood an open coffin.

I watched myself stand up and address the group—the clear Alpha of the pack now. Chloe moved her hand again, and the image seemed to zoom in to show the person lying in the coffin.

My heart lurched to a halt.

It was Cali.

I stumbled back in horror as Chloe waved her hand and the vision disappeared.

“You must be careful what you wish for,” she said.

Suddenly, everything went shimmery, and in the blink of an eye I was back in the circle. No one else seemed to have noticed what had just happened, but I was reeling. Had the witches just warned me that if I was Alpha, Cali would die?

I glanced at Xavier with wide eyes. He was still circling, still ready to fight me for the title of Alpha. Still barreling forward as if his actions wouldn’t have a ripple effect of everlasting consequences.

But I knew better now. And if I accomplished one thing in my life, it would be that I *never* let that vision come to pass. I would never put Cali in harm’s way, never let my own desires be the reason that my mate ended up dead.

I realized with a horrible certainty that what I’d said to the witches was wrong. Something *could* keep me from wanting to be Alpha, and that was Cali.

She was worth everything.

As Xavier tensed, ready to pounce, I held up my hand. “No. I’m not fighting you.”

**Episode 1875**

Greyson put up his hand. “I’m not fighting you.”

My body, which had been practically humming with anxiety, a desperate *wrongwrongwrong* feeling tightening my gut, suddenly went loose, and I sagged with relief.

*Oh thank god. Everything is going to be okay. My mates aren’t going to fight each other after all!*

I wondered what had changed Greyson’s mind. Had my words finally gotten through to him? I shot him a relieved grin. He offered a weak smile in return and then looked back at a thoroughly confused and angry Xavier.

Xavier could be angry if he wanted. I, on the other hand, was elated. From the moment Xavier had challenged Greyson to a fight, all of the happiness and relief from defeating Letifer had disappeared, and in its place had been this cold, dreadful certainty that no matter who won the fight today, everyone would lose.

I couldn’t explain the feeling. I didn’t know if it was some kind of premonition or simply my own concern for my two mates, but I’d thought my heart was going to break when I’d watched the two of them enter the ring.

Thank god Greyson had changed course.

*I can’t believe he actually listened to me!* He’d seemed so determined before. He was usually the *slightly* less hardheaded of my mates, but I’d learned in my time with Greyson that he picked his battles carefully, and once he chose one, nothing would stop him from seeing it through.

I had no idea what had caused his rapid about-face, which of my words had finally sunk in and helped him make the right choice, but I wasn’t about to question it. The important thing was I wasn’t going to have to sit through the torture of watching the two men I loved most attacking one another. And that dreadful certainty I’d been feeling? It was gone entirely. Like all my worrying had been for nothing.

Everything was going to be okay now. I knew it.

Xavier, though, didn’t seem to have gotten the message.

His eyes widened, and his nostrils flared as he stared his brother down. “What do you mean, you won’t fight me?” he demanded. “You have to. You either fight me *now* or you cede your title to me. Are you conceding?”

Greyson laughed and shook his head. “No. I’m just not giving you the satisfaction. I know you want this fight. Hell, you want it so badly you’re willing to stomp all over the entire pack’s celebration just for the chance to show me up. Well, too bad. We’re not fighting today.”

“What the hell? That’s not how this works!” Xavier’s face was rapidly shifting from red to a warm shade of purple. It wasn’t going to be an easy task, talking him down on this one.

Greyson shrugged. “I guess you’ll just have to learn to live with the disappointment.”

“This isn’t over! Not by a long shot!”

“I agree. At some point, we really do need to sort this out.”

Xavier’s mouth opened, and then closed, and then opened again. He blinked rapidly, and I could practically see his mind going into overdrive, trying like hell to figure out what was happening. I could see where Xavier’s confusion was coming from—I had plenty of my own questions where Greyson’s decision was concerned. He was agreeing with everything Xavier said, and yet he still refused to fight.

“Wait… so…” Xavier frowned. “Are you saying you’ll defer to me as Alpha in the meantime, if you refuse to fight me?”

Greyson didn’t respond. He just pushed through the pack and walked back to the pack house alone, his head held high. I’d never felt more relieved in my entire life. I was about to run after him, to thank him for listening to me, when Xavier, still a little off-kilter, turned and addressed the rest of the pack. “There you have it, I guess. Greyson isn’t willing to stand up and fight to be Alpha, so you have your answer.”

It was an anticlimactic end to the tension and drama of the day so far, but the pack looked more relieved than anything else, which just further proved Greyson had made the right choice. I knew some of the pack members had allegiances to one brother or another, but the thing everyone seemed to want most was clarity. Who the Alpha was and wasn’t. Who they should turn to for leadership and guidance.

And Xavier wasn’t wrong. Now they did have an answer for those concerns.

I was ready to go after Greyson—Xavier did *not* look like he wanted to talk right now—but Rishika stepped into the center of the ring and cleared her throat. “I know the timing is a little weird, given what just happened and that we’re pretty much all hungover from celebrating last night…”

The crowd laughed, and just like that, the rest of the tension was gone.

Rishika smiled and continued, “But… uh, some people were discussing things last night, and since Sabine and Big Mac—MacKenzie—are engaged and all…”

She allowed another pause for Mrs. Smith to give Big Mac a mischievous look. A few pack members let out excited whoops. It was like Xavier had never challenged Greyson. Suddenly, everyone’s spirits were high, and they were ready to keep the celebrations going.

I kept glancing back toward where Greyson had disappeared into the pack house. I needed to get out of this conversation or news or whatever Rishika was getting at and go talk to him. The urgency went beyond simply making sure he was okay. I felt like I was missing something important, and if I didn’t go to talk to him *right now*, I’d miss out.

Rishika cleared her throat again. “A bunch of us thought it might be nice to throw the two of them an engagement party!”

Big Mac looked like she wanted the ground to swallow her whole, but Mrs. Smith smiled. “Oh, that sounds lovely! And so thoughtful. After all the fighting, we deserve to have some fun.” She smiled at Rishika.

In the crowd, Sage, Zainab, and a few others were talking animatedly, clearly excited at the prospect of throwing another party.

My mom stepped up next to Mrs. Smith. “We’ve already discussed a few ideas, haven’t we?” The two women exchanged conspiratorial glances, and I frowned. I hadn’t realized my mom and Greyson’s mom had been spending time together.

My mom faced the crowd. “We’ll be throwing the party *tonight* in honor of the happy couple!”

*Great! Can I go now?* I was so happy for Mrs. Smith and Big Mac, but I really needed to talk to Greyson.

Xavier smiled, now playing the role of indulgent Alpha. “I think that’s a perfect idea. And Mrs. Smith is right—we do all deserve to have some fun.”

I noticed that he too glanced back in Greyson’s direction, like he was still unsettled by the swift turn of events.

A tiny ribbon of dread wrapped around me. I’d wanted to keep them from fighting because I didn’t want the wedge between them to be dug any deeper, but maybe there was no avoiding that now. I honestly couldn’t see Xavier being *happy* that Greyson had refused to fight him. Xavier might’ve been the Alpha by default, now—assuming Greyson even acknowledged that much—but at the very least, Xavier’s brother had stolen his win from him.

*I really hope there isn’t another explosion between them—not if this party is going to happen now.*

The pack all dispersed, and I was finally free to catch up to Greyson. On my way back toward the house, I overheard Ravi speaking to Ava.

“I can’t believe Greyson just gave up like that…”

I grimaced. It wasn’t great, optics wise. But he’d still made the right decision. Fortunately, it seemed like most everyone else had already mentally moved on to the party. It made sense. We were still recovering from the horror of fighting the revenants. Nobody wanted to linger on the ugliness between Xavier and Greyson.

I headed up the steps to catch up to Greyson when my mom fell into step beside me.

*Ugh, not now, Mom!*

“I’m so excited about the party,” she gushed. “Sabine and I have been plotting this for a while, but we’ve been waiting for the right opportunity. Now that everything’s finally died down…”

She trailed off, and I realized a moment too late that she’d caught me staring after Greyson.

“Cali?”

“Sorry.” I grimaced. “I do think the party sounds lovely, and I’m sure Mrs. Smith is so appreciative of your help and support, but…”

Xavier brushed past us, heading inside. I had a feeling I knew *exactly* where he was going.

“Sorry, Mom. I’ve got to go.”

I hurried after Xavier, following him up the stairs. I caught him just as he burst into Greyson’s room with a snarl.

“What the hell kind of game are you playing here?”

**Episode 1876**

XAVIER

One of these days, I was gonna kill my brother. Unfortunately for me, today would not be that day.

I glared at him. “Seriously, what are you playing at?”

My brother was up to something, I was certain. Greyson was a sneaky bastard at the best of times, and right now I was kicking myself for not seeing this coming. I’d been poised to take the title of Alpha away from him—of course he had something up his sleeve. I just wished I knew what it was.

Because refusing to fight? That couldn’t be his plan. For one, it didn’t make sense. If he wanted to prevent me from permanently taking over as Alpha, then he would have actually fought me. Or come up with some sort of loophole. All he’d done by backing out of our fight was practically gift-wrap control of the pack for me.

It wasn’t a satisfying win, and I was beyond pissed at him for taking that from me, but my ego was taking a (brief) back seat to my genuine confusion. Greyson had been all gung-ho to fight, even telling Cali loud enough for me to overhear that this was the best way to settle things.

I’d really been looking forward to that fight too—both because I wanted to prove to the pack that I deserved to be Alpha, that I wasn’t just some benchwarmer who’d tagged in because the real Alpha couldn’t perform his duties, and also because a small, petty-ass side of me wanted Cali to have a front row seat to me defeating Greyson once and for all.

But then the next thing I knew, Greyson had just up and conceded. Before either one of us had drawn first blood. Had something changed his mind? Or had the eagerness to fight all been for show? Just another part of his evil plan?

Right after it had happened, when adrenaline had still been pumping through my veins with nowhere to go, and my mind hadn’t been able to wrap itself around a reality in which Greyson would concede to me, and the entire goddamn pack had been watching, I’d assumed that Greyson must have realized he was going to lose to me and backed out at the last minute to save face in front of Cali.

But once he’d walked away and Rishika had started prattling on about the engagement party and I’d had a few seconds to collect myself, I’d realized that explanation just didn’t track. My brother was a lot of terrible things, but he wasn’t a coward. No, something had to be up.

And I was going to get to the bottom of it. Right now.

But of course, my brother wasn’t going to make it easy for me—because when in my entire life had he ever made anything easier for me?

He just stared back at me, his expression flat, not giving anything away. “I’m not playing any games.”

Suddenly, Cali burst into the room behind me. “Please don’t fight anymore!”

I turned to face her, and her gaze darted from me to Greyson. Her face was drawn, and her eyes were rimmed in red. Had she been crying? Why was she crying?

“Can’t this all just be over?” she begged. “It’s tearing me apart, watching you two like this!”

I grimaced. So that was what the tears were about. I should have known. But as much as I hated seeing her in pain, I couldn’t just drop this. Greyson was a threat to the natural order of this pack, and until I figured out what the hell he was planning and made sure he wasn’t going to take Alpha from me, this wasn’t over by a long shot.

“I’m sorry you’re having a hard time,” I said, “but surely you can tell that Greyson is up to something. You saw that fight, too. You have to admit that something’s wrong.”

Cali hesitated, her eyes flicking over to Greyson for a split second. I could see it in her eyes: she knew something was up too, even if she didn’t want to admit it. “From where I’m standing, Greyson made a decision for the good of the pack. You both want that, and I know that, but can’t we just leave it?”

Well if that wasn’t the most gigantic omission I’d ever seen. I blew out a breath, shaking my head, and turned to Greyson. My brother just raised his brows in a “you heard the girl” kind of way.

*Am I crazy for not wanting to drop this?* I was starting to feel terribly unreasonable in my confusion and my demand to understand what the hell was going on in my brother’s head. If Cali knew what he was thinking, she wasn’t sharing with the class. Though for all I knew, her quick acceptance of Greyson backing out had more to do with relief that we weren’t going to tear each other apart just yet and less to do with her knowing something I didn’t.

I did know one thing for sure: there was no way in hell I was going to drop this. I didn’t want to upset Cali further—she’d already been through so much recently, and I never in a million years wanted to be the reason for her distress. In my haste to put Greyson in his place after what he’d called “Bambigate,” I’d forgotten just how much my challenge would upset Cali, so I’d make nice for now, but I was going to get to the bottom of this, one way or another.

I nodded at Cali. “Okay, I’ll drop it.”

And then I turned back to Greyson. “As long as you understand that until we resolve this, I’m in charge. It’s only going to make things worse by prolonging all the uncertainty, so if you can’t back down until this is resolved, we’re better off fighting it out now.”

My tone brooked no argument. He’d accept my terms, or I was going to drag his ass down to the front lawn so we could finish what we’d started earlier. I felt Cali tense beside me, no doubt worrying all over again that Greyson and I were going to have it out.

But rather than lashing out, or even giving me one of his annoying, snarky comments, Greyson simply stared at Cali for a long string of seconds. There was an intensity to his gaze that didn’t sit well with me. Not because it stoked jealousy, but because, for the millionth time since Greyson had refused to fight me, my gut was telling me that something was wrong.

*What the hell is he thinking right now?*

Finally, he peeled his eyes away from Cali and looked at me. “Fine.”

Greyson didn’t look even a little bit happy about it, even though he’d been the one to set us on this path by refusing to fight me. More than ever, I knew there had to be something more to this story than he was telling me.

Cali let out a breath. “I’m glad to hear that.”

Greyson offered her a small smile. “Now that we’ve sorted that out, I’d like some time alone, please.”

I frowned. There was another piece of Greyson’s behavior that just wasn’t matching up. Since when did he want opportunities to be away from Cali? Especially when he knew that she’d leave with me?

*Something’s wrong with him.* But I wasn’t about to complain—he’d just ceded Alpha to me for the time being, and now I got to spend some time with Cali without worrying about Greyson interrupting.

Maybe this was a win after all.

I headed out of the room with Cali following close behind. I still couldn’t shake the sense that something was wrong, and I hated it.

*You got what you wanted*, I reminded myself. *Stop worrying about everything.*

Outside in the hallway, I asked Cali, “Can we talk?”

She nodded and allowed me to lead her to my room. I just needed to focus on the positives. I was the Alpha now—and not just for the battle against Letifer. Greyson had conceded, and now my leadership was undisputed.

I should’ve been feeling triumphant. After all this time, the future I’d always dreamed about was finally falling into place. I’d fought hard for this. I deserved it. And now it wouldn’t hurt to enjoy it.

“I’m glad that Greyson came to his senses,” I said.

Cali’s expression furrowed at the mention of my brother, and I decided to change the subject.

“This is great news. I have so many plans for the pack—I can’t wait to prove to them that I’m the leader they deserve.” A smile tugged at my lips. “And with you by my side…”

She glanced up at me. “What do you mean by that?”

“Well, you’ll be my Luna, of course.”

Her eyes widened. She was clearly overcome with joy.

Then she bit her lip. “But what if I can’t be your Luna?”

**Episode 1877**

LOLA

After all the drama and tension and intrigue of the non-fight, Jay and I headed back to the house with the rest of the group. It was certainly to Rishika’s credit that she’d stepped up to shift the pack’s attention away from whatever the hell *that* had been in the fighting ring, and now, instead of worrying about more in-fighting between Xavier and Greyson, the rest of the pack seemed to be fixated on the particulars of Mrs. Smith and Big Mac’s engagement party.

I could definitely relate to that. After fighting revenants—both here and at Tottenville—I was more than ready to relax and enjoy a few days of peace. Peace that Xavier had shattered this morning when he’d gotten all hotheaded and challenged Greyson to a fight.

At least now, we could get some proper downtime.

“Thank god that’s all over for now,” I said to Jay. “I’m *beyond* sick of all the drama between those two. All I want is to have some fun and not have to think about danger or fighting for as long as possible.”

“Yeah.” He nodded, but he looked distracted. Clearly my mate wasn’t adopting my laissez-faire attitude concerning the abrupt shift in the fight for Alpha. “I just think it’s kind of weird that Greyson just backed down like that, don’t you? Right up until he changed his mind, he seemed just as into it as Xavier.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. But I’m sure he had his reasons for refusing to fight. Maybe he didn’t want to upset Cali, or he thought he was going to lose to Xavier and wanted to do it on his own terms instead of getting his ass handed to him. Honestly, being Alpha sounds like a kind of shit job. Maybe Greyson just realized he didn’t feel like it.”

Jay gave me a dubious look, but I’d already moved on. Between the last few weeks, and also pretty much every moment I’d spent here at the pack house since Cali and Xavier and Greyson had gotten tied up in that *due destini* thing, Greyson and Xavier had been at each other’s throats for one reason or another. Sometimes, it seemed like they didn’t even require a reason—it was like they were born to fight each other and they wouldn’t stop until one or both of them ended up dead.

Which, of course, I would never say to Cali, because I loved her and I valued our friendship. But the point was, I’d already given *way* too much of my life to wondering about the myriad dysfunctions that made up Xavier and Greyson. As far as I was concerned, it was probably a good thing that Greyson had refused to fight. At least that was a break from their usual toxic masculinity mold.

Either way, I was done thinking about both of them.

“You’re really not concerned at all about what just happened?” my mate asked.

“Listen, all I care about is that it’s over. Xavier, Greyson, whichever broody boy is Alpha is fine with me.”

Jay snorted and pulled me in for a hug. “Not one for politics, I see.”

Held tight in his arms, I huffed out a laugh. “Sure, we’ll go with that.”

I sank into his arms, closing my eyes and breathing in his scent. *This* was what I needed. A moment with my mate where I could just… exist. Savor the rise and fall of his chest against mine. Because, despite all the seemingly insurmountable odds that were stacked against us, we’d survived. We’d come out the other side of the battle with the revenants, and we were still us, still together.

And that was all that mattered.

Pressed against my mate’s chest, I felt that vampire heat begin to build. I was about to whisper to Jay that we should head up to our room when Jacqueline suddenly popped up from the kitchen. “Lola! I’ve been looking everywhere for you!”

I bit back a groan. *Jacqueline the boner-killer strikes again.* God, it was like she had a sixth sense or something!

“Everyone was out on the lawn,” I said tersely. “Did you see?”

She shrugged. “I honestly don’t make a point of keeping track of what the werewolves are doing.”

I drew in a deep breath to keep from wrapping my hands around her throat and throttling her, Simpsons-style.

“Anyway,” Jacqueline continued, oblivious to my murderous fantasy starring her, “Emmett told me to find you and let you know he’s just finishing packing. He’s going to be heading back to Tottenville shortly.”

“Oh.” All my anger deflated, along with some of my joy. I was still kind of on the fence about him leaving. Things had always been complicated with Emmett. I’d never forget the way my vampire heat had flared around him and all the trouble that had caused, but he’d played a major role in me coming into my own as a vampire, and…

I was going to miss him when he was gone.

“Ah, there you are.” I heard Emmett’s voice behind me. “Jacqueline said she was looking for you.”

“I found her!” she said, unnecessarily.

I forced a smile and turned to face him. “Well, here I am.”

“The car’s all packed, and I’ll be leaving momentarily,” Emmett said to Jacqueline. Then he turned to me. “Lola, thank you for welcoming me into your home. This time at the pack house has been deeply fascinating. I’ll never forget it—and I’ve made some incredible strides in my research. I believe that with the information I’ve gathered here, I’ll be able to make some groundbreaking discoveries.” His gaze softened. “I’ve never met anyone like you before—if you ever want to come back to Tottenville, there’s still so much I’d like to learn from you.”

He stepped forward to give me a hug, and I was suddenly *very* aware of Jay standing right next to me. I couldn’t quite get a read on him, but I wouldn’t have blamed him if a hug bothered him. After all, I did have the hots for Emmett at one point…

I cleared my throat and held out my hand for him to shake. “Thank you, Emmett, for everything.”

And then, as he was turning away, I suddenly remembered something very important.

“Wait!” I called.

Emmett turned back. “What is it?”

“What did you mean earlier? About trying to get blood the old-fashioned way?”

He laughed. “You’ve got to learn to hunt, of course.”

My jaw dropped. Was he suggesting what I thought he was? “Like, hunt *humans*?”

He laughed again and gave me a look. “Animals, silly.”

I grimaced. “But I love animals!”

Jacqueline looked terribly bored with this conversation. “Well, if you hate the idea of hunting so much, why don’t you just break into a blood bank?”

“*Stealing?*” I gasped.

Emmett chuckled again. I was glad this was how he’d remember me, I guess. “I’m sure you’ll get the hang of hunting animals. It’s honestly pretty fun, once you get into it.”

I tried to imagine hunting small animals out in the forest, like the cute little bunnies I used to come across sometimes, back when I still had my wolf. I gagged. Nope, I could not eat a sweet little bunny.

Jay slung an arm around my shoulders. “Your favorite food used to be pepperoni pizza. Where did you think the pepperoni came from?”

I swatted his arm off. “That’s not the point! Pepperoni doesn’t have fuzzy ears.”

“All right,” Emmett conceded with a good-natured smile. “I’ll leave you with a little stash to hold you over, but I do recommend you do some hunting training—and soon.”

I glanced over at Jacqueline, who immediately rolled her eyes. “Don’t look at me. I don’t take on trainees.”

Jay took my hand. “I’ll help. We’ll make it fun.”

“Fine,” I sighed.

“I hate to dash, but I do really need to get going,” Emmett said.

“Of course. Jay and I will see you out.”

We followed him out to the driveway, where his car was packed and waiting.

“This all seems pretty quick,” I said. “Are you sure you don’t want to say goodbye to the others?”

Emmett shook his head. “I’m ready to hit the road, but if you could please say goodbye for me, I’d appreciate it. We’ll still be in touch, after all.”

I nodded and said goodbye, and then Emmett got in his car and drove off. Then I looked back at the pack house. With Emmett gone and Jacqueline obviously unwilling to help me find my way, I was kind of running blind again. There was still so much about being a vampire that I didn’t know. What if I sucked at hunting and couldn’t find enough blood? What if my vampire heat got out of control again? What if I lost control again and hurt the people I cared about? Hurt Jay?

I turned to Jay. “Do you think I’m making a mistake by not going back to Tottenville?”

**Episode 1878**

Xavier met my gaze head on, and I could see that he was still processing what I’d said. I couldn’t ignore the flicker of disappointment that crossed his face—and I wasn’t surprised to see it, either.

*What if I can’t be your Luna?* My question echoed in my head as I stood there, wondering how he was going to respond. A part of me wondered if he might lash out and think I was preferring Greyson over him. I knew how sensitive Xavier could be about things like this, but I had to trust he knew how hard this was on me, too. Betraying him was the last thing I wanted to do. He was my mate. I wanted to stand by his side as much as he wanted me there, but I couldn’t—not as Luna, anyway. He was as haunted by this whole *due destini* thing as I was, so surely he understood that the stakes were way too high for me to take becoming his Luna as a given.

“Xavier—we might have won the battle with Letifer, but it’s not like we’re all free and clear now. Nothing’s changed—the curse still stands, and I’m not willing to do anything that could put either of your lives at risk. If I became your Luna, that would be a choice—specifically, me choosing you. How could I risk that?”

Xavier looked away, something clearly balancing on the tip of his tongue. His angular jaw flexed in thought, and for a moment, I wondered if he was going to push back. Everything was so out of whack right now—especially adding Greyson’s strange behavior into the mix. I was relieved that he and Xavier hadn’t come to blows, but Greyson backing down from a fight like that, and then asking for space from me? He wasn’t acting like himself, and I didn’t have any idea what was going through his head right now.

Letifer and the revenants were gone, but it was starting to feel like all that turmoil had been a big distraction from the very real problems Xavier, Greyson, and I still had hanging over our heads. I hated that they were at each other’s throats right now. *Will they ever get along? Will this back and forth and fighting over me ever stop?* It was starting to look like they would never come to any sort of resolution, and that scared me more than anything.

And now, they’d made a deal that I didn’t understand in the least and had complicated things even further. *If that’s even possible.* Was Xavier’s position as Alpha cemented or not? Was Greyson conceding? Or stalling? My main focus was to keep them from fighting again—because I knew that someone would get hurt even worse this time. Even setting the *due destini* aside—which was impossible—and deciding to be Xavier’s Luna would only cause more strife between them. We were already at a breaking point as it was.

“I understand,” Xavier finally said. “Besides, it’s not something that we need to decide right away.”

*Great.* Just as I’d thought, he wasn’t dropping it. He was tabling it for now, but I knew it was only a matter of time before he asked me again. My answer would have to be the same because, well, *due destini*.

An awkward silence passed between us as I wondered how I was ever going to be able to address this. How was I going to make Xavier see that it would never work for me to be Luna to *either* of them? I sighed, not wanting to push it at the moment.

“So, what are you going to do now?” I asked. “What’s your plan?”

“I’m going to lead. Now that Letifer has been defeated, I’m ready for things to quiet down. I want to settle into the rhythm of living peacefully without danger hanging over all our heads. I’m sure that’s what everyone wants.” Xavier got up and strolled over to the door. “I need to go check in with the pack, find out what I should be focusing on next.”

I nodded. That was a great idea for the moment. The pack had been through a lot, and right now, they needed a strong, engaged leader more than anything. If Xavier took that role for the time being, so be it.

As we both left Xavier’s room, I saw Lola and Jay coming in from outside. Lola looked visibly shaken, and I could tell that Jay was trying to comfort her.

I rushed to her side, wanting to take any and every opportunity to be a better friend for her, like I’d promised. “Is everything okay, Lola?”

Lola sighed and shook her head. “Let’s go somewhere quiet to talk.”

Oh, that didn’t sound good. I ushered Lola into the den, then shut and locked the door behind us. “Okay, spill.”

“There’s nothing to *spill*. Emmett just left.”

I waited. I hadn’t gotten a chance to know Emmett all that well or anything, but I could see that Lola seemed quite bothered by his leaving. “Are you going to miss him, or…?”

“No—it’s more that I’m wondering if I should have gone back to Tottenville with him. The only reason I went there in the first place was to learn all the tips and tricks for being a new vampire—you know, how to control cravings, with an emphasis on how *not* to crave biting your friends’ necks.”

I laughed a little, hoping that she’d learned enough in that department.

“But everything went haywire pretty quickly, what with the revenants popping up before I could even really adjust to the place and learn anything. There’s still so much that I don’t know.”

I felt for her—and I could relate. I remembered how it had felt to find out I was Fae—and I still didn’t know exactly what that meant, or how to deal with all the strange and dangerous powers I had. For Lola, it had to be even worse, because of the cravings and the control issues. I couldn’t imagine what it would be like to be afraid of yourself.

“I’m worried that I’m going to lose control again. I’ve been relying on Emmett’s blood bags, and without him here I think I’m going to have to learn how to hunt.”

*Hunt?* “Oh, that sounds—”

“Animals—not people!” Lola added quickly.

“Phew, okay. I want to be supportive, of course, but I would definitely have to draw the line at you hunting humans.” *Specifically, hunting me or any of the pack members.*

“Of course! I would never hunt a human! But I don’t know if I can hunt animals, either! I love them! I can’t see myself tracking them down and killing them to…” Lola shuddered. “To feast on their blood.”

“I know what you mean, but you’ve got this, Lola. And really, what choice do you have? You have to drink blood, and animals seem like the best option. A lot of us around here eat meat, so if you think about it, we’re not really any different. Besides, you’ll be a pro—remember how good you always were at Big Buck Hunting? That game we used to play at the arcade back home?”

Lola wrinkled her nose. “That’s not exactly the same as doing it in real life. What if I’m really bad at it? What if I run into a human when my blood lust is up, and I can’t control myself and I accidentally attack them or something?”

I thought about this. There was no question that Lola’s cravings could be a real problem. Most of the vampires I’d come into contact with weren’t good at controlling their basest impulses, and most of those impulses surrounded tackling humans and sucking their blood.

“Can’t you just… tap into your old wolf instincts?” I asked.

Lola looked sad. “I don’t have those anymore.”

I could see that this was really weighing on her, and I wanted to be there for my friend, but how? How could I make her feel better about losing a part of herself that she’d loved so much? Lola had enjoyed being a werewolf almost more than anyone I knew, and then it had been snatched away and replaced with something she’d never wanted to be.

“Do you miss your wolf a lot?” I asked.

Lola choked back a sob. “So much. Sometimes, not having my wolf anymore feels almost like I’m missing a limb. Like a part of me is just… gone. That’s what I mean—all of this is so new. I’m worried about losing myself and becoming something I’m not, because I’m something I never prepared to be. A vampire? What in the entire hell, right?”

“Right,” I agreed. It was still crazy to think that my best friend had been changed into a vampire. I was simply happy that she wasn’t exactly the same as most of the other vampires I’d come into contact with—creepy and untrustworthy. She was still a living, breathing, person, and that counted for something. I took Lola’s hand. “You’re still the same Lola to me. I’m going to help you get through this. Tell you what—let’s do it.”

“Let’s do… what?”

“A hunting excursion, you and me, this afternoon.”

**Episode 1879**

RISHIKA

Just like that, Artemis and I were officially a part of Orla’s engagement party planning team. After Orla’s pep talk about the spirit and energy that we needed to communicate through the decorations and party theme, she’d sent us to the kitchen to search Mrs. Smith’s recipe books for fun punch and cocktail ideas.

“It’s kind of crazy how fast we went from battle to battle to party to party,” Artemis said.

“And I have to say, as much as a good fight can get the blood pumping, I much prefer the party lifestyle. All work and no play makes Rishika a dull werewolf.”

Artemis arched an eyebrow at me and shrugged. “I don’t think you’re dull, either way.”

She seemed subdued, even a little uncomfortable with shifting gears into light, party planning fun mode.

“It’s an expression, Artemis. From a movie?” When the blank look stayed on Artemis’s face, I remembered that they probably didn’t watch famous American horror movies in the Fae world. But when I really thought about it, maybe her awkward demeanor wasn’t because she didn’t get the joke, but because of what Kira had said about her still having dark magic in her. That was a hard possibility to swallow. I gave her a little nudge in the arm. “Hey, everything’s all good, okay? You’re here with us. *You*.”

A slow smile spread across Artemis’s face, and she relaxed a little. “Okay, well what about a Saucy Screwdriver?”

“Huh?”

“For the engagement party!” Artemis jabbed her finger at an interesting-looking cocktail on the page in front of her. Mrs. Smith’s recipe books were thorough, complete with Polaroids of all the food and drink recipes.

“Oh. That sounds—suspicious. Let’s stick to something without a weapon-like thing in the name, like a Rum Punch Out. Wait… What’s up with these drink names?”

“I don’t know. Ask Mrs. Smith—these are all her recipes,” Artemis said with a laugh. “Look at this one, it’s called a Painkiller, and this one on the next page is called a Paingiver. They all sound scary, but knowing Mrs. Smith, they all taste like heaven.”

As I watched her lighten up even more as she flipped through the pages of the book, I was overcome by a massive wave of gratitude that I hadn’t lost her to Letifer. I’d been absolutely petrified that I would never see the Artemis that I knew and loved again. The terror of almost losing her only made it clear how much I cared about her. I didn’t know what I would do if I lost her now.

Artemis looked up at me and frowned. “What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

*Oops.* My intense staring had made her self-conscious—I’d zoned out and had no clue how long I’d been sitting there looking at her like that. If I were Artemis, I’d be creeped out, too.

I grinned. “No reason.” I looked away quickly, returning my attention to a box of index cards that held more of Mrs. Smith’s drink concoctions. “Look at this one, it’s called the Ghostbuster,” I said, waving the card at Artemis. “Lots of tequila in this one.”

Artemis laughed. “Well, you can never have too much tequila at a party, right?”

“A woman after my own heart. You know, I’m really happy that all of that drama with Letifer is over, because I have big, big plans for the two of us,” I said, leaning in close.

“Oh yeah?” Artemis closed the book and looped her pinky finger around mine. “What kind of plans?”

I leaned into her even more, so that there wasn’t an inch of space between us. “Well, actually, I was thinking it’s time for us to go on another date.”

“Seriously?” Artemis laughed. “I think we’re kind of past that by now.”

“What? No! No couple is ever *past* dating. That’s how you keep things fresh! Plus, with everything that’s been happening, we never really had a chance to go on a real date outside of this pack house, or the other one.”

“Oh,” Artemis said dubiously. “I know what human dates are all about. But you’re right. I’ve never been on a traditional date in this world, and Fae have a more… ritualized courtship thing going on. Oh, and would we be competing? And with who?”

“Um… competing? On a date?”

“Yeah, you know, like what Torin was doing in that whole thing with Cali and Xavier and Greyson?” Artemis furrowed her brow. “So, our date might be a group date, or a one-on-one?”

“A group date?”

“Sure… I mean, no one ever wants to go on a group date, but if it’s something you’re into, maybe I’d give it a try? Because Torin made me watch some episodes of *The Bachelor* so that I could prepare properly for their *Werewolf* *Bachelorette*, and I’ve gotta say, I don’t really think that whole thing is my scene.”

I laughed. *Werewolf Bachelorette*?Hell no.“No, I don’t plan on sharing you with anyone, Artemis! So that means no competing, and no group dates!” Artemis was all mine—the last thing I wanted was to share her. I couldn’t believe how hard I’d fallen for her, and every day it seemed like I fell for her even more. I couldn’t help the flutter in my stomach as I pushed a lock of Artemis’s rich brown hair behind her ear so that I could admire the delicate curve of her neck. “I’m thinking more one-on-one. Dessert and a movie out in the world somewhere, so I can show you off. It’d be nice to do something normal like that for a change.”

Artemis smiled and shrugged. “That doesn’t sound so bad.”

“So, you’re in?” I was smiling so hard it felt like my cheeks were going to fall off.

“If it’s what you want to do, yes, I’m in.”

I was over the moon. I liked the idea of our relationship settling into something that felt more real. “So it’s a date. Maybe we could do it tomorrow? After Thanksgiving dinner?”

Artemis nodded just as Xavier came walking into the kitchen, giving us both a stiff nod. I held up Mrs. Smith’s recipe book. “We’re looking up drinks and food to make for the party tonight, and you look like you’re on a mission. What’s up?”

“Would you mind a quick chat? Pack business.”

I looked back at Artemis. She was busy flipping through the recipe box. She looked up and waved me away. “Go, go, I’ll be fine. There’s so much to choose from, I’m doing my best not to get overwhelmed. While you’re gone, I’ll try to… narrow down a few menu options?”

“Sounds good,” I said, before following Xavier out onto the porch. We sat in silence for a while before I finally spoke. I wanted to get back to Artemis as soon as I could, and talking pack politics was the last thing I wanted to do at the moment. “So, what do you need, Xavier?”

“I wanted to get a sense of how the pack is feeling. I know how difficult the last few days have been on everyone, and I know that the tension between me and Greyson hasn’t helped matters.”

“I won’t argue with you there—it’s true. People wanted to relax after all the stress of the Letifer stuff, and a werewolf pack isn’t quite whole without its Alpha. The indecision has been stressful for everyone.”

Xavier nodded and looked out into the distance. “I understand that. What I want to be sure of is whether the pack is fully backing me. I know I can trust you, Rishika—you’ve had my back since the first time around, and I want to thank you for that. Just be honest with me if you hear any grumblings that I should know about.”

I hesitated, knowing that this was a very delicate subject. Xavier had been on edge about the Alpha role for a while now, but Greyson wasn’t one to give up. It was a pretty complicated situation without even considering the Cali angle. “Mostly, everyone is just relieved that it’s been settled for now.”

Xavier looked at me closely. “I sense a ‘but’ in there somewhere.”

I hesitated again, thinking about some of the whispers that I’d heard around the house. “Greyson was a good Alpha—my Alpha. Like you said, I had your back before, but Greyson’s the Alpha I joined this pack for. I, like the others, thought that we would follow what we agreed on, and that the role would revert back to Greyson once he was healthy again after the battle. Don’t get me wrong, I don’t have any major issues with you other than the fact that you’re a little hotheaded—”

“Me?”

“I know that we all can be a bit hotheaded, but you take it to another level sometimes. And… I’m not quite sure about how things would go under your leadership long term.”

Xavier whirled to look at me. I could already see his mouth tightening into a straight line, and his nostrils were flaring slightly. *See, that’s what I’m talking about. Reactive and intense.*

“Rishika, what are you saying?”

I lifted my chin and faced him head on. “There are pack members who still see Greyson as the legitimate Alpha. What are you going to do about that?”

**Episode 1880**

GREYSON

*Am I losing my mind?* It sure felt like it. I was pacing back and forth in my bedroom, and I was so wound up and stressed about being forced into inaction that I was starting to lose my grip on reality. *Those damn witches! What are they trying to tell me?* It was beyond frustrating. Why did they always have to beat around the bush? Couldn’t they give me my destiny straight, for once? *Really, how hard would it be for them to give me some facts every now and then?* No, they had to speak in riddles and show me all these vague visions that didn’t do anything but scare me. No solutions at all.

If only that were the only thing I had to worry about. The thought that Xavier was downstairs consolidating his power as Alpha (as he was sure to be doing) was making me want to tear back down and fight him for real so that I could show him, and everyone, why I’d become Alpha in the first place. Even so, I had to admit that there was something soothing about getting under Xavier’s skin by refusing to play by his rules. It had to be tearing him up inside that I wouldn’t take his bait and fight him. It was nice to see my little brother off-balance and unnerved. He deserved to be as uncomfortable as I was right now, after all. But no matter how much I liked to keep Xavier guessing, I couldn’t let him just swoop in and take over. Not in the long run. There was no doubt in my mind that I was the right leader for the pack, and a whole hell of a lot better than Xavier.

I was trying to formulate a plan, here. There was no way I’d be able to challenge Xavier until I figured out exactly what the witches were trying to tell me about my decisions and how they could affect Cali’s fate. I had to protect her at any costs. The visions I’d had of Cali’s grave, Cali’s funeral… They were enough to make me go truly insane. There was nothing worth risking that outcome. The first thing I had to do was get to the bottom of the Cali thing and make sure that there was a way for me to ensure her safety, no matter what. Once I did that, I would take Xavier down, and take back what was rightfully mine—the pack.

*Make sure Cali’s safe, then take back the pack. Make sure Cali’s safe, then take back the pack.* I repeated it in my head over and over like a mantra, trying to figure out how I was going to do it. I had to calm down and think. I’d been in tighter binds than this before, so I needed to get into problem-solving mode.

A knock on the door pulled me away from my thoughts. I hoped it was Cali—as always—but at the same time, I hoped it wasn’t. As much as I really wanted to see her, I knew that she, like everyone else, didn’t understand my decision to back down from Xavier, and I wasn’t in the mood to explain it further right now. I was still trying to make sense of all of it myself.

“Greyson? It’s me.”

*Mom?* I wasn’t really in the mood for a mother-son heart to heart, but I opened the door anyway, and Sabine came in, eyeing me anxiously.

“Son, are you okay?” She reached out and picked a bit of lint from my shoulder. *Yup, she’s in complete mom mode.*

I closed the door behind her, sighing. “I’m fine. But that engagement party! Sounds like fun! Such a great idea, too, and well overdue, might I add. It’ll be nice to have the pack celebrating love instead of fighting, for once, right?”

“Yes, the party will be nice, but you’re changing the subject. I came here to talk about you, not the party. These last few days have been rough on everyone, you especially. I know that everything going on with Xavier must be hard on you, so have you given any thought to what you’re planning on doing about it?”

I looked at her, and a small part of me wanted to open up and tell her everything—about the witches and the vague visions they showed me about how my decisions might, or might not, cause Cali harm. About how I was tired of this push and pull with Xavier over Cali, how I felt like I was losing my mind a little—but in the end, I didn’t tell her any of that.

“I’m just biding my time,” I said, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible.

She frowned at me. “What does that mean? Do you really want to keep the pack in limbo?”

A wave of guilt crashed over me. She had a point. It was so easy to get wrapped up in what was going on with the three of us that I hadn’t stopped to think that the pack was getting the short end of the stick as well. I really did hate what all of this was doing to the pack, but what choice did I have? I was stuck between a rock and a hard place. There was nothing I could really do until I was sure that my decisions wouldn’t hurt Cali. That wasn’t a chance I was prepared to take, even for the pack’s peace of mind. Summoning a confidence that I didn’t really feel, I tried to ease Sabine’s mind as much as I could.

“Don’t worry, I have a plan,” I said. “All in good time.”

“I don’t know…”

“Mom, I appreciate your concern and you coming up to check on me, but I don’t want to discuss it anymore, not right now. You have to trust me. I’ll figure it out, and everything will be fine. You shouldn’t be worrying about me anyway,” I said, trying to sound cheerful. “You’ve got an engagement to celebrate!”

She smiled, and it warmed my heart to see how excited she actually was. At least one of us was having some good luck in the love department. It was true that like my mother, I’d met the woman of my dreams, but in my case, my love was showing up in another man’s dreams as well.

“I’ll admit, I’m pretty excited about celebrating MacKenzie. She’s so special to me, and I’ve been wanting to do this for a long time. I’m definitely looking forward to it.”

She was positively glowing, and I couldn’t remember the last time I’d actually seen real happiness on her face. It reminded me that even though things felt really dark and difficult right now, at least the external threat was gone. Things weren’t perfect—nothing ever was—but what we had now that we hadn’t had before was breathing room.

I returned my mother’s smile. “I’m really happy for you, Mom. I can tell that Big Mac loves you, and I’m happy that you two found each other.” *And it’s lucky for the pack that Big Mac does love you—she can be difficult, but she’s a huge help to all of us, and her soft spot for you is a boon to us all.*

“Thank you, sweetie,” she said, pulling me into a hug. “It means the world to me that you’ll be there to celebrate with us. There was a minute there where I…” She stopped for a moment as a rush of tears filled her eyes. “Where I didn’t know if you were going to make it, if you were going to come back to me in once piece. I’m so happy that you’re okay, I don’t know what I would have done—”

“I’m okay, Mom,” I said, hugging her back.

“Okay, okay. I’ll stop fussing over you now,” she said, pulling away and heading for the door. “I have a lot to do, so I’d better get to it. But Greyson, please don’t forget—if you need me, I’m here.”

A bit after she left, I realized that my lightness had gone out the door with her. I was back to worrying, to planning, to pacing back and forth. I went to the window and looked out. I could see Rishika and Xavier on the porch, deep in conversation. *Just like I suspected. Rallying support.* It angered me all over again that Xavier was pulling this right now. I should’ve known he was bluffing when he’d agreed to only hold on to the Alpha role during the fight with Letifer. He’d been obsessed with taking over, and he’d finally found a way to do it.

*If I don’t get this Cali stuff squared away with the witches, Xavier will have cemented himself so strongly as Alpha that I won’t be able to take it back.*

Then it came to me—what I would have to do to make sure that didn’t happen. I needed to rally my own supporters and let them know that I had absolutely no intention of giving up.

**Episode 1881**

AVA

The pack house was bustling with activity as everyone pitched in to get ready for Big Mac and Mrs. Smith’s engagement party. It wasn’t quite my scene—it was all a little too happy and festive for my tastes—but I had to admit that there was something appealing about being in the pack house when we weren’t being terrorized by Silas-Letifer hybrids and orange-eyed freaks.

Torin, on the other hand, was totally in his element. He was beaming from ear to ear and bossing everyone around in that good-natured way he had. He’d also brought out more crafting supplies than I’d ever seen in once place in my life, and he was instructing a small group on how to make something called “paper poofs” for decorations. I couldn’t imagine what the hell those were, and from the looks on Sage’s and Zainab’s faces as Torin explained it, they didn’t either. *Better them than me.*

I was elated to stay out of the way and not be part of the party planning committee. I was content to sit off to the side, watching a little and mostly minding my business while everyone rushed around me. I was preoccupied, anyway, and couldn’t push the whole Xavier and Greyson thing out of my mind as easily as the others could. As much as I believed that Xavier was the better Alpha, I didn’t think that the struggle between him and Greyson was over. Far from it. I could tell that Greyson was up to something. I’d seen him brooding in the corner earlier while someone forced him to taste test a tray of cocktails for the party. He’d looked like he was a million miles away, and I knew that he was thinking about how he was going to get his position back from Xavier. I didn’t know if anyone else saw what I saw, but to me, it was written all over his face.

I turned to see Ravi coming down the stairs, and we locked eyes. For those few seconds, time seemed to slow down, a rush of heat flooded my cheeks, and I all but stopped breathing. Immediately, I scooted over next to Sage and pretended to be engrossed in how she was stacking sheets of technicolor tissue paper. I grabbed a few sheets and started twisting them together, my hands shaking like a leaf.

“What are you doing?” Sage asked, giving me a weird look. “Give me those, you’re doing it all wrong.” Sage snatched the stack of tissue paper from my hands and rolled her eyes.

I ignored her and yanked them right back, keeping my head down and grabbing a pair of scissors as if I were about to cut something. Knowing Sage would lose her shit if I brought my scissors anywhere near their paper poof supplies, I looked around for something—anything—to shred to bits as Ravi came closer.

“Hey, can we talk?” Ravi asked as he approached.

I looked up at him and feigned surprise. Sage and Zainab shot curious glances my way.

“Um, it’s a bad time, I’m super busy.” I held up my scissors, opening and closing them a few times for emphasis, and showed him my papercraft. I winced internally—it was just a crumpled ball of paper, and everyone was looking at me like I’d grown another head.

Zainab shot me a dismissive look. “We don’t need you here. Go.”

*Thanks a lot. This pack sucks, for real. How hard would it have been to cover for me?*

Reluctantly, I stood up. Ravi turned and started up the stairs. *Oh, he thinks we’re going to talk in one of the bedrooms? Fat chance.* I thought about us being alone in such a close, private space again. We didn’t have the best track record with that, and the thought of being so near to him again made me feel a little dizzy.

“Ravi, why don’t we take a little walk?” I asked. *Maybe the fresh air will keep me from going all stupid again.*

Ravi shrugged. “Sure.”

“Perfect, let’s go.”

I threw on a coat, and Ravi followed me out the front door. I felt better the second we were out in the crisp, fresh winter air. My mind felt much clearer, and somehow it felt easier to be around him without walls closing us in. Still, I was pretty anxious. I wished that Ravi would let it go. We’d had a drunken night together. So what? Not a big deal. So why was he taking it so seriously?

We walked around aimlessly for a bit in semi-awkward silence, kind of making our way toward the woods. Ravi’s hand brushed against mine, and a little electric shock snaked up my arm. I pulled my hand away as if I’d been burned.

Ravi must have felt it too, because he turned and looked at me. “Come on, Ava. Are you really going to pretend that what happened between us wasn’t a big deal?”

He sounded as exasperated as I felt.

I considered his words while doing my best to avoid his gaze, since just looking at him was too intense. When we’d locked eyes in the house, I’d nearly hyperventilated and had resorted to crafts of all things to avoid him.

I shrugged and tried to sound casual. “Ravi, that’s because it *wasn’t* a big deal. We got drunk, we hooked up. So what?”

Ravi stopped walking and put a hand on my shoulder, forcing me to stop and look at him. Another jolt of electricity raced through my body at his touch. What in the hell was up with me? It felt like we were two live wires that shouldn’t be anywhere near each other, because we might spark an electrical storm.

“*So what*? Really, Ava? You and I both know it was bigger than that.” Ravi sighed and looked away, searching the horizon. “Listen. It’s not like I was looking for this to happen either. You’re like, quasi-evil, and everyone knows that you’re still hung up on Xavier.”

*What? Everyone knows?* I guessed I’d never made that a secret—especially since I’d masqueraded around as Cali just to get close to Xavier. Though that hadn’t entirely been my decision—it had mostly been Silas’s fault. I pushed that memory out of my head as quickly as I could. I didn’t even want to think about Silas right now. He was the reason we were in this mess in the first place.

“And I just lost Joss,” Ravi continued. “But pretending that this”—Ravi gestured back and forth between us—“isn’t happening is naïve. We can both feel that there’s something here. Don’t act like I’m the only one.”

I finally met his gaze and felt an even stronger frisson that I couldn’t deny—one that felt a hell of a lot like a mate connection, if I was being honest with myself. Ravi shivered a bit, and again, I knew that he’d felt what I’d felt. It was a shock to the senses, realizing that there was something undeniable forming between me and Ravi. Especially when there was only one man that I wanted as a mate—the only man I’d ever wanted, Xavier. Why was this happening? How could I feel this way about Ravi and still have such strong feelings for Xavier?

“Fine!” I snapped, turning away from him. “But even if there is some kind of… connection, here, neither of us want it. Like you said, I’m quasi-evil or whatever, and I’m into Xavier, so what’s the point in beating a dead horse? Stop harping on about it. If we just ignore it, I’m sure it’ll go away. Problem solved.” *Please, let that solve the problem!*

Ravi shook his head, and a wistful smile played on his lips. “Ava, you know that isn’t true. You and I both know that that’s not how mate connections work. No matter how much you want to deny it, you know that that’s what this feels like—a mate connection.”

“Shit!” I stamped my foot, feeling like a child throwing a tantrum. Why was this happening right now of all times? I’d just had a breakthrough with Xavier. He’d kissed me! My skin tingled as I remembered the delicious press of Xavier’s lips against mine. It had felt as amazing as I remembered. Sure, he’d thought I was on my deathbed—and I *had* been, pretty much—but it had still proven that Xavier cared for me, and that there was still something between us. I wanted to explore that, but how could I with this Ravi stuff getting in the way? If there really was a mate connection forming, then Ravi was right—and the electric jolts that raced through my body every time we touched only confirmed it further.

I frowned. “Well whatever this is between us, you should know that I have no intention of becoming your mate. Like, at all.”

Somehow, I felt like I was betraying Xavier by even admitting it, but it would be crazy of me to continue to deny something that was so obvious.

Ravi snorted. “I’m not trying to beg you to be my mate, believe me. I’m not looking for that, either, so get over yourself. What I’m saying is, what do we do now?”

**Episode 1882**

MARTA

“Lilac, Marta, I’m trusting you with one of the most important tasks there is,” Torin said, thrusting a ladle at us as he spoke. “As you both know, this is all a team effort. I’ve already checked in with the craft team, and they fully understand their duties and what is at stake here, and they’re chugging along well—so we’re all good on decorations. As for you two, Artemis and Rishika put together a shopping list, and I want you to go pick up the supplies. As I said, this is a very important mission. Can you do it?”

Lilac and I exchanged a quick look. I could tell that Lilac was brimming with excitement. To me, this was all sounding suspiciously like battle commands. In fact, I didn’t even think Xavier had been this rigid before the actual battle with Letifer.

“A grocery store? Really? I haven’t been to one of those in ages!” Lilac was, as always, enthusiastic. He looked at me and clapped his hands. “Ooh! And a ride in the car! We’re in. Right, Marta?”

I wished that I could share Lilac’s enthusiasm, but I wasn’t in the mood. I’d been feeling nervous ever since that weird thing with the plants at breakfast. What *was* that? I’d made a whole plant wilt and die just by touching it. I’d even gone around touching other plants to see what happened, but there’d been nothing. Maybe I’d been seeing things. It wouldn’t have been the first time—though those other times, my supposed hallucinations had actually been real.

Realizing that I wasn’t paying attention, Lilac turned back to Torin, answering for the both of us. “We’re in!”

A few minutes later, we were in the car, and my mood had thankfully lifted quite a bit—which wasn’t too surprising, since Lilac’s enthusiasm was nothing if not infectious. He had a way of making you feel stupid for being down in the dumps, and today I didn’t mind it. Lilac was in rare form today, though. Everything was exciting him.

“I want to catch up on the Top 40! I’ve been out of commission for a while. I’ve never even heard most of these songs,” he said, switching radio stations every few seconds. A super popular, super scandalous song about celebrating women’s… wet assets… came on, and Lilac’s eyes widened so much that I thought they were about to pop out of his head. He turned it up to the max and hung his head out of the window with his eyes closed.

“Oh my gosh, Lilac!” I was cracking up. He was acting exactly like a puppy on his first trip to the dog park, and it was literally one of the cutest things I’d ever seen. Who knew that I could be attracted to someone this… happy?

I was almost disappointed when we got to the grocery store, but luckily Lilac’s excitement transferred from the car ride to all the things inside the store.

“Oh my gosh! They have free samples of honey ham in the deli today!” he shouted, pointing at a banner hanging over the entryway. “We absolutely have to try it! Oh—and there’s a sale on pies and cupcakes at the bakery… and they have a buy one, get one free deal on potato chips! Now that I can taste stuff again, I have a giant list of all my old favorites to pick up.”

“You’re gonna single-handedly eat the entire pack’s budget for groceries,” I laughed, but still quickly agreed to his requests. If only everyone could be satisfied by the prospect of buying groceries. Lilac was easily impressed, which I supposed was a good thing.

“Oh my god, there’s a cheese sample table!” Lilac sprinted over and grabbed three toothpicks of exotic cheese and popped them in his mouth. He rolled his eyes and clutched at his chest as he chewed. “Delectable! Divine!”

“They’re three for five with your loyalty card,” said the bored-looking worker running the cheese table.

“Whoa, you’re all but *giving* away this delicious, decadent cheese?”

The worker flashed Lilac a strange look. “It’s just cheese, dude.”

“I know, that’s what I mean!”

I had to admit that I’d never seen anyone this excited about cheese—or food, for that matter—in my life. But his excitement was only serving to elevate my mood even more, so I was good with it.

Lilac yanked a cart out of the corral by the door and raced ahead of me. I tried to keep up with him as he ran up and down the aisles, plucking all kinds of things from the shelves and tossing them into his cart.

“Kraft Mac and Cheese? Yes please! Cream cheese stuffed olives in vinegar? Just try to keep me away! Cap’n Crunch cereal? Oh, how I’ve missed this!” He threw three boxes of that into the cart and then raced over to the freezer section. “How much ice cream do you think we can fit in the freezer back at the pack house? Would eight tubs be too much?”

All of this was undeniably adorable, and I could tell from the looks on other people’s faces that they either found it adorable or strange. Either way, they were right. It was definitely a little of both.

“Lilac, I know you’re having a great time, but you weren’t dead all that long, and you should try to stay focused—we have a list, after all. Let’s stick to it.”

“Mm, yes. Lists. So, do you think I could buy graham crackers separately and then mix them into all the tubs of ice cream at a later time?” He was already heading to the cracker aisle, and I watched him toss three boxes of graham crackers into the cart before his attention was drawn elsewhere.

I rolled my eyes and looked around. “If you keep this up, we’re going to need another cart, Lilac.”

“Oh, thanks for volunteering to go get another one,” he said, without even looking at me.

As I went back to the front of the store to grab another cart, I realized that I was a bit captivated by the grocery store, too. Things had definitely changed since the 60s, and there was a ton of stuff that I’d never seen before. By the time I returned to Lilac’s side with the cart, I was feeling a bit excited by all the food choices, too. I’d seen not one, not two, but like, two hundred types of hot sauce on my way back from grabbing the cart.

Finally getting into the grocery shopping spirit, I trailed after Lilac as we zoomed up and down the aisles.

“Ooh, I bet we could use this for something fun!” I said, showing him a huge bottle of chocolate syrup.

He looked at me, confused.

“For hot chocolate? No! Chocolate milk?” he asked, taking it from me and examining the bottle.

“No, I was thinking of something a little more… racy.”

“Oh, as a topping for fries?” Lilac said, wiggling his eyebrows.

“Just put it in the cart, Lilac.”

We were running around like maniacs, eliciting odd glances from everyone we passed, but I didn’t mind it. In fact, I was relishing it. It was yet another reminder of how awesome it was to have a Lilac that everyone could see and hear by my side. He was a breath of fresh air, and again, I felt thankful that I’d found him and that he was fully back in the land of the living.

As our carts piled up, I took out our list and checked it over. We were almost out of cart space, but we’d also picked up almost everything on the list. I frowned at one of the few things that we still hadn’t crossed out. “Truffle oil? What’s that?”

Lilac shrugged and took the list from me, studying the word. “I don’t know, maybe it’s the same as olive oil?”

The store was enormous, and we wound up and down the aisles, looking for where they kept all the oils. We moved through the dairy section, which was freezing cold. I shivered, and Lilac noticed. He came over and ran his warm hands up and down my arms. I shivered again, though this time it wasn’t because of the cold.

Sensing the shift, Lilac smirked at me. “Did that warm you up?”

“You don’t know the half of it,” I said, looking into his eyes.

We stayed that way for a minute, surrounded by yogurt and milk and cheese (I hoped that Lilac wouldn’t notice how much cheese there was, or we’d never get out of here), and I knew that this was exactly where I wanted to be, and who I wanted to be with.

We continued our search for the truffle oil, and finally found it near the front of the store. I tossed a big bottle of it into the cart.

“Great, now we just need to grab the veggies and then we should have everything,” I said.

In the produce section, I read off the last few things on the list as Lilac searched them out and tossed them into our brimming carts. We probably could’ve used a third cart from the way things were looking, but that was where I drew the line.

“And lettuce,” I said, looking down and realizing that it was right beside me. I picked up a particularly lush head of lettuce—and then screamed and dropped it in horror. The lettuce had withered to a disgusting brown color, just like that plant had earlier.

Lilac started and looked down at the lettuce on the ground. He hadn’t seen what had happened. He wrinkled his nose. “Ew, that one’s gross. It went bad, or something. Here,” he said, grabbing another one and tossing it to me.

The moment the lettuce touched my hands, it started to wilt, exactly like the other one. I yelped, dropping it to the ground.

“Marta! What’s going on?” Lilac was looking back and forth between me and the growing pile of ruined lettuce on the ground with a concerned look on his face.

I didn’t answer. I was already moving toward the rest of the produce.

I reached out and touched a green pepper. Just like the lettuce, it wilted under my touch. I pulled my hand away quickly, but it was too late. Everything that was touching the green pepper began to wilt and rot.

“Hey, what did you do to the cabbages?” a stock boy yelled, looking at both of us with his eyes narrowed to slits.

I turned to Lilac as he took in the sight of row after row of wilting vegetables, his mouth open in shock.

“Lilac, we need to go, now!”

**Episode 1883**

I wove through the activity in the pack house, looking for Xavier so that I could let him know I was going to go out with Lola in support of her learning to hunt. I passed by the living room on the way and saw Torin standing over Sage and Zainab like a drill sergeant while they turned tissue paper into festive party decorations. I didn’t envy those two. There were two things Torin didn’t play around with—food and crafts.

I finally found Xavier coming in from the porch with a troubled look on his face. I stopped him. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, I’m fine,” he said, waving me off and smiling. “Nothing you need to worry about.”

“Oh, okay,” I said, deciding not to press the issue. “I wanted to let you know that I’m worried about Lola—she’s feeling a little out of place as the only vamp in the pack house, so I’m going to help her hunt.”

“A hunt, really?” Xavier was clearly amused. “Lola and you?” He studied me closely. “That doesn’t seem like something you two would be into.”

“Well, granted, I’ve never gone hunting before. But Lola has to eat, and I’d do anything to help her.”

Xavier smirked, giving me that fond look that I loved. He’d been so stressed lately that it was nice to see him looking happy. “I know that—you’re always there for your friends. That’s one of my favorite things about you, you know. You’re always willing to do whatever it takes to help the people you love.”

I looked up into his eyes, and he returned my gaze head on as all the suggestion and heat that we could pack into a stare flared between us. I wished that everything was a little less complicated. If it were, I’d be able to just fall into his arms and kiss him, and—

I shook myself out of it. This wasn’t the time. I had to focus on Lola. Being there for her when she needed me most was the most important thing. I wanted Lola to realize how much I cared about her, so running off with Xavier when she needed me was not in the cards.

“We won’t be gone long, and we’ll definitely be back before the engagement party gets going—and we won’t go far,” I said quickly. I could tell from the look on Xavier’s face that he wasn’t too keen about me going off into the woods without him. I wondered if he was still going to be protective even though the battle was over and the threat was gone.

In the end, he surprised me. “Okay—you two be careful. Wait, you’re not taking a rifle out there with you or anything, right? I love you, but I’m not sure that I trust you with heavy weaponry.”

I shuddered. “No, of course not. I’m just going along as Lola’s emotional support friend. I have no intention of actually killing anything myself.”

I stretched up to give Xavier a kiss on the cheek and lingered there for a moment, inhaling his spicy, masculine scent and enjoying the heat rolling off his body. I pulled away, clearing my throat as Xavier considered me with a knowing look in his dark blue eyes.

“Don’t be gone long, and call me if you need anything,” he said huskily.

“Xavier, get over here! We need another set of hands!” Torin called out.

“Duty calls.” Xavier rolled his eyes and hustled off to the living room.

As I made my way upstairs to let Lola know that we were good to go, I couldn’t help but reflect on what I knew about hunting—I wanted to actually be useful. Being from Minnesota, the one thing I remembered about hunting season was that hunters wore bright clothing. I burst into Lola’s room, feeling excited. It felt good to have a purpose that had nothing to do with the undead or evil spirits or curses. Well, fine, Lola was *technically* undead, but she was the good kind.

Lola was perched on her bed, and she looked up at me as I came in.

“Xavier gave us the green light,” I sang. “It’s time to get going.”

Lola stood up and stretched. “I’m ready.”

I shook my head at her. “Oh no you aren’t. Not yet.”

I whirled over to Lola’s closet and started looking through her clothing, quickly picking out the brightest things she owned and throwing them onto the bed. Lola looked at the pile of clothes, then up at me. “Uh… so are we going to a rave or something?”

“A rave? No! Don’t you remember how we all had to wear bright clothes when we went out into the woods during hunting season?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure that was to keep *other* hunters from shooting you. That doesn’t seem like an issue here.”

I shushed her. “We need to get ourselves into the right headspace. The first step in taking up a new hobby is wearing the right outfit. Once you have that, everything else falls into place.”

Lola was looking at me like I’d lost it, but I could tell that she was lightening up. I wanted her to relax and think of this whole hunting animals for blood thing as an exciting adventure, not some awful chore that she had to deal with in order to survive her new normal.

“So, what’s it going to be?” I asked.

Giving her time to decide, I dashed off into my room and got dressed, then went back to join Lola. I galloped through her door, twirling around in my outfit.

“So, what do you think?” I asked.

We both stared at each other and burst out laughing. We looked ridiculous. I was in a head-to-toe neon green jogging suit, and Lola was in hot pink coveralls with a matching jacket.

“Wow. If we do happen to see any animals out there, they’re going to run the other way the second they get a glimpse of us.”

“Speak for yourself, Lola. I look damn good. Any animal would be lucky to see something this fashion forward coming their way. I’ll be the most exciting thing they will have seen in years after being surrounded by all those dull greens and browns and stuff.”

We melted into giggles.

“Well, hopefully you’re right. Maybe they’ll be so shocked that they’ll keel over at the sight of us, and we won’t even have to hunt them at all!” Lola said. It was a little morbid, but we were cracking up.

“If it were only that easy,” I giggled.

I was enjoying this moment with Lola more than I could’ve ever imagined. I felt a little giddy, and I could tell that Lola was feeling the same way. Just messing around and being silly with my friend was something I’d missed—and it was long overdue. Things had been so tense between us before that it was nice to have a moment to release all that awkwardness and get back to the way we used to be together—always laughing and having fun. We hadn’t had a chance to let loose for a long time, especially with how serious and dangerous things had been lately.

When our laughter finally died down, Lola took a deep breath and gave me a serious look. “So, are we really going to wear this?”

I grinned. “Hell, yeah we are!” I took a moment to take in Lola’s getup again, feeling nostalgic. “You know, this reminds me of when we used to play dress-up in your basement. You always used to have the best costumes.”

Lola nodded. “Yeah, I remember that.”

“A lot has changed since then, huh?”

“It has,” Lola said, looping her arm through mine before giving it a squeeze. “But not everything.”

“So happy that we’re good again.” I almost didn’t want to mention it, but I needed Lola to know how much she meant to me. It had been pure torture when she was mad at me, and it was so great to have my best friend back.

“Oh, we’re beyond good!” Lola replied.

“Okay. So *now* we’re ready.” Arm in arm, we made our way downstairs.

“My eyes! Please, someone help! I’m blind—it’s too bright!” Artemis said as soon as we hit the bottom step. She threw her hands up over her eyes and stumbled around the living room, knocking into people.

“Oh, you love it, Artemis,” Lola teased.

We got more of the same as we made our way through the house. The energy in the pack house was so joyful and light—I’d almost forgotten how fun it was to live here when there weren’t murderous hordes stalking our every move. We went out the back door and walked to the edge of the woods. I knew there was a trail that started somewhere nearby, and Lola and I searched for a few minutes until we found it.

“Shall we?” I said, taking a deep breath.

“We shall.” Lola still sounded cheerful, but I could tell that her nerves were starting to get the best of her again.

I squeezed her arm reassuringly, and we made our way down the trail. Birds chirped as we went, and though it was chilly, it was a beautiful sunny day, complete with blue skies and minimal wind.

“I don’t know,” Lola said after a few minutes. “How are we ever going to find any animals? It’s not like we’re trackers or anything. Maybe we should’ve brought Jay—”

Just then, we walked over the crest of a hill and froze. A buck! It was only a few yards down the path, and it lifted its head and looked at us, probably assessing whether the two loudly dressed women were threats or not. I held Lola still beside me, knowing that any sudden move would send the buck dashing off into the woods.

I looked at Lola and whispered, “Game time!”

**Episode 1884**

GREYSON

I had to find Ravi. He’d supported me in the original pre-battle vote for Alpha, and I needed some advice and some intel—if he had it—about what the current situation was with the pack. Were people still backing me, or had things shifted over to Xavier? I was starting to wonder if the latter would be so bad, given the vision I’d had about Cali dying if I became Alpha. I was officially at a loss. I’d replayed the witches’ visions over and over again in my head, and nothing was any clearer.

Being Alpha was my role and had been my identity for a while now, and simply giving it up to Xavier, especially without a fight, wasn’t what I wanted. But losing Cali wasn’t an option whatsoever. I was definitely at an impasse, and I wasn’t sure how I was going to get out of it—but there had to be a way. In the meantime, I needed to get my finger on the pack’s pulse to see what they were thinking.

I ducked into one of the studies, checked the kitchen, the den, the living room, but I couldn’t find Ravi anywhere. I’d asked a couple of people if they’d seen him, but no one had. Finally, I saw Ravi coming in through the back door. I beckoned to him, and he came over to me.

“Hey, Greyson, what’s up?”

“Hi, been looking for you. I was hoping that we could talk.”

Ravi nodded, then glanced over my shoulder. A look I couldn’t quite read passed over his face, and I turned to see what it was that had caught his attention. Ava. She was looking kind of shifty—which wasn’t strange in and of itself, but I still wondered what the hell she was up to. I didn’t think I’d ever be able to trust her fully, even after all of her help with Letifer. Well, she was Xavier’s concern for now, not mine. I had enough to deal with already.

“Let’s go chat in the study,” I said.

The pack house felt fuller than ever, even though the Blue Bloods had left. There were people everywhere, decorating and cooking and mixing drinks and laughing. It was nice to see everyone so at ease, and it was disappointing that I couldn’t fully give myself over to it. There was too much on my mind, and I didn’t have the luxury of relaxing. Not yet.

I led Ravi into the study and shut the door behind us.

“I hope the pack understands that I’m not giving up on being Alpha,” I said, deciding not to waste any time. “It’s… complicated.”

Ravi gave me a confused look. “Then why don’t you fight for it, then? I don’t get it.”

It was frustrating that I couldn’t just tell him the whole reason, that Cali might be in danger if I took over again. It was even more frustrating that I even had to fight for it in the first place. I should have known Xavier would have pulled a stunt like this.

“I didn’t want to give Xavier the satisfaction. Me refusing to fight him right then and there—I know it drove him crazy. I’m sad to say that it was worth it to see him out of sorts. Plus, I have a plan, and I’m not going to make my move until I wrap up a few loose ends.”

“Whatever you say, man,” Ravi said with a shrug.

“I know it seems crazy, but the pack has been through so much violence, so much bloodshed. Having a fight now would only have been dangerous for the pack—something Xavier doesn’t recognize, of course, because he’s too self-centered.” *And too pig-headed, and too hell-bent on having Cali all for himself.*

Ravi knitted his brow. “I don’t get what you mean. Werewolves have fought for Alpha for centuries.”

I paused, trying to figure out the best way to explain it. “Both Xavier and I—as well as everyone else in the pack—are worn down from battle. We’re not in top form. Any fight between us would be messy, and would have left both of us weakened no matter who won. For me, there’s no glory in being Alpha if it means that the pack is in no shape to defend itself from other threats. Besides, Xavier’s pride is at an all-time high right now. I’m not sure how well he’d take a loss.”

Ravi nodded slowly. “I see what you mean. It’s insightful—which is one of the reasons why I voted for you in the first place.”

It felt really good to hear that, to know that even though I wasn’t Alpha at the moment, people still respected me and my opinions on the pack. I’d tried really hard to put the pack first in everything I did, and I really did have their best interests at heart. Hopefully they could still see that, even though I wasn’t clawing and fighting Xavier yet to get it back.

We both turned at a knock on the door.

“Hey, are there warm bodies in there?” It was Torin.

“Hey, Torin,” I said, opening the door a crack.

“Hey, glad it’s you.” He pushed the door open further. “And Ravi. Perfect, though now that I think about it, I’ll probably only need one of you. I need a little help moving the mulled cider. Come with me, it’s in the kitchen.”

Ravi and I followed Torin into the kitchen, where he pointed to one of the biggest pots I’d ever seen in my life.

“Don’t tell me that’s the mulled cider,” I said.

“Of course it is! For the best taste, it needs to simmer on the fire outside for a bit, but I can’t move it out there myself. Besides, I still have so much to do—there’s still a lot of cooking that needs to be done, and I haven’t even begun to decide if I want there to be a dress code, and…”

Torin was keeping busy, that much was clear, but it seemed a little like he was using the engagement party as a way to distract himself from everything that had happened with Astrid—and who could blame him? We all dealt with death differently, and there was no way I was going to tell the Fae how to handle his grief. I could only imagine the void that Astrid’s death had left in his life.

“… and so once we get the mulled cider outside, I can start to take care of all that. So, will you help?”

I shot a look at Ravi. I wanted to continue our conversation—I was especially interested in learning if he had any insight on how other people in the pack were feeling about things, where the lines were drawn and all that—but it could wait. I said a prayer for my back and donned a pair of oven mitts that Torin had set aside for the task.

“Lift with your legs, Greyson!” Torin called out as Ravi and I lugged the massive pot of cider—which smelled incredible—outside to the firepit that Tom was stoking with a look of concentration etched on his face. We put the pot down gently on the fire, and Torin gave me a hard pat on the back before he rushed back inside, moving on to the next thing.

I took a moment to look around, taking in how well everything was coming together. It was quite impressive. Orla was adding the finishing touches to a massive floral arrangement that twisted up from the ground and reached high into the sky, and Rishika was busy setting up chairs and tables. Everyone was hustling around, and there was a collective happiness in the air as everyone lost themselves in working toward something positive for a change.

“Thanks again, Greyson. I’ll make sure I save a cup special for you—this is going to go fast during the party,” Tom said, stirring the cider.

“Thanks, Tom, I look forward to it,” I said, though I couldn’t imagine that we would ever run out of that much cider. We’d probably be drinking the stuff for the next year.

I headed back into the house, encouraged that Ravi still thought I was the best Alpha. There had to be other pack members who felt the same. Still, before I could make any moves toward putting things back the way they were supposed to be, I needed to get to the bottom of what the witches had told me. I had to figure out how, and why, Cali was connected to my role as Alpha. Maybe I’d misinterpreted the vision. Maybe there was a way for me to be Alpha *and* for Cali to be safe, but I couldn’t be sure.

I had a sudden thought. I ran upstairs to my room and yanked open one of my dresser drawers. I rummaged around until I found the card the witches had given me when they’d said that I should contact them once I made my decision about what I wanted to do about the *due destini* curse. I still wasn’t ready to decide about that, but I had something else in mind that they could help me out with instead.

**Episode 1885**

XAVIER

Jay and I were working out in the basement, taking a break from the engagement party prep madness upstairs for a moment so that we could get our daily reps in. It had been pretty hard to get away from Torin, and I’d all but had to sneak down here. Once I’d made a clean break, I’d sent Jay a text in the hope that he’d be able to escape as well.

Though I was excited to work out with Jay, that wasn’t the only thing I was after. I wanted to speak to him alone. I knew—or at least hoped—that I could count on Jay’s support in my bid for Alpha. We’d always been close, and out of everyone in the pack, he was one of my closest friends.

I shot a quick glance at him. “How do you think Lola and Cali are doing on their little hunting excursion?”

Jay burst out laughing so hard that he had to drop his weights to the floor. “Did you see what they were wearing when they headed out? They looked like two highlighter pens.”

“I did, man, I did.” Cali had looked hot, of course, if not a little tacky. “Anything they’re hunting is going to see them coming a mile away and get the hell out of dodge,” I said, remembering the sight of them making their way down the lawn to the woods. They’d looked so happy. Thinking about it warmed my heart. All I wanted was for Cali to be that happy every single day.

“Right, there’s no way in hell they’re going to catch anything like that.”

I shrugged. “Who knows, maybe we’re being too hard on them. I mean, they might be able to blind an animal long enough to get close to it.”

We both laughed. It felt nice to laugh, and it was a little sad that I couldn’t quite remember the last time I’d laughed so hard.

“Well, I’m just happy that they were able to put their differences aside. Lola might act all tough, but I knew it was killing her to keep pushing Cali away like that.”

“Yeah, it was hard on Cali, too. Those two are like sisters.”

A beat of silence passed between us, and I knew that Jay was thinking what I was thinking: about how bad things were between me and my actual brother. Things had never been great between Greyson and me, but lately things were worse than they’d ever been, and they weren’t going to get any better if our newest struggle was any indication. I thought about my conversation with Rishika earlier. She’d made it clear that things weren’t cut and dry, and that there were plenty of pack members who still supported Greyson as Alpha.

I turned to Jay. “Hey man, can I ask you something?”

“Sure, anything.”

“Did I… Did I do the right thing?” Jay was the only person, maybe other than Cali, who I felt comfortable asking that sort of question. It showed a vulnerability that I didn’t want anyone else to see, but I knew that I could trust Jay to give it to me straight.

“I think you did what you thought was right at the time,” Jay said. “And I don’t pretend to know how hard it is to fight for Alpha. I’m sure it was a hard decision for you to make.” Jay had picked up his weights again and was pumping away, probably looking for anything to take the edge off our conversation.

“Sure, but from where I stand, I was the one who led the pack safely through the battle. Letifer threatened our entire existence, and Greyson wasn’t in any position to face him, so I had to be the one to step up. Shouldn’t the one who does that be the person remains the pack’s official Alpha? Greyson couldn’t lead the pack during one of the roughest events we’ve ever faced, so doesn’t that mean he isn’t fit for the job?”

Jay flashed a thoughtful look. “You’re not wrong… But Greyson wasn’t quite himself then. He seems back to normal now, though.”

*Oh, is that how it is?* “What, so you do think that Greyson should be Alpha instead of me now that he’s better?”

Jay winced and shook his head, speeding up his reps. “I didn’t say that, man, don’t put words in my mouth. You know that I know what you’re capable of more than anyone. I’ve seen time and time again the way you put the pack first, and… I still think that Greyson’s distracted about something.”

“Totally!” Not to mention that I’d never seen Greyson back down from a fight—especially not a fight with me. “And I’m not distracted in the least. I’m as on point as I’ve ever been. I’m here, and I’m definitely myself,” I said with a wink. “I’m ready to step in now. Can’t the rest of the pack support that?”

I was starting to feel the burn in my arms, and I realized that I’d been doing my reps quicker than usual. I set my weights on the floor and stretched out a little, letting my arms hang loose. I looked at Jay. He seemed uncomfortable, and I hated to put him in an awkward position, but I needed to know exactly where the pack stood.

“Look Xavier, you know that I support you. I always have and I always will, but I can’t say that I blame the pack members who aren’t so sure. Being Alpha—it’s a big deal. It’s not a decision to be taken lightly.”

“I assure you that I’m not taking this lightly at all—why do you think I’m asking you? Why do you think I feel so strongly I’m the right Alpha for this pack?”

Jay sighed and dropped his weights. He whipped the towel from his shoulder and swiped it over the sweat beading on his brow. “I get it. Just keep your focus on the pack; keep proving yourself. I’m sure that soon, everyone will come around.”

“Will they, though?”

Jay was about to answer when Ava appeared at the top of the stairs and started making her way down.

Jay frowned. “What do you want?”

Ava eyed him coolly and then turned her attention to me.

*Of course. I don’t need this right now.*

“I only wanted to talk to Xavier.”

Jay gave me a look that asked whether I wanted him to stay or not. “It’s fine Jay, I’m good. I’ll catch up with you later.”

“Okay, catch you later.” Jay put his shirt back on and bounded upstairs. He had a look on his face like he was actually looking forward to being back in the thick of party planning and at Torin’s beck and call after our talk and Ava’s appearance. Come to think of it, I wouldn’t have minded hanging streamers myself if it got me away from Ava. I sighed and dried my face and arms with my towel, watching as Ava made a slow lap around the gym area, running her fingers over the weights and throwing a soft punch at the heavy bag in the corner.

“So, you said you wanted to talk. What is it?”

Ava took a seat on one of the weight benches, avoiding my gaze. “I thought you might want to know that I saw Greyson going around talking to pack members about this whole Alpha debacle. Looks to me like he’s trying to drum up support for some kind of coup. You need to watch your back.”

Here she was again, pretending to be my only friend, acting like she was looking out for me. That kiss I’d given her had only reignited the weirdness between us, and I regretted it more than she would ever understand.

“I already know that,” I said. “I spoke to Rishika, and she told me that the pack is pretty much split on who they’re supporting.”

“Oh?” Ava said, finally looking up at me. She seemed disappointed that she hadn’t given me new information.

*Just as I thought.* She was so manipulative. Did she ever do anything without a motive? All she was doing was trying to gain my favor, and little did she know, she would never get it. Not after everything she’d done. All I wanted was to be rid of her, but it didn’t seem like she was taking the hint—or the outright requests for her to get lost.

“So, thanks for the update, Ava, but I’ve got it handled.” I gave her a stiff smile, hoping that she would take it as a cue to leave me be.

She frowned. “Do you really have it handled? Because from where I’m standing, you’re on rocky ground. That isn’t where an Alpha wants to be, is it?”

All right. Now I was getting pissed. “Listen Ava, this is none of your concern. I said I’m handling it, and I am. I got it, all right?”

Ava leapt up and got in my face. “Oh yeah? Then what, exactly, are you going to do about this Greyson situation?”

**Episode 1886**

MARTA

With my eyes wide in shock and horror, I sped away from the vegetables as the dark cloud of rot passed from one formerly green, healthy vegetable to another until the entire produce aisle looked like something you could’ve found in the dumpster out back.

“What’s happening?” Lilac asked, right on my heels.

I shook my head. “I don’t really now, but there’s no time to figure it out. Hurry, we have to go. Now!” I half ran, half walked toward the entrance as Lilac jogged beside me, looking back longingly at our carts of food. I could still hear the stock boy yelling about the blackened cabbages, and I knew that any minute now, we’d have a bunch of disgruntled grocery store people chasing after us.

“But—but—what about all the groceries we’re supposed to get? Torin’s going to kill us!”

“Too bad. Maybe we can come back when my touch won’t kill everything in sight.”

Great, we were almost there. I could see the sliding glass exit doors ahead of us, and I picked up speed as Lilac fell into step beside me.

He scrunched up his nose, deep in thought. “Maybe… Maybe all those rotten veggies were just really close to their expiration dates?”

I shook my head and shot him a look. I knew that he was trying to lighten the mood, but this wasn’t the time. I could feel panic rippling up inside me. When this had happened before, at breakfast, I told myself that it was nothing, that I was just imagining things. I convinced myself that maybe the plant had been dead already and I just hadn’t noticed, but after all this—decimating an entire produce aisle—I wasn’t so sure. I couldn’t stop picturing the way the lettuce had wilted in my hand, like I was poisonous or something. There was nothing anyone could say to erase the image of the devastation and havoc I’d caused from my mind.

Finally, out in the parking lot, I took a deep breath. We were almost in the clear. Before I knew it, my brain started to spin through all the possibilities. Needing to talk it through, I whispered my entire thought process to Lilac, who leaned close and listened intently.

“So, as we all know, I’m a portal to the underworld. I can summon the dead, among other things.” I pictured all the rows of dead veggies, and the dead plant from earlier today. “What if there’s been some sort of reversal of my powers, and now I’m not a summoner of the dead, but a *bringer* of death?” I hissed.

I shivered as I imagined how life would be, living as a person who couldn’t touch anyone because if I did, they’d shrivel up like an old prune. My breath quickened, and my heart started racing. A bringer of death? I was literally afraid of myself—and afraid for anyone who had the misfortune of coming into contact with my… my *death hands*!

“Calm down, Marta. It’s going to be okay. Take a deep breath.”

“I’m trying!” I panted. I leaned against the car, closed my eyes, and tried to catch my breath. I just needed to clear my head—and to do that, I needed to forget that my entire world had just shifted.

I opened my eyes. Lilac was so close that I could see how shockingly clear and blue his eyes were. I didn’t know what it was about them at that very moment, but it seemed like I was only now just noticing how absolutely gorgeous they were. I supposed that his eyes hadn’t been this vibrant, of course, when he was a ghost. Just looking at them relaxed me, and my heartbeat started to slow.

“See, everything’s okay. You aren’t some sort of death-bringer. You’re just my sweet, strong Marta.”

I was a little relieved that he was so close to me and seemed to be fine, but I shook my head. “Lilac, you don’t know how much I want to believe that everything is okay, that I’m not some sort of…” I didn’t even want to finish the sentence, so I didn’t. “But you don’t know that for sure. What happened back there with all those innocent vegetables—that definitely wasn’t normal.”

Lilac cocked his head to the side and shrugged, looking far away, as if he were picturing the carnage that I’d just left behind. “I have to agree that you’re right about that— but it’s no use panicking just yet. Let’s get back to the pack house and talk with Kira and Big Mac. They’ll be able to make sense of all this.”

There was something about the sound of Lilac’s voice that calmed me down and made me feel like everything was going to be okay. Lilac was right—I had two powerful witches on my side, and they would be able to help for sure. I remembered that I was supposed to meet with them soon anyway to plan for my defense in my upcoming unsanctioned necromancy trial. I wondered what the “courts” would say if they knew about my latest superpower. I winced and pressed my eyes shut again, hoping that maybe, just maybe, the whole thing had been a fluke that would never happen again.

“Is that your phone?” Lilac asked.

I jumped. I’d been so distracted that I hadn’t even noticed it was ringing. I pulled it out and handed it to Lilac after taking a quick glance at the screen. “It’s your sister. She’s FaceTiming you. I doubt she’s calling to talk to me.”

It was just as well—there was no one in the world I wanted to talk to just now. Well, except for Lilac.

Lilac lit up as he took the phone. “Violet!”

I got a sinking feeling in my stomach as he answered the phone. I hoped that he would be discrete and that he wouldn’t mention anything about what had happened in the grocery store. I needed time to process everything before I could even begin to explain what had happened to someone who hadn’t seen it in action. It was like I’d given the vegetables some sort of plague.

Despite everything, I couldn’t help but be touched by how excited Lilac was to speak with his sister. He was so sweet, so innocent. Again, I was reminded of how little it took to make him happy. Even at a moment like this, his cheerfulness made me feel hopeful.

Violet was equally excited. “Lilac! I still can’t believe it. I mean… you’re here. Alive. And you’re sure it’s for good this time? No more disappearing back into a spirit?” she squealed, beaming.

“Yup, I’m a certified real boy again. Crazy, right? I can’t wait to see you. I mean it, I really, really can’t wait to see you!”

“I can’t wait, either! Charlie and I are about to hop on a plane as we speak.”

“Ooh! Charlie’s coming, too? You two are inseparable, huh? I’m excited! This will be my first time meeting Charlie in my physical body. Should I be nervous?” Lilac said, giving me a wide-eyed look.

“Oh! Lilac, we have to go, they just called for us to board. I can’t wait to see you! I’m going to give you the biggest hug in the history of humanity.”

Violet hung up, and Lilac kept grinning at the blank screen for a few seconds before he handed it back to me. “You know, it’s going to be so amazing to be able to hug my sister again. I was beginning to think this day would never come. And it’s all thanks to you, Marta.”

Our gazes connected again, and I admired the way the sun sparkled in the blue of his eyes.

“Don’t mention it,” I said. “I’m just happy that something good came out of all this.”

My stomach flipped as electricity passed back and forth between us. I didn’t think I’d ever felt this way when I looked at someone. It was still so surprising to me, the effect that he had on me, first as a ghost, and now as a real live guy standing right here in front of me. If only I could touch him… I couldn’t help myself. I leaned in close, even though I knew I probably shouldn’t. I didn’t know what had come over me. I just wanted to be as close to him as I possibly could, by any means necessary—

Suddenly, we heard someone yelling. We both turned at the same time, and just like that, I was in panic mode again.

“Hey! There they are!” It was the stock boy from before, pointing straight at us as he ran out of the store and into the parking lot, and it looked like he’d brought security with him. “Stop right there, you two!” he yelled at the top of his lungs. “Get them! Those two blackened the cabbages!”

Lilac’s eyes went wide. “Uh oh, we’d better go!”

**Episode 1887**

I couldn’t believe it—a huge buck was just standing there, looking right at us. I had a sneaking suspicion that our bright as hell outfits had frozen him to the spot in awe. I glanced at Lola, who was standing stock still as she stared at the buck.

“Careful,” I said in a stage whisper. “Don’t move, Lola. He’s right there.”

“What do we do now?” Lola whispered out of the corner of her mouth.

“Erm… Well, you should vamp-speed your way over there and… bite its neck, right? Yum? That’s the whole deal, no?”

Lola looked stricken. “How should I know? I’ve never taken down a deer before.”

I nudged her forward with my elbow. “There’s a first time for everything. Go on. Vamp away.”

Lola hesitated for a second, and I nudged her again. The buck was starting to look skittish, and it was now or never. Then Lola took off, reaching the buck in hyper speed. Before I could even register what was happening, she had taken the buck down and was kneeling at its side, drinking its blood as it lay there, not moving an inch.

“Yay! You did it!” I ran over, and Lola looked up at me, her fangs bared, torrents of blood dripping down her chin. It was a shocking sight—Lola looked like something straight out of a horror film. I stepped back, an involuntary, “Oh god!” slipping from my lips. I slapped my hand over my mouth quickly, just in case any other words of shock decided to slip out.

Lola looked like I’d slapped her. “What?”

“Erm, nothing—you’ve got some… blood… Never mind. What’s important here is that you did it!” I clapped my hands and jumped up and down a little, now that the initial shock had passed. It wasn’t like I didn’t live in a pack house with a bunch of wolves who got into violent fights all the time—but it was a little jarring to see my childhood friend with a face covered in steaming deer blood.

Lola looked down at the bleeding wound on the buck’s neck and grimaced. “Ew! Gross.” She wiped her mouth and smirked. “I have to admit it, though—that was delicious.”

I grinned down at her. I’d never thought I’d be so proud to see my best friend gorging herself on deer blood, straight from the source. “See, I told you that you could do it.”

“Thanks, Cali.” Lola grinned, her fangs retracting. “I don’t know if I would’ve been able to convince myself to do it on my own.”

I glanced down at the buck. “Are you still hungry or anything? I can wait if you need to, like… finish up?”

Lola shook her head. I noticed how pink her cheeks were. She looked vibrant and happy and alive. “No, I’m all good. I’m actually full,” she said, patting her stomach. She rose to her feet and moved to hug me, and again, I stepped back involuntarily.

I reached up and wiped the rest of the blood from her chin with my sleeve.

“There we go, bring it in,” I said, pulling her into a tight hug.

I looped an arm through hers, and we started our trek back to the pack house, Lola with a noticeable pep in her step. I couldn’t believe it—our hunting trip had been a massive success. I snuck a glance at Lola. She was so happy, and I could see the relief written all over her face. It was so great to see her in good spirits. She’d had a hard time lately, and I knew that she was still trying to adjust. I was sure that today’s victory would play a huge role in making her more comfortable with this new journey she was on.

“Oh, and did you see how easy that was?” Lola was saying. “I was like zoom, pow! Did you see? I went so damn fast!”

“Well, actually no, I didn’t see. You were like a blur,” I said with a laugh. It was impressive, and I was happy that she was finally able to see a bit of the bright side of being a vampire. Super speed wasn’t anything to sniff at.

“You, Jay, and Emmett were all right! I wasn’t able to see it then, but now I know that I can totally do this! In fact, I don’t see why vampires can’t feed this way all the time. Seems like it would solve a lot of problems, and a lot less people would hate us if we weren’t hunting them down for their blood.”

“Yeah, but most vampires aren’t like you, Lola.” No, most vampires *enjoyed* sucking human blood. I wondered if it tasted different, or if it were more satisfying. Hopefully, Lola would never take the opportunity to find out.

Lola glanced at me, then down at the bloody smear on my sleeve. She grimaced. “Sorry about that. All of that had to be pretty gross for you.”

I shook my head earnestly. “Lola, no, you’ll never be gross to me.” *Shocking, yes. Gross, no.*

“Thanks again, Cali. It was so nice not having to go through my first hunt all on my own.” Lola squeezed me closer, and we walked the rest of the way in a comfortable silence.

I started thinking about the engagement party as we got closer to the house. I could see all of the decorations coming together as everyone buzzed about the yard, coming in and out of the house with supplies, talking and laughing. Everyone was so excited, and from the looks of things, it was going to be a pretty snazzy event. Torin and my mom had made sure to think of all the small details—I’d seen my mom working on beautiful floral arrangements, and Torin had tissue paper and streamer art down to a science. I knew that this was going to be yet another opportunity for the pack to let off some steam after everything that we’d been through. It was all going to be so damn romantic, especially seeing Big Mac and Mrs. Smith celebrating their love without some dark force lurking in the shadows. Witnessing Big Mac in such an emotional, loving state was going to be the icing on the cake.

I pictured myself at the party, standing under twinkling lights and celebrating love with Greyson… Or Xavier. And just like that, all my anxiety came flooding back. I wished that they weren’t fighting over the Alpha mantle right now—it was literally the worst thing they could be doing. They should’ve been celebrating like everyone else, but no, they were too busy plotting against each other.

Lola glanced over at me with a concerned look. “What’s wrong, Cali?”

I shook my head. “I’m fine—this is my Lola time. We don’t need to talk about me right now.”

Lola grinned. “Ah, so it’s the mates.” She gave me a gentle nudge on the shoulder. “Come on, talk to me, you just watched me suck the blood out of deer. I think I owe you one free mate rant.”

I sighed. “It’s only… I hate all of this fighting between the three of us. It never stops. If it’s not one thing it’s another, and it’s tearing my heart apart.”

“I can only imagine how much all of this sucks for you, Cali. It has to be beyond stressful to see the two men you love fighting like this—and you’re stuck in the middle, unfortunately. Have you tried talking to them about it?”

“You don’t know how many times I’ve tried. It’s not like either of them would ever take my advice. They’re both so stubborn—it’s funny because they’re so much alike, even though they’d never admit it. Neither of them would know what compromise looked like even if it bit them on the ass. And you’re right—I’m stuck in the middle, and it’s awkward as hell. I feel like the rope in tug of war between two extremely hunky werewolves.”

Lola laughed. “Whoa, that’s a hell of a mental image.”

I laughed too, but it was short lived. “But that’s really what it’s like. If I give advice to one, it’s like I’m betraying the other. If I tell one to let things go, he thinks I’m trying to make it easier for the other, and if I tell them to talk it out, they act like I’m just being sweet, crazy Cali who’s incapable of understanding the dynamics between two battling Alphas. I feel absolutely helpless, and I hate it. I’m starting to feel like however this ends, if it ever even does, it’s not going to be good.”

“I don’t know, maybe it’ll turn out better than you think. Stay positive. I think that’s the only thing you can really do right now.”

“I know. I’m trying, Lola. It’s only that, whichever one of them ends up becoming Alpha, there’s going to be trouble in the aftermath.”

Lola stopped short, yanking me to a stop with her. “What if one of them *doesn’t* end up being Alpha?”

I frowned. “What? That’s what I was just saying.”

Lola shook her head. “No, I mean… Why can’t they *both* be Alpha? Together?”

**Episode 1888**

The deer killing and eating with Lola had actually gone pretty well! To clarify, I was an innocent bystander. *She* was the one who’d done the killing and the eating. Like, bloodsucking. Sucking of the deer’s blood. Anyway, she seemed fine now.

“I’m really glad you’ve found a way to deal with your vampire cravings without biting your unsuspecting friends,” I told her.

Lola grinned. “Right? I don’t need to go back to Tottenville at this rate. This was awesome!”

Not for the deer, though. But I wasn’t about to tell Lola that she’d just killed Bambi. We’d been through enough trauma to deserve this moment of peace.

*Which is probably going to be demolished sooner or later*, I thought to myself.

Right on cue, Lola said, “But seriously, what do you think about what I said? About having *both* Xavier and Greyson be in charge of the pack?”

“Yeah,” I scoffed, “I can’t imagine a world in which either of my mates would agree to share power. They rarely agree on anything—they’d probably kill each other.”

Lola snorted. “That’s always a possibility, anyway.”

“True. The idea of them being Alphas together and co-existing peacefully…” I swallowed down the hope I felt. “It sounds great. In theory, at least.”

I paused, noticing a small creek along the way. Lola paused as well, and we fell silent, looking at each other. It was just the soft bubbling of the water and the silence.

My voice lowered to a whisper. “Do you think that could be a portal, or just regular water?”

Lola seemed nervous. “I have no idea.”

I shivered, pulling my friend away. “Let’s not get too close. The vibes are too bad.”

“Agreed,” Lola said as we skittered away. “Not everything about the other pool is bad, though—Letifer was defeated there, and Marta got Lilac back.”

I eyed Lola—her rose-colored look at the pool was weirdly nice. But still, I just wanted to forget all about what had happened there. It felt like a night terror waiting to come to life.

When we got back to the pack house, Jay was on the porch swing. He sat up the moment he saw us, sauntering over. Had he been waiting for us?

“Hey!” He stared between us, his eyes—eye—wide. “How did the hunting trip go?”

Lola raised an eyebrow. “Do I sense a hint of worry in your tone? I hope you didn’t doubt me.”

Jay chuckled, pulling her into a hug. “Never. I just wanna make sure everything’s okay.”

Lola and Jay nuzzled each other for a brief moment, happiness in their expressions, and I wished that I could have that kind of peace as well. But even though there was a lot to celebrate with Letifer’s defeat, it still felt like there was a shadow hovering above me.

*For god’s sake, I can’t even kiss one of my mates without sending the other into a jealous frenzy!* I thought, scowling. *This should be easier.*

There was part of me that was envious of Lola—even as a vampire, she had found happiness with her wolf-less werewolf. They could be literally at each other’s throats, but they would always make up a moment later. They always trusted each other, were always understanding.

I wanted that.

I wanted to be content and secure in my relationship. I hated existing in a constant state of apprehension, worried that the tiniest thing would set off Xavier or Greyson.

*When I say it like that, it sounds so fucked up*, I thought. *Like, dump-them-both-and-run-away fucked up.*

“… I’m glad everything went well,” Jay was telling Lola, tucking her hair behind her ear. “I bet it was a bonding experience for you two.”

“Yep. Actually…” Lola trailed off, shooting me a sideways glance before facing Jay again. “Cali and I had a little discussion about the whole Alpha situation. Why can’t the Redwood pack have two of them?”

Jay paused for a moment. As if his brain had short-circuited. “Come again?”

“Xavier and Greyson could share the Alpha position,” Lola told Jay hopefully.

And then Jay burst out laughing. He tapped on her temple. “Does deer blood cause hallucinations? Is that what’s happening right now?”

“This is actually for real,” I said, cringing.

Jay eyed me carefully. “How do you feel about that, Cali?”

I scoffed. “I think it’s nuts, but I would love for it to be an actual possibility without the risk of anyone getting fucking killed.”

“You know it’s not gonna happen, Cali,” Jay said. “Those two could never collaborate like that. Their egos are too big. Especially Xavier—he’s my ride or die, but man, that dude thinks he’s always right.”

I frowned.

“Is it technically possible, though?” Lola asked Jay. “Like, as an idea? To have two Alphas?”

Jay shrugged. “I think there’s a reason why kingdoms only have one king, and governments only have one president. Power sharing among Alphas is a recipe for disaster.”

“But has it ever been done?” I pressed.

Jay shook his head. “I’m actually not sure.”

*Well, that answer actually won’t do!* I thought, annoyed. *I need to investigate further.*

I allowed Jay and Lola another minute of canoodling before I pulled my friend away to go inside and upstairs to my room.

“What’s going?” Lola asked when we were alone. “You’ve got that up-to-no-good look on your face.”

“I’ve been warming up to your idea about Greyson and Xavier sharing power,” I told her.

“What about their murderous tendencies, though?” Lola asked me, almost amused.

“I know it’s ninety-nine percent impossible that they’ll get their shit together, but that one percent could keep me going. It’s not like the *due destini* is gonna go away by itself, so I have to explore all options to make life between the three of us better. Or at least bearable.”

Lola cringed. “That bad, huh?”

“Yep,” I deadpanned, plopping down onto my bed and opening my laptop.

“What happens now?” Lola asked.

“Close the door, we’re going to do some secret research,” I told her.

Lola quickly followed direction and returned to the bed, her eyes fixed on my laptop’s screen.

I had pulled up the Obaltarion’s website, and I was ready for battle.

“What’s that?” Lola asked, eyeing the website.

“It’s the magic library’s website. I can access it remotely through the internet thanks to the library card Steinar gave me,” I said. “I have a lifetime membership now.”

“I’m not even gonna call you a nerd,” Lola said with a grin. “You know.”

I snorted. “Thanks, but if there’s any record of two Alphas sharing a pack, this library should have it.”

I clicked on the search bar and put in my keywords.

*two alpas*

The results were about… alpacas?

“Something’s wrong here,” I said, eyes narrowed.

“You’re missing an ‘h,’” Lola told me with authority, hanging over me like an annoying fly.

After correcting my tiny error—thanks, Grammar Police—a bunch of results popped up.

Like, a lot of them.

“This is a good sign, right?” I asked Lola.

She gave me a look. “Depends on what’s in the articles.”

Lola was unfortunately right again. I started scanning the results, one by one, but none of them had “two Alphas” together, just the word “two” and the word “alphas” separately. After going through at least fifty articles, Lola groaned and fell back on the bed.

“This is hopeless!” she huffed. “I give up!”

I shook my head. “It’s not that bad—”

“What are you talking about?” She snorted. “This is more research than I did in high school and college combined!”

I did believe that to be true. Lola had more of a math-oriented, practical kind of mind. Reading though a bunch of pages was definitely not her style. I was fine with doing research, but even I was starting to lose hope—there was a voice in the back of my head that said that if there was a true match in there, *somewhere*, it would’ve been at the very top of the results.

“Maybe if I search it in a different way…” I trailed off, just as a chat window popped up.

Lola flinched, turning to look at the screen. “Wait, what’s that?”

It was an “Ask a librarian” question box!

“It’s Steinar!” I said excitedly.

*Hello Caliana*, the gargoyle typed out. *Hope you are doing well! I’m so happy to see you’re doing some more scholarly research. Is there anything I can help you with?*

“Jackpot,” I murmured, and scrambled to write a response.

*Hi Steinar! So good to hear from you! I actually really need your help—I was wondering if it’s possible for two Alphas to share a pack. Has something like that been done before over the eons?*

Steinar’s response was instant. *TWO ALPHAS?! ONE PACK?! Shocking!*

“Well,” Lola said wryly. “That looks promising.”

I cringed, typing, *Do you have any information about it, though? Could it be possible in theory? Has it ever been done in practice?*

Steinar’s three typing dots started bouncing. Then they stopped again. I bit my lower lip, eager and anxious to see his response.

At the same time, though, I wondered: was there any hope to Lola’s idea, or would it be a dead end?

**Episode 1889**

GREYSON

I stared at the card the three witches had given me.

I wanted to talk to them, but they had specifically instructed me not to wave the thing around and summon them—unless I was ready to make a deal with them.

Unless I was ready to complete a spell to “change my fate.”

But—of fucking course—they hadn’t told me *how* my fate would be changed.

The vagueness of it all was driving me nuts.

I had no idea why those three expected me to agree to something without letting me know what it actually entailed. They were acting like one of those “Terms and Conditions” forms you had to sign to navigate the internet, where you probably ended up agreeing to give away your kidney.

I wanted to *keep* my kidney, okay?

I wanted to keep my kidney and my goddamn woman, the love of my life *et al.*, thanks very fucking much. The image of Cali in that coffin was still fresh in my mind, haunting me. I needed to know more about whether what I’d seen before fighting Xavier was a version of my fate that I could change. I needed to know if it was something that would truly happen if I became Alpha.

Could there be leftover dark magic in my system, bringing up my worst fears?

Either way, I wished I could purge it from my mind.

A knock on the door startled me, interrupting my thoughts. I slipped the card back into the drawer—the witches would have to wait.

“Come in,” I called, and the door opened in an instant.

“Sorry,” Sabine said. “I didn’t mean to bother you.”

I closed the drawer, facing her. “What’s up?”

“I just wanted to see how you were doing,” she mumbled. “I know that things between you and Xavier aren’t great.”

Sabine stood there, staring at me with all the worry in the world. But that hadn’t stopped her from voting against me before the battle with Letifer.

But I didn’t want to dwell on any of that.

“Ignore us,” I told her, shrugging it off. “Xavier and I will work it out. Trouble between competing Alphas is hardly uncommon. It’s harmless.”

“I’m not sure if you two fighting could ever be ‘harmless,’ Greyson,” my mom said quietly. “You’re brothers who are pitted against each other, and who share the same mate.”

I winced at the word “share.”

Another thing I didn’t want to dwell on was all the times I’d known or suspected that Cali was with Xavier. It made me sick to my stomach. I wanted to punch through a wall, in full-blown, clichéd, Alpha bullshit mode.

“I get that you don’t want to talk about this,” Sabine said quietly, placing a hand on my arm. “But I’m your mother. And I need you to remember that the only reason I backed Xavier as Alpha was because you were injured.”

I leveled her with a stare. “And now?”

She took a deep breath. “I hoped that things would work out, but if push comes to shove, I will stand with you. You’re my son.”

I took a step back, crossing my arms. “I appreciate that. Though I hope there aren’t any conditions attached to it.”

Sabine flinched. “My love and support is unconditional, Greyson.”

I pressed my lips together, shaking my head as I looked away. I really hoped that was true. I didn’t need any more heartache.

“Right. Sorry for being blunt about that.” I looked away, changing the subject. “Anyway, uh, shouldn’t you be getting ready for the engagement party?”

“I have plenty of time to get dressed,” she said. Excitement flickered over her features, and something in me eased.

“You seem happy about it,” I said.

She chuckled awkwardly. “I know it’s a little weird to do this so suddenly and so soon after Letifer’s defeat, but Rishika encouraged me. She said we all needed something hopeful to cling to. I feel the pack could use some fun too.”

I smiled. “I agree.”

She nodded. “I’m happy to hear that. I was worried you’d be annoyed.”

I scoffed. “I’m not the grumpy type, Mom—that’s the other Alpha, the one who’s *not* your son.”

She swallowed. “I like it when you call me ‘Mom.’”

I blinked at her. Then again. It looked like she was about to start crying, and I wasn’t prepared. “Uh, well, that’s—nice?”

She laughed, because I was an awkward wreck at times, but at least that eased the tension. “It *is* nice.”

Ugh, were we just going to sit here and talk about our feelings *forever*? I preferred action.

“Is there anything I can do to help with the party?” I asked quickly. “I’m not exactly a party planner, but I can fix or build pretty much anything. Even balloon arches.”

“It’s okay,” she said. “Between Tom, Orla, and Torin, most things are covered. Torin’s already made two balloon arches.”

I frowned. I’d been kinda looking forward to that. I was about to make a case for my superior balloon arch structuring abilities when I took a closer look at my mother’s face.

“Why does it look like you’re not happy right now, though?” I asked. “What’s missing?”

She shook her head. “It’s fine, I promise.”

“It’s fine” meant that something was seriously fucking wrong.

“Okay,” I said, “spill. What’s bothering you?”

Sabine replied right away, as if she’d just been *waiting* for me to give her the go-ahead. “Tom, Orla, and Torin are all helping and setting everything up, and they’re super excited about it. Everyone, for the most part, is excited about the engagement party… Everyone except the other bride.”

I scowled. “How come?”

“Big Mac doesn't want to be part of the party,” Sabine mumbled. “She hates being in the spotlight. But I suspect this might be about her not wanting to make it official.”

I shook my head. “No way. She loves you. Anyone can see that.”

Sabine looked up at me in a way that reminded me of a kitten. “I know she does. But sometimes it feels like she doesn’t think she deserves to be happy with me, and that’s why she wants to avoid the party. It’s heartbreaking.”

I nodded. “Right.” *Damn.*

Sabine cleared her throat. “Actually, I was wondering… Maybe you could talk to her about this?”

*Me?* Talk to *Big Mac*? About her *feelings*?

That sounded like a recipe for disaster. I did not want to get caught up in this kind of drama. But then again, even though Big Mac and I hadn’t always seen eye to eye, she *had* been good to my mother so far. And she and all her witchy things had proven to be helpful when it came to the pack. And since I was part of the pack, and its rightful Alpha, perhaps I could ask Big Mac some questions about the three witches.

A plan formed in my mind: I would talk to Big Mac about her feelings and my mother’s, survive to tell the tale, and then ask her about the three witches and their shady offer.

I was truly a diplomatic fucking genius. Not.

And then, my mother said, “Please, Greyson. It would mean a lot to me if you could just speak to her. Remind her that she deserves all the happiness in the world.”

This was such a bad idea.

But I said, “I’ll try to get her to see the upside of a party. And remind her how much it means to you.”

Sabine smiled. “Thank you, Greyson.”

She gave me another squishy hug that felt pretty awkward. Would I ever get used to hugging her? She was my mother after all. That was probably a question to ask myself at another time.

“She’s in the garage,” Sabine said. “If you want to talk to her right now.”

“Why the garage?” I asked.

“She’s been hunkering down, trying to stay out of sight, hoping the party will go on without her,” my mom said.

I patted her on the shoulder. Awkwardly, of course. “Don’t worry. I’ll do my best.”

This was such a bad idea.

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So, as an Alpha, I was supposed to be able to persuade anyone to do anything. Anyone apart from Cali, that was. But, realistically, Big Mac was a tough nut to crack. I didn’t want to piss her off. Angry witches were bad news.

When I got to the garage, I found her hunched over a workbench.

Before I could even breathe in her direction, she barked, “Go away.”

This was going so well already. I deserved all the diplomacy awards ever.

“Look,” I said, “I come in peace. My mother’s just a little concerned about you and the engagement party, something about you feeling like you don’t deserve it, or—”

Big Mac snorted, her gaze sharp. “Cut the feelings bullshit. What’s the real reason you’re here?”

Apparently, a discussion about feelings wasn’t on the menu today, so I had to move on. I knew I was going to sound ridiculous, but it was now or never.

*Here goes nothing.*

I looked Big Mac dead in the eye. “Is the future set in stone, or can we change it?”

**Episode 1890**

The three dots were still dancing in the chat box, so I knew that Steinar was still typing.

“Oh my god, WHAT is he doing?” I grumbled under my breath, raking my hands through my hair.

“This is pretty cool, actually,” Lola said. “Like your own personal shopper, but for books. If we go back to school—which we probably should at some point, I guess—can I borrow your card?”

I blinked, alarmed. “My magical library card? Why?”

“Imagine how easy it’s gonna be to write my papers with Steinar helping me!” Lola enthused.

I frowned. Why hadn’t I thought of that first?

“Uh, I’m not sure if I can loan the card,” I said. “It might violate some rule.”

Lola rolled her eyes. “Rules are made to be broken, Cali! Don’t be a knowledge hog!”

I was totally a knowledge hog. Oh my god, this was such a huge ethical dilemma! And we hadn’t even gone back to school yet.

“I can see you spiraling,” Lola said, examining my face with arched eyebrows.

Before I could tell her that I was indeed spiraling for literally no real reason, a response popped up.

*As I’m sure you realize, this is a very unique situation. I am going to have to do a deep dive to get answers about a pack having two Alphas, and I might need to search through the eons. Can you wait until tomorrow? There’s a group of warlocks from Wisconsin who are researching ancient toad spells. You know how impatient warlocks can be.*

“Ancient toad spells?” Lola said after reading the text. “Who needs ancient toad spells? And I had no idea Wisconsin even had warlocks.”

I shook my head. “Me neither. But then again, it wasn’t that long ago that I didn’t even know werewolves were real.”

I was wondering why they might need toad spells, but I barreled through. This was super important, and I wasn’t about to be pushed aside for some frog talk. I hated the idea of putting this off any longer.

*I’m really sorry to be a pain in the ass, but I’m not sure I can wait. The Redwood pack could be ripped apart. We are talking civil war levels, here, Steinar.*

“Oh wow, that’s good,” Lola told me, clearly impressed by my skills of persuasion.

Thankfully, they worked.

Steinar replied, *Oh, that sounds horrible! I’ll tell the Wisconsin warlocks it’s an emergency. I hope they’ll understand.*

“If Steinar comes back with a way for us to have two Alphas, how would it work, though? Like, technically?” Lola mused.

“Jay said that there can’t be two kings or two presidents…” I trailed off. “So I have no idea, really.”

Lola smirked. “What if they did it like a shared custody of the pack? Greyson could get every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, and Xavier could get every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday.”

I paused, confused. “But what about Sunday?”

Lola giggled, looking very happy with herself. “Sunday is a day of rest!”

I scoffed, laughing. “Let’s be realistic—it feels like forever since we’ve gotten a day off, Lola.”

“Kinda like being Alpha,” Lola commented. “No days off.”

I sobered up. “Joking aside, Xavier and Greyson couldn’t accept the idea of me being with both of them, so I don’t know how that split schedule would really work.”

Lola sighed. “That’s different—they’re in love with you. The pack is more about duty and responsibility.”

“That’s true,” I mumbled.

“I get where they’re coming from, actually,” she said. “I can’t imagine what it would be like to share Jay. If anyone—Jacqueline, for example—ever tried to put their hands on Jay, I would sink my fangs in them so fast that I wouldn’t even need to hunt deer for a week!”

Okay, then. That had gotten real graphic real fast.

As Lola went on about all the unpleasant things she’d do to anyone who touched her mate, I thought about how I’d felt when I’d learned that Ava had slept with Xavier and Greyson.

“Remember when Ava tricked my mates into sleeping with her?” I asked Lola, scowling.

“Yeah,” Lola said, eyes wide. “That was next level fucked up.”

“Sometimes I feel like I can forgive her, like we could leave the past behind. But deep down, I kind of want to blast her back to the spirit world,” I said.

Lola scoffed. “I can help you.”

I huffed. “I just wish she would leave—it’s going to suck having her at Thanksgiving tomorrow.”

Lola’s annoyed expression faded. She seemed thoughtful.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing,” she said. “I just realized that tomorrow will be the first full moon that I’ll experience without my wolf.”

Poor Lola. I hugged my friend tight. “It’s gonna be okay. I’ll be right here with you.”

Lola sighed, facing me. She held my hand in hers, staring into my eyes. “Thank you, Cali. Thank you for coming with me to hunt, too. It was super important to me.”

*Look at us bonding!* I thought, feeling all warm and fuzzy inside. This felt familiar and yet also new, somehow. Like Lola and I had passed some sort of threshold and were now free to move on together as best friends.

“Thank *you* for being the best and always listening to me ramble about these annoying Alphas,” I said, and Lola smirked.

“I *am* the best.” She winked. “And I don’t even want to eat you anymore now that I’m full of deer blood.”

Cringing, I shoved her a little, and she laughed, hugging me again and giving me a squishy kiss on the cheek.

At least I trusted her enough to let her kiss me.

“Wait, he’s typing!” I exclaimed, batting Lola away. Both of us stared at the screen, at the chat box.

*I’m back*, Steinar said, *and I think I found something!*

I gasped. *What is it????????*

*I just spotted a case about a pack having two Alphas—it happened in the 1960s.*

“The 1960s?” Lola asked, frowning. “Do we know anyone who was alive back then?”

I shushed Lola when a link popped up. Steinar wrote, *Check it out and let me know if you have any more questions. Hopefully I’ll be back soon.*

*Thank you so much!* I replied, before adding, *By the way, what happened with the warlocks?*

*Hah, I’ll have to go deal with them right now*, Steinar typed. *They’re threatening to turn me into a cheesehead—what’s a cheesehead? Should I be worried?*

“Yep,” Lola said, eyebrows arched.

I replied to Steinar quickly. *It’s going to be fine. I have total faith in you!*

Steinar sent me a thumbs up and signed out.

“Okay,” I told Lola, clicking on the link. “Here goes nothing.”

An article came up about a pack of werewolves who’d nearly been torn apart by a heated rivalry between two Alphas after the pack’s original Alpha had been killed. There were pictures and everything.

“This is *so* boho chic!” Lola pointed at the photo, impressed. “Look at the outfits! But wait, I thought that the hippie generation was all about peace and love—how come they wanted to kill each other over power?”

I ignored Lola’s social commentary and focused on the article. The text said that the pack had decided to reorganize itself as a commune-style group, where everyone shared duties.

“Shared duties?” Lola huffed, obviously reading at the same speed as me. “Isn’t that what a pack is anyway?”

“That’s true,” I agreed.

“Then why—”

“Lola, let’s keep on reading!”

“Right, sorry.”

I went through the next paragraph. Apparently, after the hippie pack’s Alpha had died in a battle, an intense rivalry between two other Alphas had nearly destroyed the pack. Instead of having a Lupo Finale to settle it, though, the elders of the pack negotiated a compromise where the two Alphas would share leadership roles.

“Sharing leadership roles!” Lola exclaimed, pointing at the screen. “So it’s totally like splitting up the days of the week!”

I stared at the screen, intrigued. “I mean, kinda. Different Alpha responsibilities were redistributed. And here it says that when there was conflict, it would be up to the entire pack to decide what happened next.”

“Like what happened before the battle with Letifer,” Lola said, “when we put the leader’s role up for a vote. Democracy and stuff!”

“Uh huh,” I said, still reading. “But here it looks like the goal would be for everybody in the pack to agree to a plan of action. And if that didn’t happen, the Alphas would have to go back and come up with a compromise and present it to everybody all over again, until everyone was on board.”

“Fascinating,” Lola said. She turned to me, her eyes wide. “It is possible then. The hippies made it happen!”

“They did…” I stared at my friend nervously, holding my breath. If this was true, it would be a big deal. Life changing for the entire pack. “Do you think Greyson and Xavier would agree to try this out?”

**Episode 1891**

XAVIER

I had to go out for a run to clear my head.

I told Ava to go fuck herself, though I should’ve told her to go to hell. Just, *hell*—back to the dead, where she could leave us all the fuck alone. No matter how long she hung around, she was not part of the pack and would never be. It shouldn’t matter to her who was Alpha or not—this was none of her business.

I could not let this be her business.

She had tempted me, though. I’d briefly considered the advantages of her campaigning on my behalf. Nevertheless, I’d shoved that idea away quickly enough. I wasn’t the only one who despised Ava—it would probably backfire, and I would lose the support that I already had. And I knew that there were people in the pack who supported me, but it wasn’t everyone. Rishika, for one, had declared herself Greyson’s ally. She was a remarkable fighter with huge pull in the pack, so him having her on his side was a massive draw.

The thought pissed me off to no end.

Right along with the fact that Greyson had backed out of a fight—we could have settled everything so neatly, quickly, just by using brute strength.

That was how I worked best.

It felt like I was stuck in limbo now. I’d already had to work hard to convince the others to support me during the Letifer fight, even when it had been *obvious* that Greyson wasn’t capable of being Alpha. Now that Greyson was healthy, things would be much harder. I knew that Cali wouldn’t choose either one of us, and last time, Mrs. Smith had been the surprise swing vote. I doubted that she would back her son’s rival for a second time. Everybody was so fucking obsessed with Greyson, it was ridiculous.

What the hell did my older brother have that I didn’t?

Yeah, Greyson had been Alpha when the pack had defeated Ryker. And the Manus Cruentae. And Silas. But I’d been Alpha when we’d defeated Letifer. Pondering that made me scowl. Damn it—that was still three to one in Greyson’s favor.

That didn’t mean Greyson was perfect, though.

Why didn’t these people hold more of a grudge after Greyson had repeatedly gone MIA and put me in charge? I’d stepped in for him while he ran off to do whatever he wanted so many times. How could anyone want an Alpha who abandoned their pack?

What kind of spell had Greyson put on the people who supported him?

*What the hell does Greyson have that I don’t?*

I shifted back to human once I got back to the pack house’s front yard, still stewing. My mood lightened when I saw Cali come out of the house, though. Her presence made my heart race, all my dark thoughts clear. She had a coat on, and mittens and a scarf. Her hair was in disarray, her nose red.

She was stunning.

And in that moment, I refocused on why being Alpha was so important to me.

She would be my Luna.

We would be together.

I would protect her.

“Xavier!” She waved at me as I walked up to the front porch. Grinning, she looked me up and down, her cheeks flushing despite the icy atmosphere. “Shouldn’t you put your shirt on? It’s freezing.”

I smirked. “Aren’t I more fun to look at this way?”

Cali blushed, waving me off. “Stop it.”

“You don’t mean that,” I said softly, taking her hand in mine, and she chuckled, swatting at me playfully.

“You’re such a brat,” she said, huffing as I wrapped my arms around her. I touched her chin, lifting it up so she would look at me.

“I know,” I said.

She seemed shocked to see me acknowledge any wrongdoing. I guessed I didn’t do it often.

*Does Greyson acknowledge his errors? Is that why people prefer him?*

I swatted those thoughts away, focusing on Cali. She was my number one priority, always.

“I just want to apologize for the way things have been unraveling with me and my brother the last few days,” I said. “I just wish you weren’t caught in the middle.”

Cali’s expression sobered. She let me go, taking a step back. At least she was still holding my hand—I took that as a good sign. “Thanks for saying that. But I know it’s been hard on you too.”

I shook my head. “I can handle it—I just want to make things easier for you, but I don’t…” I swallowed. “I don’t know how.”

“I’m sure I could think of a couple of ways,” Cali said under her breath, looking away.

I frowned, confused. “What did you just say?”

“Nothing, I mean… Well. How are you feeling right now?” she asked, blinking at me slowly, as if she was trying to peer into my soul.

I stared at her face. At those doe eyes that I loved feeling on me, at the pouty lips that I couldn’t get enough of—everything about her, I was addicted to. There was no other way to put it.

I yearned for her all the fucking time. Every second she spent away from me was like an ache that I couldn’t stop. The mate bond shivered between us, and it felt like a living thing that I wanted to protect at all costs. I needed Cali more than anything.

“I feel lost without you,” I whispered. “That’s all I can think about right now.”

Cali stared at me, her breath catching.

“Where do we stand right now, Cali?” I asked.

She looked around. “On the porch?”

I pressed my lips together. “I mean about the whole sharing thing.”

She frowned. “It’s not like anything has changed. I can’t choose. You know that.”

I allowed myself a smile. “As long as nothing’s changed, then I still have a chance.” I leaned down, gently kissing her on the forehead, taking in her scent.

She melted into me, sighing happily.

I stared into her eyes. “I promise that things will get better, Cali. At some point. But…” I winced. “I’m not sure when or how, though.”

The moment the words were out of my mouth, I felt like I was disappointing her.

This was so fucked.

And yet, Cali didn’t look sad. Her expression brightened. “Well, um, since we’re on the subject, I might have found a way for us to get there. But first you have to promise to listen to me before you reject it. *Listen*, Xavier.”

“What kind of way?” I asked suspiciously.

“A very interesting way,” she said. “It’s super interesting, I promise!”

“It’s not a reckless idea that’s gonna make me run for the hills, is it?” I asked, teasing.

She scoffed, smacking my arm. “Excuse me? I’m a genius, and you know it! And that’s why I have you—I’m supposed to be the reckless one who brings in the results, and then you can come around and rescue me from trouble. We all have our strengths, Xavier.”

I laughed at her logic. “Fair enough.”

“Are you gonna listen to my idea, then? *Carefully* listen?” she insisted.

“Of course,” I replied, intrigued. I loved how determined Cali looked. She would be such a fucking amazing Luna.

“Have you ever heard of the Eden pack?” Cali asked.

I paused, thoughtful. “No, actually. What does that have to do with our current problem?”

The words rushed out of Cali like a waterfall. “I did some research, and it turns out that the Eden pack was in kind of a similar situation, with two Alphas vying to be the pack’s leader.”

“Huh,” I mused. “That doesn’t usually work out so well. Did one of them die in a Lupo Finale?”

“Not at all,” my mate said, her expression still intense. “In fact, they agreed to share custody of the pack.”

I stared at Cali.

Cali stared at me.

“I don’t—” I tried to focus. “I’m not sure I heard that right. In what world would any Alpha agree to share a pack? Or anything, or anyone?” But even as I said the words, I realized that I *had* agreed to share Cali. Albeit against my better judgment.

The truth, though, remained—I had put Greyson’s and my differences aside to give Cali what she wanted. And that was both of us.

Cali wanted both me and my brother.

And what Cali wanted, Cali got.

I was about to brush the thought away when Cali took a step closer. Her scent hit me full force. I wanted her all to myself—I always fucking did—and yet I settled so easily for just bits of her. But Cali was a person, and the pack was…

More people.

More responsibilities. Different ones.

Could something like power-sharing even *work* in these circumstances?

“What I’m saying, Xavier…” Cali trailed off, looking deep into my eyes. It was a look I could get lost in. “Would you be willing to co-lead the pack with Greyson?”

**Episode 1892**

MARTA

I was freaking the hell out.

I was sitting in the car with my hands under my armpits, terrified of touching anything. After we left the grocery store in a rush, running away from security like a couple of common criminals, I’d told Lilac that I’d caused the lettuce and cabbages to wilt and die.

*I killed them, Lilac!* I’d yelled at him. *I killed the fucking cabbages!*

“I killed the fucking cabbages,” I whispered again after we got in the car. I was sitting in the passenger seat. Lilac glanced at me from the driver’s seat before turning back at the road.

“Marta, please. You didn’t kill the cabbages,” he said patiently.

He kept repeating that, but I wasn’t so convinced. I was literally shaking, watching my knees bouncing up and down.

“I did, though,” I said, sniffling. “They were just there, peacefully hanging out in the produce aisle, and I killed them all by touching them.”

“Hey!” Lilac honked at some random car, waving them off. “Watch where you’re going, asshole!”

Newfound dread settled over me.

“Wait…” I swallowed roughly, realization dawning. “Do you even have a license anymore?”

Lilac cleared his throat, staring at the road. “What? Pfft, it’s fine, I—”

Someone honked at him, and Lilac screamed and then I screamed and then Lilac swerved really fucking badly to avoid a collision.

“Lilac!” I screeched. “We’re going to die!”

Panting, Lilac gripped the wheel. At least he kept the goddamn car in its lane as he told me, “We’re not gonna die. I’m making out with this really hot girl these days, and she can actually resuscitate the dead.”

I wanted to laugh. And also tear my hair out. “Do you even know how to drive, or are you just a danger to society?” I demanded.

Lilac let out a wry little chuckle. “Okay. Can I be honest here?”

My eye twitched, my hands still under my armpits. “Lilac!”

“Okay, okay, sheesh!” He glanced at me. “I’m sorry. I’m a little rusty. In fact, I’d gotten my license, but I never really drove even before I became a ghost. I was a wolf! I just ran places.”

I could feel the blood draining from my face.

This was the last thing I needed right now.

“Please don’t worry,” Lilac said, serious all of a sudden. “I know what I’m doing. I’ll be ready for the Grand Prix soon enough.”

I’d have laughed under other circumstances, but now I couldn’t. My ears were ringing, my heart pounding too hard. Lilac glanced at me again, taking a deep breath. “How are you feeling?”

I was too shaken to answer. I was too shaken to think of anything other than the tightness in my chest and how hard it suddenly was to breathe. I started to hyperventilate, feeling frozen and trapped, locked down in this car after I’d murdered a bunch of produce that had never harmed anyone.

What if I accidentally touched someone from the pack and killed them?

“Marta?” Lilac was saying, but I couldn’t reply.

I was just shaking, and crying, and—

Lilac suddenly pulled over to the side of the road, the car coming to a screeching halt. He reached for me, his face determined, but my fear only got worse.

“Don’t touch me!” I shouted.

Lilac flinched. “Why? What’s wrong?”

Tears were streaming down my cheeks. “I murdered the cabbages, Lilac.”

He groaned. “Oh my god, just because you might have wilted a few salad items doesn't mean you’re going to wilt *me*!”

I wiped my tears, rearing back from him. “There’s no way we can know that, and I refuse to take any chances.”

The thought that my touch could send Lilac back to the spirit work was too much to deal with.

“I get that you’re upset, so I’m not gonna push this,” Lilac said quietly. “But you have to know that it’s going to be devastating for me to stop kissing you. In fact, I might just die.”

This guy was so ridiculous that it only made me want to kiss him more.

I took a deep breath, fighting to keep my wits together.

“I’m going to hop in the back seat so there’s no temptation or accidental touching,” I told him.

He scoffed. “I refuse! I’m not your chauffeur—I’m your man!”

I blinked.

“Even if we’re not touching,” he went on, “I want us to be close. Besides, I have *amazing* self-control.”

I stared at him. “You just told me you’d die if you didn’t kiss me.”

“I lied, of course! Don’t get a big head—it’s not like you’re irresistible or anything.” He grinned and winked at me, and I felt a little better. He was so annoying and so charming all at once, and getting upset with him felt almost impossible.

“Okay,” I whispered, but I still shrank back against the door, just in case.

Lilac started the car again, pulling out onto the road. After a small beat of silence, after my breathing had evened, Lilac said, “What happened at the store could have been some leftover bad magic. It’s probably a one-time thing.”

“It’s not,” I whispered.

Lilac frowned, peering at me before turning to the road. “What do you mean?”

I explained about the house plant, and Lilac almost swerved out of his lane.

“Oh my goodness, be careful!” I ordered, and he swerved back in.

“Shit!” He huffed. “Why didn’t you tell me about the plant?”

I rubbed my trembling knees. “I was afraid I’d scare you. That you’d think I was a monster.”

He scoffed. “You’ve got too pretty a face to be a monster.”

I felt my cheeks heat up. “Stop it. Flattery isn’t going to work—I’m not going to touch you or let you touch me.”

He shot me a sideways smirk. “Can’t blame me for trying.”

I suppressed a laugh. This was so surreal. “Keep your eyes on the road… And your hands on the wheel.”

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I was relieved when we finally pulled into the pack house garage. Although I had to repeatedly warn Lilac not to scrape the mirrors on the sides. I was the one who’d murdered the cabbages, but he was a danger to society.

“Look at that,” Lilac murmured, eyebrows arched.

I turned to see where he was pointing—Big Mac was talking to Greyson in the far corner of the garage. There was a bunch of weird equipment on the witch’s work bench. Big Mac was looking stern, and I realized…

“Oh my god,” I hissed at Lilac. “We were supposed to buy food for the engagement party!”

Lilac shook his head. “Don’t worry. I’ll go get it—I only brought you back home because I felt you’d be more comfortable.”

“That’s so thoughtful, Lilac,” I said, my heart warming.

“I know,” he said gravely. “I’m not just a handsome face—I’m also extremely thoughtful, and a gentleman. Let me take you inside.”

“Let’s not walk by them, though,” I muttered. “I’d rather avoid Big Mac. She might hug me again or something. I don’t want her to turn into a wilted cabbage.”

Lilac gave me a patient look. “Look, we don’t know for sure what caused the cabbage massacre, but—”

“Lilac!”

“Okay. We get in through the other entrance.”

We got to the front without Big Mac or Greyson paying us any attention, then paused at the door. There were so many people in the house—what if I accidentally touched one of them?

I felt sick to my stomach.

I should just run away. Just leave everyone, leave Lilac, leave all my friends and happiness and everything I’d always yearned for, leave them and vanish because that was the only thing I—

“Marta, you gotta calm down.” Lilac’s voice pierced through my panic. “Breathe with me, okay?”

I stared into his eyes, and he turned into my anchor.

We breathed together for a long moment, until I could control my panting.

“I have a solution,” Lilac told me. He opened up a drawer by the door and pulled out a pair of gloves. “Put these on, and then you won’t have to worry about touching anyone.”

I swallowed thickly. “Put the gloves down. I don’t want to risk touching you.”

Lilac rolled his eyes but did what he was told. I picked up the gloves, nice black ones, and put them on.

Lilac’s eyes were intense on me. “Better?”

I faced him. “I’m still afraid.”

His expression was taken over by something fierce. Out of the blue, he reached out, cupping my chin.

I gasped, flinching. “Lilac!” I exclaimed. “Don’t do that!”

He flinched too, alarmed. “Sorry, I just wanted to make you feel better! But wait—” He looked down at his hands. “I’m still alive.”

I exhaled in relief, eyes wide. Lilac was unharmed. He just stood there, handsome, sweet, annoying, charming, funny, and just fine.

Touching me hadn’t harmed him in the slightest.

“See?” he said, grinning. “I’m in perfect health! Invincible.”

I stared at him, my mind fighting to process what had just happened.

A massive question formed in my head.

*Is Lilac safe from my deadly touch because he was brought back by my powers?*

**Episode 1893**

GREYSON

Big Mac stared at me.

She was going to call me crazy any minute now, I could feel it.

She would scoff at me, roll her eyes, and say, *Nobody can change the future, Greyson! What the hell is wrong with you?*

But, shockingly enough, that was not how things played out.

“Oh, thank god,” the witch said, exhaling in obvious relief. “Finally something real to talk about.”

I gaped. “You don’t think what I’m asking is absurd?”

And now, it was time for the mocking to commence.

“Oh no, I didn’t say that,” she said, waving a dismissive hand that didn’t make me feel better. “But at the moment, all anyone will talk about with me is the engagement party. It’s driving me insane. I don’t want a fucking balloon arch!”

My brow furrowed. “Balloon arches are a true art form, though.”

There it was. Big Mac looked at me like I was insane.

“Wait a minute now—why don’t you want to have the engagement party?” I asked.

She gave me a wry look. “Do you really think my ideal afternoon is one spent with a bunch of people who won’t stop talking to me?”

“Touché,” I said.

Big Mac sighed. “I know the party is important to Sabine. She thought it would be a positive thing for the pack, and I’m trying to be supportive, but I don’t want to talk about flower arrangements or balloons.”

I smirked. “So you’re hiding away like a coward?”

Big Mac side-eyed me. “No. I’m just working on some of my moonshine. I haven’t had a chance to do it lately, and it soothes me.” She paused. “And maybe I’m looking to spike the punch at the party. Not sure about that yet.”

I eyed Big Mac’s setup. She was stirring something silver over one of those portable burners. She whacked the spoon on the edge of the pot, and the echo of the sound made me flinch.

What if she put us all to sleep tonight just to avoid the party?

I wouldn’t put it past her.

“So,” Big Mac said, sitting back. “What is this about wanting to know whether the future is set in stone?”

I examined Big Mac’s face. This was the woman my mother was marrying. Did I really wanted to open up to her about all this? She might tell Sabine, and then Sabine would be worried and hover over me, and then she wouldn’t vote me for Alpha—or, even worse, she might want to talk about my *feelings*.

I should forget about this and ask Kira.

Kira was just as unfriendly as Big Mac, and perhaps even snootier, but at least she was new around here. She was partial to Xavier, though. And I didn’t know her well enough.

What other option did I have, though?

Just the three witches who loved talking in fucking riddles.

And I had to hand it to Big Mac—she’d always been honest with me. Painfully blunt sometimes, too, but she’d been much more upfront than those three. Right now, I needed the truth. Bad or good, I needed some hard facts to work with, just so I could move forward with some kind of plan.

The garage door opened, and Lilac and Marta pulled in. They seemed deep in conversation as they got out of the car, so neither Big Mac nor I paid any attention to them. The moment they were gone, I turned to Big Mac and said, “Here’s the deal.”

She stared at me. “Yes?”

“I’ve been having blackouts for a while now,” I admitted.

Big Mac’s left eyebrow twitched, but she remained expressionless as I explained everything to her. Including the vision I’d had recently, about Cali being dead.

“It’s clear that it was a sign. If I become Alpha again, Cali will die,” I said.

Big Mac’s eyes narrowed. “When did these visions start?”

“After I saved the three witches,” I said.

She fell silent.

“Well?” I asked, feeling antsy.

“I’m just thinking that this whole thing is pretty damn worrisome,” she conceded.

“Gee, thanks,” I said wryly. “Hadn’t figured that one out for myself yet.”

Big Mac stirred her pot, checking the liquid. “I need to get something from outside. Walk with me.”

Huffing, I followed Big Mac out into the yard.

She paused at one of the flowerbeds that looked like they held nothing but weeds. She picked up some dried-out plants from the ground, sniffed them, threw them back, then picked some more.

It didn’t make any fucking sense to me, but who was I to doubt her process?

“What do the three witches have to do with your original question about changing the future?” Big Mac asked. “What did they offer to you as a reward for saving them?”

I looked past Big Mac to the front porch, where Cali was talking to a very naked Xavier. *Asshole*. Scowling, I turned away and faced Big Mac again.

“They said that they could change my destiny,” I said, “but they didn’t offer any explanation as to what that would mean.”

Big Mac looked up the sky, rolling her eyes. “That is extremely annoying.”

I was a little surprised by her reaction, but couldn’t help but perk up. “Right? Like, do they get off on being vague? What the fuck is up with that?”

“Many witches simply take pleasure in being vague and mysterious for no reason other than to make people squirm,” Big Mac declared.

I had to bite my tongue there, because I thought that *all* witches did that, even Big Mac.

“But what do I do with them now?” I pressed. “What the hell do they want from me?”

Big Mac picked up another handful of weeds and fiddled with it. “Witches like to trade their magic for favors. If someone needs a spell, there will always be a price.”

“Yeah, I gathered,” I said. I also remembered Big Mac taking Jay’s eye. It’d been to conceal her house from any werewolf seeing it—primarily Silas—but it was still ruthless to take an eye as part of a deal.

“But in your case,” Big Mac went on, “things are much more complicated, because they are the ones who owe you. Witches *despise* being in someone’s debt.”

“I saved their lives—”

“And that’s a million times worse,” Big Mac said. “They don’t just owe you—they owe you their *lives*. And they must really hate that.”

Maybe I should have left them to die. Seemed less complicated at this point.

“But all the mumbo jumbo they keep going on about—could they really cast a spell and change my so-called fate?” I asked. “Or is that all bullshit?”

Big Mac sighed. “You should keep in mind that a curse and fate are not the same thing, Greyson.”

I frowned. “Have I ever said that I think they’re the same thing?”

“The way you talk about it, though—it sounds like you’re confusing the two,” Big Mac said seriously.

“No, *you* are confusing me,” I said. “What’s happening right now? Are you doing one of those witchy things where you twist your words?”

“I told you, I’m not like other witches,” Big Mac said. “I’m not being vague on purpose.”

“What are you saying, then?” Before she could reply, I added, “Are you talking about my destiny being a curse in and of itself?”

“There’s also a difference between fate and destiny, by the way. And obviously the *due destini* curse,” Big Mac said.

I wanted to bury myself in that fucking flower bed and be eaten by worms just to end this madness.

“Big Mac, *please*,” I said, really pleading. “Stop being evasive and just answer my question.”

“What question?” Big Mac asked, throwing her hands up. “You haven’t even asked me anything yet!”

I was certain, then. Being vague and nonsensical during a conversation was part of a witch’s DNA. Like white people were bad at dancing, unless they were from the Mediterranean. Or the dance was ballet. Weren’t Russians good at ballet?

“Greyson?” Big Mac poked my shoulder. “I’m talking to you! What are you thinking?”

“Ballet,” I blurted.

Again, Big Mac stared at me like I was nuts.

I shook my head to clear it. “No, I mean—”

Big Mac huffed. “Can you please focus here?”

Easier said than done. We were at the side of the house, and Cali was still on the front porch talking with a very fucking naked Xavier.

The *due destini* was a curse, all right.

If I unleashed my jealousy, everything would turn to chaos.

“The witches said that I have to decide whether to take up their offer soon, so I’m gonna ask you again, and this time please just answer without bringing up anything else,” I told Big Mac. “Is there a spell out there, a potion, *whatever*, that the witches could use to *really* alter my fate?”

Big Mac eyed me carefully. “How do you know they haven’t already started the spell?”

**Episode 1894**

I stared at Xavier’s impassive face after delivering my idea.

I expected him to scoff at the notion of sharing Alpha duties with Greyson. He was rarely one to accept compromise, especially when it came to the pack.

His expression still blank, Xavier’s gaze shifted. I followed it to see Big Mac talking to Greyson by the side of the house. Greyson looked annoyed, actually. He was frowning, his arms crossed over his chest. I wondered what that was all about, but I wasn’t about to ask Xavier to eavesdrop on his brother’s talk with the person who was, on paper, his future stepmom.

*Yikes*, I thought. *That conversation must be awkward. I should be there for Greyson.*

I doubted Xavier would appreciate me dumping him right now and running off to his brother, though.

“Have you run this by Greyson?” Xavier asked me.

I shook my head. “I came to you first.”

Xavier’s lips twitched into a smile. The little brat was obviously pleased that I’d talked to him first.

*Should I tell him that’s because he’s the more difficult and probably immature of the two?* I wondered wryly. *I don’t remember Greyson throwing a temper tantrum over anything recently.*

“Would *you* be comfortable knowing that I’m co-leading with Greyson?” he asked. “I’d be a kind of… half-Alpha.”

I raised an eyebrow. “The reason why I love you has nothing to do with you being an Alpha werewolf, Xavier.”

He tilted his head to the side. “So it’s got nothing to do with power?”

I scoffed. “I don’t need either of you to be the strongest werewolves ever. Just… be there for me. And listen to what I need. Okay?”

Xavier stared. His expression became thoughtful. “Is the co-captain thing what you need right now?”

I pressed my lips together. “I need you two to stop fighting. So yeah, I guess it is.”

After a beat of silence, Xavier stepped closer to me. He rested his hands on my shoulders gently. “I’m open to the idea, then. If it would make you happy.”

*Wait*, I thought, stunned*. Did he just agree to this?*

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Xavier asked, eyebrows arched.

“I’m just trying to figure out if this is a really unfunny joke or not,” I said slowly.

“Why?”

I scoffed. “Mainly because I can’t even remember the last time you agreed to anything without making a fuss, Xavier!”

He shook his head, pulling me into a hug. His scent soothed me. “I’ll always do what’s best for the pack. And if you’re pleased too, then all the better.”

I studied his face, eyes narrowed suspiciously.

*I mean it, Cali*, Xavier mind linked. *I just want you to be safe and happy.*

Xavier could be the worst, but he could also be adorable and surprisingly considerate. Sometimes. This was one of those times, and I felt like kissing him. I hesitated, though—Greyson could be watching us, and I didn’t want to stoke the flames. I still had to sell Greyson on the co-Alpha thing, too.

“Let’s go inside,” Xavier mumbled, kissing my forehead. “I have to shower…” He smirked. “Maybe you want to join me?”

I rolled my eyes, nudging him. “Nice try.”

I was tempted, though. Sleeping by his side last night only made me want him more. But I couldn’t give in to that, not now with everything about the pack’s leadership up in the air.

Before we headed inside, I glanced back at Greyson.

He was following us with his eyes.

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“You know, this is important to me, Cali,” Xavier said, pausing by the staircase. “I could really use someone to scrub my back.”

He really thought he was being slick. I patted his very hard bicep and refrained from drooling. “That’s what the loofah is for—lots of scrubbing abilities there, getting rid of all the dead skin cells. Good luck!”

I heard his quiet chuckle as I sauntered over to the kitchen, leaving him to go upstairs alone.

*That was a close one*, I thought*.*

All my horny thoughts thankfully flew out the window once I got to the kitchen. Torin was sitting at the table, staring sadly at a pumpkin pie. The angst wafting off him was just as overpowering as the cinnamon.

“Torin,” I said, sitting down next to him. “What’s up?”

“The pie,” Torin said, sighing. “It’s… subpar.”

I was shocked here. “Torin, it looks beautiful. It would make Paul Hollywood jealous.”

Torin shook his head, his smile small and forced. “I think I can do better. I want to show Tom what a star baker I am.”

I shook my head. “My dad will like whatever you make, Torin. I promise.”

Torin sighed, resting his head in his hands.

I frowned. “Are you sure that’s why you’re sad right now?”

Torin took a deep breath, glancing at me. “It’s just… Astrid and I had been looking forward to our first Thanksgiving.” His voice trembled, and my heart clenched. “I just… I miss her.”

My eyes felt scratchy. I pulled Torin into a tight hug. We embraced for a long moment, and when I faced him, I swallowed thickly. “I knew Astrid for just a short while, but I really miss her too. I can’t even imagine how hard this is for you. You two had been friends for years…”

Torin wiped away a tear. “I’m sorry. I don’t want to drag down the holiday.”

I shook my head. “You’re mourning someone you loved. It’s okay. We all miss Astrid.”

Torin sniffled, wiping his eyes. He stared at the pie. After a beat of silence, he asked, “How are you supposed to know if it’s any good? Tom said we need a dozen of these—I don’t wanna make any more with this recipe if this one is bad.”

I smirked, reaching around to grab a couple of forks. “Well, there’s only one way to find out.”

I tried it out. The pie melted in my mouth, the filling perfect pumpkin goodness, the crust crumbly but buttery.

“Oh my god,” I said. “Wow!”

Torin smiled shyly. “You’re just saying that.”

“Try it!” I exclaimed. “It’s so good I want to marry it! That would definitely solve all my Alpha werewolf problems.”

Torin laughed. It was lovely to see his mood get better. He picked up his fork and took a bite, chewing slowly. “Wow. It *is* good, isn’t it?”

I chuckled as Torin took another bite, looking content.

*What a sweetheart*, I thought. *We’re so lucky to have him here.*

My phone vibrated, and I saw that Steinar had texted me. My pulse picked up as I read his message.

*I found something about the Luna in the two-Alpha pack. Can you FaceTime me right now?*

I gasped, intrigued. Damn, this librarian was not messing around.

*Yes*, I replied instantly*. Call me!*

Within seconds, I was video-chatting with a gargoyle. It wasn’t on the list of weirdest things I’d ever done, but it had to be up there. I squinted my eyes at the screen as the picture cleared up.

“Steinar,” I said. “Did you get a… haircut?”

Steinar puffed up. “I chiseled it myself.”

I had so many questions. “It looks so good! I—”

“I’d love to talk more about how handsome I am, but this is important, Cali,” Steinar said seriously. “I’ve found more information about the dual Alphas.”

Torin perked up, abandoning his pie. “The *what* now?”

“There was a pack with two Alphas,” I told Torin, then Steinar gasped.

“Wait, hold on, is that a pumpkin pie?”

“Yes. I made it,” Torin said happily.

Steinar’s eyes were wide. “That looks amazing. Save me a piece—I might just drop by for a visit.”

Torin blushed at Steinar’s compliment, and I snorted.

“Tell me what you found out about the Alphas first,” I said.

“Right.” Steinar blinked, refocusing. “So that pack is characterized by scholars as a ‘radical werewolf commune,’ and there isn’t a lot of data on it. But this is what I can tell you—the Luna was the guiding compass for the pack and for the Alphas.”

I paused.

*Well, then*, I thought. *That sounds like a fucking awesome idea!*

I loved the notion of serving as a beacon for the two boys. How fascinating and fun! And also, I’d get so much power. Power sounded nice. I loved power! I was all for it!

*Am I ready for that kind of responsibility, though?*

Who cared, I wanted it!

Also, how many times had I told those annoying stubborn men—a.k.a. my beautiful amazing mates—that I was the real Alpha here?

“I like the sound of that, very interesting, do go on,” I told Steinar.

“The bond between the two Alphas and the one Luna created a harmony among the trio. At least that was what happened in the case of the pack we’ve been discussing,” Steinar said.

My optimism was off the charts now. If Xavier was already on board with this, and I convinced Greyson, and then I became their Luna…

Everyone kept saying that the Luna mark was dangerous, though.

Was there a ceremony for me to be a *double* Luna?

What would happen to me if I couldn’t handle the magical force behind it all?

**Episode 1895**

VIOLET

I was almost jumping up and down in the back seat of the cab as it made a turn for the pack house. I’d been buzzing with excitement ever since we’d boarded the plane.

“Someone’s happy,” Charlie teased, pulling me in for a hug and kiss on the temple.

I grinned, nodding. I was coming home, to the pack, and my brother.

Lilac was alive—in the flesh—and I couldn’t wait to see him.

The pack house came into view with just a few feet to spare.

“You can leave us here!” I told the driver, who shrugged and pulled over.

I got out in a flash, about to start running toward the yard when I heard Charlie chuckle.

*Shit!*

“Charlie, I—”

“Go,” he said, waving me off. “I’ll get our bags and be right behind you.”

I ran back, grabbed his face, and gave him a quick kiss on the mouth, grinning widely before I dashed away. The last time my brother had been here, with me, we’d still been living in this old pack house, Xavier’s house. We would run around the premises and race each other, then go back and set up water balloon tournaments. Sometimes we would binge-watch TV shows together, or read on the front porch, and Lilac would make tea for both of us. I had so many memories like that with him, things that had happened only a few months ago, and yet felt like a lifetime.

But everything was different now.

Charlie had come home with me, and Lilac was here, and Xavier was here, and the entire pack—my family—was safe. This was where I truly belonged, not in some hunter boot camp.

This was my home.

I was breathless as I ran into the house, kicking my shoes off as I yelled, “Lilac!”

“Violet!” Rishika looked up at me from the living room, Zainab with her as they sat by the fireplace, surprised but smiling. “We thought you were coming back later in the week!”

“Change of plans! Great to see you, gotta find my brother!” I said quickly. “Lilac!”

“I think he’s upstairs,” Artemis told me, smiling, and I rushed over.

“Lilac! Where are—” I froze when I turned the corner and saw my brother at the top of the staircase. I gasped, my eyes wide as I took him in, the feeling of relief so strong that it almost knocked me out.

“Lilac,” I whispered, shaking.

He smiled at me softly. “Hey, Violet,” he said. “It’s me.”

I ran up the stairs three at a time and fell into his arms. We hugged tight, our wolves circling each other in joy and excitement while our hearts pounded as one.

This was my twin.

He was real, no longer a ghost.

I couldn’t believe this had actually happened.

I had missed him so, so much.

“Hey,” he said, facing me. We were both sniffling, wiping each other’s tears. “You got taller.”

I laughed. “You *feel* taller.”

“I really tried to come back as an improved version of myself,” he joked, and we both laughed, sniffling some more.

Right on cue, I heard Charlie’s voice behind me. “I’m glad to be here.”

A moment later, we were downstairs and Lilac and Charlie were shaking hands. Charlie was smiling, but Lilac was staring weirdly at my mate.

“What?” I asked, nudging Lilac.

“I thought about it a little more, and now I don’t know if I like that you have a mate,” Lilac told me seriously. “Also, I’m pretty sure I have an issue with said mate being a hunter.” He eyed Charlie, eyebrows arched. “Feel free to be offended, dude.”

Charlie looked at Lilac, then at me, all awkward and precious before he said, “I’d never let anything bad happen to Violet. I love her.”

Lilac kept staring at Charlie like he was some sort of criminal mastermind, and I scoffed, smacking him on the shoulder. “Oh my god, stop it! I can take care of myself, and Charlie is an amazing mate!”

“I do my best,” Charlie said, his expression earnest.

“That’s sweet,” Lilac deadpanned. “Is your best *enough*, though?”

Charlie looked a little pale, and I shoved Lilac. It felt nice to be able to push him around like this, actually. It felt really familiar. “Lilac! Stop bullying my mate.”

Lilac rolled his eyes. “Bullying? Please, this is me being nice! Aren’t I nice, Charlie?”

Charlie blinked slowly. “Is this a trick question?”

“Yes,” Lilac replied. “Make sure you give the right answer, otherwise I shall exile you back to hunter camp.”

I gasped. “Lilac!”

Lilac smirked. “What, I’m just kidding!” He winked at Charlie. “Ignore me, it’s all in good fun.”

Charlie looked a little sheepish, so I quickly said, “You two need to get to know each other better.”

“Do we, though?” Lilac pondered out loud.

I elbowed him before saying, “We should all go on a double date together.”

For the first time since I’d seen him alive again, Lilac looked nervous. “What? How—*What* do you mean by a double date?”

I gave him a look. “Are you seriously going to deny that you have a thing going on with Marta? The last time I saw you two together, there was definitely a spark.”

Lilac waved a hand. “That is none of your business!”

I rolled my eyes. “You literally just got into my business with my mate.”

“That’s different, I’m your twin,” Lilac scoffed.

“Which makes me your twin too!”

Lilac opened his mouth to speak, index finger raised like he was ready to berate me. And then he shook his head. “Okay, that’s fair.”

“His mood swings are pretty intense, huh?” Charlie whispered to me, and Lilac shot him a glare.

“Did you just say something?” Lilac asked.

“Nothing,” Charlie blurted.

“Lilac,” I said patiently. “Why won’t you admit that there’s something going on with you and Marta? Come on now!”

Lilac sighed. “Okay, fine. I like her. I might be in love? I don’t know. She’s, like, really cute and fun and powerful. Maybe a little too powerful, actually…”

I snorted. “Well, now that that’s settled then, all four of us will go on a proper double date.”

Lilac shook his head. “Look, I’m being for real here. There’s been some weird stuff happening with Marta, so I don’t know if she’d be up for it.”

I frowned. “What’s going on?”

“I’ll tell you more later,” Lilac said, glancing at Charlie. “Why don’t you two settle in first?”

I frowned deeper. Lilac and I used to share our deepest secrets, and I wanted to know everything that was going on with my brother.

“I’ll go get our bags upstairs so you two can talk,” Charlie said. “Nice to meet you again, Lilac.”

My brother, to his credit, decided not to be a brat this time round. “You too.”

I gave him a look once Charlie was gone.

“So maybe your boyfriend isn’t all bad…” Lilac trailed off.

“Do you like him now?” I asked, arching an eyebrow.

“Let’s not push it,” Lilac said, teasing.

I took a deep breath, refocusing. Joking around was great and all, but there was something I needed to get off my chest. “You know…”

“What?” Lilac asked.

“I feel pretty bad that I left you and Marta here during a time where there was so much going on in the pack.” I winced. “I hope you understand why I had to go. I couldn’t leave my mate alone in that place.”

Lilac nodded. “I get it. It’s about the mate bond. I kinda feel like… Feelings are a lot to handle, aren’t they?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Everything that happened back at the camp was so nuts. One of Charlie’s friends got out of control, and—”

“Because, like, I find myself having feelings too. A lot of them. You know?”

“Yeah, and that’s why going to meet Charlie at the camp was so important to me.”

“I’m really glad you’re here. That I’m alive to see you, hug you, yell at you. We have Marta to thank for that,” Lilac said reverently.

I paused, taking a moment to stare at Lilac. Usually by now he’d be all over me, asking questions about what had happened at the camp. The fact that he was choosing to speak about Marta was a testament to his emotions for her. I was glad that he had someone like her in his life—after all, what he’d said was true. If it wasn’t for Marta, Lilac would still be a ghost.

But right now—as Lilac went on about the ways that Marta had changed his life, instead of asking me about *my* life—I realized that something had changed.

The close relationship I had with Lilac had been interrupted. Not just by his death and subsequent return, but by having Marta in his life. Would things between us ever be the same again? Was I being selfish by wondering that? I’d been at a camp and almost died, but he had been *literally* dead. Maybe I should’ve been pressing him with questions here, instead of expecting him to focus on me.

Marta seemed to be front and center in his mind at the moment.

And then it hit me.

Could Marta be my brother’s mate?

**Episode 1896**

AVA

I was out in the forest, running. My wolf sniffed the air—I had been hoping to find Xavier after seeing him go out, but I had lost his scent. The cool breeze felt good, though. Sobering.

I didn’t want to be in that house, not when Ravi was there and things were still strange between us. It didn’t feel like we were mates, but at the same time, it did. It was strange. Frustrating. I had no idea how to fix it. I couldn’t even remember what Xavier had said to break the bond with me. The words should’ve been there, hanging out in my subconscious, but nothing came up. I must’ve blocked them out, the memory too painful to think of. Xavier had broken us irreversibly. And yet…

I remembered the kiss we’d shared recently.

I had felt something then. Something strong, alive, a hint of a mate spark again. It was unmistakable. It had felt like a rush, like a true connection. But then all this nonsense with Ravi had started, and every one of my emotions had come crashing down.

The cool breeze no longer felt refreshing, so I returned to the house.

I walked in, closing the door behind me. I’d shifted back to human, so I was naked and much colder now. I tried to shake the thought of Ravi as I stared at myself in the hallway mirror and dusted off the remnants of snow.

Xavier’s scent hit me like a train.

Fighting not to rush, I headed upstairs, walking past his room to get to mine. The door was open, and he was in jeans, drying his hair with a towel. I hated the way he’d dismissed me earlier when I’d asked him what he was planning to do about remaining Alpha. I was trying to help him, and he wouldn’t give me the time of day.

I wanted to believe that his annoyance wasn’t personal. That he was just pissed off because Greyson had refused to fight him, and his anger had nothing to do with me. Maybe he would listen to reason now—maybe he would listen to me when I told him that he should be the one in charge of the Redwood pack. I could feel it in my bones. It was his destiny, and I would be his Luna.

Just as I finished the thought, he turned around, meeting my gaze as I hovered by the door. His eyes narrowed, but I noticed them flickering down to my bare body for a second.

“What do you want, Ava?” he asked tightly.

“Have you thought more about what I said?”

He shook his head, looking away. “This isn’t your business. I talked it out with Cali. She’s come up with a solution.”

I fought not to flinch at the sound of Cali’s name. Jealousy, acidic and bitter, rose in my stomach. It was all about *Cali, Cali, Cali.* When would Xavier realize that Cali was hardly the mate or Luna that he needed if he wanted to remain Alpha?

I opened my mouth to speak, but then Xavier approached me. His proximity always sent waves of want through me, and this time wasn’t an exception. Instead of continuing the conversation, though, Xavier said, “We’re done here, Ava.”

And then he shut the door in my face.

I wanted to scream at him and bang on the fucking door.

Fighting down the humiliation, I was heading to my room when I heard Ravi’s voice behind me.

“Ava?”

All thoughts of Xavier flew out the window when I faced the other man, a jolt running through me. What the hell was this? A mate bond, or just plain hormones? I really hoped it was the latter.

“What do you want?” I asked him, irritated. “Why are you following me around the house?”

He arched an eyebrow. “Last time I checked, the hallway was public domain. I’m just going to my room.” That was what he said, but his eyes told another story as they glanced at my naked form. The way his gaze made me feel was obscene. Ridiculous.

“I thought we could be civil,” Ravi went on, “but maybe we should talk this out. You’re obviously on edge around me after what happened between us.”

I rolled my eyes.

“What are you talking about? I barely notice you,” I scoffed, brushing past him.

The back of his hand came into contact with mine, and my lie was made more obvious than ever when I shuddered at the contact. Ravi faced me, his lips parting, his dark eyes fixed on me.

In that moment of silence, I felt my entire body heat up, adrenaline coursing through me like a drug.

This was bad.

“You’re insufferable,” I snapped, pushing past him with much more force than necessary.

He huffed as I walked away, marching toward my room. My pulse was going nuts, and when I reached the door, I dared to look over my shoulder.

Ravi stood there, staring.

I had no idea what this thing was between us, but it was really hard to ignore.

And why should I ignore the physical aspect of it?

“Well?” I said, flipping my hair over my shoulder, staring at Ravi. “Are you coming or what?”

Ravi went rigid. He looked around, hesitant—probably nervous at the thought of the others learning about whatever was going on between us. After all, I was the black sheep of the pack house. On some level, I was ashamed too, because I knew I belonged to Xavier.

But this feeling with Ravi was too intense, and Xavier had shut the door in my face.

Xavier had repeatedly rejected me, and it hurt so badly that I could taste it.

“Christ,” Ravi said under his breath, striding over to me.

I walked into the room, and he followed, shutting the door.

When he stared at me this time, his gaze was unashamed, and I allowed myself to dwell on that, too. On the shame. On the ways that being with Ravi felt wrong.

This was wrong, because I belonged to another man, but it felt like I couldn’t stop it.

And then, before my eyes, in my imagination, I transformed Ravi into Xavier.

It helped my fantasy that Ravi didn’t say anything. He just marched toward me, grabbed me by the back of the neck, and crashed his mouth onto mine. In my mind, it was Xavier who put his hands all over my bare body, whose tongue was in my mouth. It was Xavier who shoved me onto the bed and kissed me again. It was Xavier who traced his fingers between my legs where I was so wet everything felt slippery.

I kept my eyes closed, kept Xavier’s mouth on mine, kept my thighs spread for him to pin down, and he did. Xavier kissed me and at my request, he slid inside me with one hard thrust. Xavier groaned as the jolt in me kept going, his hips moving against mine as we kissed and bit at each other.

When I came, I moaned so loudly that Xavier had to stifle it with his calloused palm. I was trembling, shaking for him, my eyes still closed.

He orgasmed with a grunt, an eager sound that made my toes curl.

And then he flipped over next to me, both of us panting from the rush.

My eyes opened, and I moved away from him.

“I have to go check on something,” Ravi grumbled, clearing his throat.

When I looked at him this time, he was himself.

He was a handsome man, Ravi. There was a raw appeal to him. I understood why Joss had been drawn to him.

But he was not my mate.

He just *couldn’t* be, no matter what these wild feelings said.

I was glad he wanted to leave. I didn’t need any awkward pleasantries, so I didn’t say anything, and Ravi slipped out of the room. When we weren’t fucking, he seemed as uninterested in me as I was in him.

I cleaned myself up quickly in the bathroom, and then I settled back into the bed to sleep, my eyes fluttering shut as tiredness took over.

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When I opened my eyes again, Xavier was standing over me.

“Why do you keep betraying me, Ava?” Xavier’s expression was severe, his voice otherworldly with what sounded like sorrow. Like jealousy.

I shook my head. “It’s not my fault. I—I think of you every time I’m with Ravi. I never meant—”

“You’re such a fucking liar.” Xavier stared at me, furious and bitter. And then he stalked away.

“Xavier, wait!” I called after him, running to catch up. My heart was breaking, still stupidly hoping for us to be together. I couldn’t lose him, not like this.

I followed him out of the quiet, empty house—a house that looked like a ghost—and when we reached the yard, I called his name again.

“Xavier!”

“What the hell do you want from me, Ava?” he snapped, turning to face me.

I didn’t have the time to answer.

A massive creature jumped out of the shadows and tackled my mate. My Xavier. It tore into him, the sounds of ripping flesh making me scream.

“No!” I ran to him, sobbing, helpless. I had to save him, protect him, heal him.

But it was too late.

Xavier was still.

Xavier was dead, torn into pieces like a slaughtered animal.

The creature rose up, bathed in Xavier’s blood.

It turned to face me, with glowing orange eyes and a sinister smile.

I gasped, because I knew that smile.

I knew that face.

I knew this monster.

It was Iñigo, his head tilted to the side like a predator’s. He laughed. “I’ve come for you, Ava. This thing between us isn’t over.”

**Episode 1897**

XAVIER

I finished getting dressed, feeling pretty pissed at everything.

Especially Ava.

Ava, who always looked amazing naked, who always fucking pissed me off.

It was always Ava, and the way she refused to let go of her feelings for me was getting ridiculous. It was also ridiculous that I couldn’t seem to just kick her the hell out, but I wasn’t about to dwell on that thought.

Cali was a saint for not forcing me to do it, but the truth of the matter was that Cali didn’t feel insecure over Ava. Cali knew that I loved her. She knew that I was her mate. She knew that I was hers, and nothing Ava ever did could change that, or break my bond with Cali.

What about my former mate bond with Ava, though?

If it were truly broken, why the hell did I still find her attractive—almost tempting? Was it just me being related to Colton? Or was it something else?

The thought made me sick with guilt. I wasn’t meant to be feeling like this over Ava—I thought I had rid myself of all emotions but contempt for her. She’d said that she wanted to help me, that she believed in me being Alpha, but that sounded way too good to be true.

Everybody knew that Ava was only interested in helping herself.

The best way she could help *me* would be to leave me alone, to leave the pack.

Nevertheless, she continued with her bullshit, and I continued…

To *not* throw her out.

This was my house, my walls, my rules, and I couldn’t set this woman straight. Why was I hesitating? What the fuck was wrong with me? I wanted to punch through the door, but I stopped myself. I hated the idea of Ava knowing that she was getting to me.

Besides, if anyone saw me lose my cool, it would only help Greyson’s mission to portray me as a hothead. In the past, he’d accused me multiple times of letting my emotions cloud my judgment. My judgement about Ava wasn’t clouded, though, it was just…

I didn’t know what the fuck it was.

But I was certain that whatever she thought was still going on between us was a lie.

I would ignore her, and that was all there was to it.

Full of resolve, I headed downstairs just as I heard a *click* coming from down the hall. Ravi was coming out of Ava’s room, and I frowned.

What was that about? Was she recruiting Ravi to help her cause? I needed to look into that, to figure out what the fuck she’d been telling people around the house. Ravi vanished down the hall, going straight to a room, and I decided to speak to him later.

When I got to the kitchen to pick up a glass of water, I found Torin rolling out what looked like pie dough on the counter. He had flour on his nose, his apron dusty with it. But at least he looked content.

“What’s going on, Torin?” I asked, and he grinned at me.

“I’m making pumpkin pies for Thanksgiving!” he said, a little breathlessly. He seemed in high spirits, and I figured this whole fast and furious cooking thing must’ve been helping him. It seemed to be keeping his mind occupied with something other than Astrid, at least. Poor guy.

“These look really good,” I said honestly, eyeing the pies that had just been taken out of the oven.

“Would you like a slice?” Torin asked with a smile.

“I’ll have some later,” I said. “By the way, where’s the party happening?”

Torin pointed outside. “Phil is here with his van. He’s setting up a large tent and heat lamps in the back yard.”

I looked out the window and spotted Cali, Orla, Rishika, Artemis, Jay, Lola, Jacqueline, Kira, and Mrs. Smith setting things up. I wasn’t surprised that Big Mac wasn’t out there helping—there was no way a party was her idea of fun. That was something that witch and I had in common.

I eyed Cali, taking in her beautiful face as she laughed at something Lola said. Had she told Greyson about her co-Alpha idea yet? Would he accept it? I wondered how that kind of thing could ever work between us long-term and came up short.

I wouldn’t let the friction between me and Greyson come between myself and the pack, though. I wanted the pack to grow into a tight-knit, powerful family, and I’d do it with or without Greyson. Ava had once suggested that I could run off and form a new pack, but *this* was my pack. Just like Cali was my mate. And when the time came and the power-sharing agreement frayed, I would need to act smart.

I would need to have the majority of the group on my side by then.

In fact, I was ready to start on that already.

I said goodbye to Torin and headed outside, where everybody was working hard to get everything organized.

“How can I help?” I asked Cali’s mom, just to make sure I got extra brownie points from my kind-of mother-in-law.

Orla beamed at me, handing me a massive bouquet of purple daisies. “Would you be a dear and set the flowers in vases?”

In the background, Jay laughed, the asshole. “Not sure Xavier’s the best at floral arrangements.”

I shot him a look and kept my voice low. “Are you trying to be a jerk right now?”

He smirked, glancing at Cali’s mom. “Sorry. Didn’t know flowers were so important to you.”

The truth was that I didn’t like flowers at all and didn’t have a clue about how to arrange them, but that wasn’t the point here. Suppressing the urge to tell Jay to fuck off, I turned to Orla. “I’m probably better at carrying stuff around, but I can definitely give flower arranging a try.”

Orla gave me another massive smile, which I considered a win.

“You can do it, Xavier,” Cali told me, waving from across the tent. “I believe in you!”

She was fucking adorable, and I loved it.

As I started fighting with daisies of various colors, setting them into vases, Lola sauntered around.

“I just think it’s *so* funny how practically everyone is helping out—except the son of the bride,” she quipped. I could definitely sense that she didn’t find this funny at all. Meanwhile, in the corner, Jay was snickering. That girl could do no wrong in his eyes.

“Where *is* Greyson?” I asked Lola.

“Probably being ungrateful somewhere while we set up his mother’s party,” Lola deadpanned. “Where’s Cali?”

I scowled, looking around. “I’m not sure where she went.”

“My goodness, you’re doing it all wrong!” Jacqueline the vampire grabbed the flowers from my hands.

“How?” I scowled, gesturing at the five vases I’d just finished setting up.

“There’s an uneven number of purple and yellow daisies in this one!” She pointed at the first vase. “And this one just has this random pink daisy that nobody asked for!” She pointed at the third vase. “And then there’s this one that’s all white daisies! It’s just—wait, actually that’s not so horrible. There’s symmetry and sophistication in an all-white look.”

I shook my head. “Do you want to take over?”

“Yes, please. I love daisies,” Jacqueline said seriously.

I scoffed, letting her at it.

I then walked over to Kira, who was struggling to hang a banner as she stood on a ladder. “Need any help?”

“No,” she said, rolling her eyes.

The pins dropped, and the banner fell to the floor.

She glared at me. “Oh my god, you jinxed me!”

I laughed, and we started bickering about who was the bringer of bad luck here as I helped her hang the thing again. I was fond of Kira, even if she was snarky and a bit cagey. She kinda reminded me of myself, that way. I wondered if she’d taken my offer to stay with the pack seriously. Why would she be here, otherwise?

She could literally go anywhere now that Garren and Iñigo were dead, and yet she was still here with us. I hoped that she enjoyed being part of the pack, of our weird little family.

“Thank you,” she told me, after we were done with the banner. “That was actually much easier to do with you helping me.”

“You’re welcome,” I replied.

“By the way, now that I have your attention and you’re not being annoying,” Kira said, looking around, “do you mind stepping away with me for a moment? I want to talk to you about something. In private.”

I nodded, intrigued by Kira’s usual cryptic-ness. Both of us left the tent. When we were a few feet away, I asked, “What’s up?”

Kira looked around. There was something nervous about her usual confident demeanor. “Look, I know that everyone wants to have this party to celebrate the defeat of Letifer and the revenants, but I wonder if it’s too soon.”

I arched an eyebrow. “Aren’t you being a little dramatic? That whole thing is over, so why dwell on it?”

Kira took a deep breath. When she faced me again, her gaze was sharp. “I think that before we do anything else, we need to check if the witch mark is still on the other house. Because if that’s the case, there’s going to be more trouble.”

**Episode 1898**

I looked morosely out the study window as the light outside began to change, steadily eating pie directly from the tin. It sat like a stone in my stomach, but I barely noticed. My mind was still reeling as I tried to make sense out of what Steinar had told me about the Alphas and the Luna.

The clock on the wall chimed the hour and pulled me out of my reverie. Looking down at the pie plate on the desk in front of me, I realized I’d eaten almost half the pumpkin pie without even realizing it. Though, now that I *had* realized it, my stomach started to protest. I groaned and pushed the pie away from me. “Big mistake.”

“Cali?”

I looked up as Torin poked his head in through the study door. “Oh, hey, Torin.”

“There you are.” He wiped a wisp of whipped cream from the corner of his mouth. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

“Really? What’s up?”

“Artemis is looking for you.” He leaned back out into the hallway. “She’s in here.”

Artemis appeared a moment later. Her eyes swept over the dim, empty study, then the pie plate, then me. “We’re setting up for the engagement party. What are you doing hiding out in here?”

“If you ladies don’t need me, I’m going to head back to the kitchen. I have a few more pies to make.” Torin glanced at the half-eaten pie in front of me. “Plus one.”

I dropped my head into one hand as my stomach gave a sick kind of twist. Definitely too much pie.

“So, want to tell me what’s going on with you?” Artemis said, walking in and taking a seat across from me.

“Nothing,” I said quickly. The last thing I wanted to do was burden Artemis with my problems. She had enough to deal with, after everything she’d gone through. “Nothing’s going on.”

But Artemis clearly wasn’t buying it. She rolled her eyes. “Oh, okay. Nothing’s wrong. You’re just binge eating a whole pie in a dark room because everything’s perfectly fine, is that right? Never better?”

I almost said yes, but when I opened my mouth, I just sighed. I *did* need to talk to someone about what was going on. My thoughts were a hopeless tangle, and maybe it would help to just say a few things out loud. “I’ve been talking to Steinar about what’s been going on between Xavier and Greyson. All the tension, and the battle for Alpha. And we’ve started talking about the possibility of them both being Alpha.”

Artemis looked confused. “How would that be possible?”

“Co-Alphas,” I said hurriedly. “Steinar’s done some research, and he thinks it might be possible. But there would only be one Luna. Me, in all likelihood—”

Artemis snorted. “Yeah, I would think so.”

“But I just don’t see how that would be possible,” I said, shaking my head, feeling hopeless again. “I mean, think about it: how could being a Luna to two Alphas *possibly* be harmonious? It’s been hard enough just trying to be a mate to both Xavier and Greyson. And it hasn’t just been hard,” I said, growing more agitated. “It’s been almost *impossible.*”

Artemis was quiet for a moment. She tilted her head, looking at me carefully. “And how would being a Luna change that?”

“I-I—” I stammered. “I don’t actually know,” I finally admitted. “I got ahold of Steinar to get some answers, but now I have a lot more questions about the two Alphas situation than I did before I talked to him.”

“And?” Artemis asked, eyeing me keenly. “What else?”

“And… I’m worried,” I said. “Xavier and Greyson have both told me that becoming a Luna is *really* painful. And it’s complicated. I remember how agonizing it was for Joss after Greyson chose her, and she was so crazy strong. And brave. And then there are all these questions that no one can even begin to answer…”

“Like what?”

“Like about me being Fae. How would that even work? Would it work at all? And would I have to go through two separate Luna mark rituals? Would I even survive that?” I could feel my throat getting tight.

Artemis leaned forward. “If the question is whether you’re strong enough, then I know the answer. You are. I can’t answer the questions about what happens when you’re part Fae, but I’ve seen you in action, Cali, and you’re a helluva lot stronger than most of the Fae I’ve ever come across.”

I gave her a watery smile. “Thanks, Artemis, but still…”

Artemis was quiet for a moment. “Have you talked about this with either Xavier or Greyson? Told them that you’re worried about all this?”

I shook my head. “I haven’t even talked to Greyson about being co-Alpha—if that’s even a thing. And all the Luna questions just make the whole thing so much more complicated.”

Artemis nodded slowly. “It sounds like you need some more time to think things over. Why don’t you come back outside and help with the party?” When I hesitated, she stood up decisively. “Come on, it’ll be a good distraction. It’ll help you think.”

“Okay,” I agreed, getting to my feet, leaving my pie behind.

Outside, the freezing November air hit my face and woke me right up. I looked at the busyness all around me and did start to feel a little better. It was hard not to feel cheered up by the sight of the whole pack working together for such a happy occasion.

But I didn’t see Greyson anywhere. He wasn’t with the rest of the pack in the center of the yard, so I walked down the steps and looked around. Just in time to see him coming out of the garage.

“Hey, here’s your chance,” Artemis said, stepping up next to me and elbowing me in the side.

“What do you mean?” I asked, massaging my ribs.

She rolled her eyes. “This whole party is for Greyson’s mom and Big Mac, right? He’s bound to be in a good mood. Go talk to him. See if you can sell him on being co-Alpha.”

I thought about bailing completely—my thoughts darting longingly back to my pie—but decided that Artemis was probably right, and now was as good a time as any.

As I walked over, Greyson looked up, watching my approach. I tried to gauge his mood, but it was hard to read. It felt like it had been a while since we’d last spoken. I’d been preoccupied, but he’d been distant, too. And not acting like himself, either—especially since he’d refused to fight Xavier.

But I could still feel the pull of him as I drew closer, as though there were a physical tether drawing me toward him. I took a deep breath, trying to keep it together even as I felt my cheeks flush red.

“Hey,” I said. “How come you’re not out celebrating with everyone else? Is everything okay?”  
 He smiled. “You worried about me?”

I frowned. “Of course I am. I’m always worried about you. Why wouldn’t I be?”

He was quiet for a beat, then shrugged again. “I’m fine. You don’t have anything to worry about.”

I stared at him. He wasn’t telling the truth. He was playing casual, but I could see past his easy manner. Something was going on. “You sure you don’t have anything on your mind?”

He stepped forward and slipped an arm around my waist. He pulled me gently closer and pressed a kiss to my forehead. “Nothing to worry about, love.”

My skin tingled at his touch. It always did—no matter what else was going on. I took a step back, trying to force my mind to think clearly. “Are you still thinking about this whole Alpha situation?”

He shrugged easily. “It’s something I can deal with.”

“What if…” I started. I swallowed nervously. “What if I found a solution?”

A frown crossed his features. “A solution? What do you mean?”  
 “To the Alpha probl—situation. What if I found a solution to it?” I asked quickly. “One that would keep the pack united?”

Greyson looked surprised. “I guess I’m open to ideas. What did you have in mind?”

“Okay.” I took a deep breath and took Greyson’s hand. “Would you be open to the idea of being a co-Alpha?”

“What?” He looked baffled.

“Co-Alpha. *With* Xavier. Both of you leading the pack.” My heart beat fast in my chest as I watched his face for a response.

Greyson seemed to think about this, and when he smiled slightly, I felt the tension in my shoulders unknitting. He was thinking about it! He was considering it! Holy shit, this might actually work! Wilder things had happened, right?

“Absolutely not.”

This brought me crashing back down to earth. “Wait, *what*?”

He shook his head. “Not a chance.”

I stared at him in shock. “You’re not even willing to try it? For the pack?”

**Episode 1899**

GREYSON

Cali was still looking at me, her expression frustrated and concerned, so I tried to gather my thoughts. I’d been thinking of something else when she’d proposed the co-Alpha idea—whatever the hell *that* was. I’d been thinking about the three witches, and what Big Mac had told me. I’d just been debating telling Cali all of it when she’d steered the conversation toward the Alpha situation.

I knew it had been worrying her, but her “solution” had thrown me. It wasn’t what I’d been expecting to hear—at all. I reached for her and gently lifted her chin with my finger until she was looking up at me. “I know that’s not what you want to hear, but I can’t imagine Xavier would agree to this idea either.”

Her eyes flashed, and she pulled away from my hand. “I already talked to Xavier about this, Greyson, and he *did* agree. That’s why I’m suggesting it to you.”

She had gone to Xavier first, and I felt a jolt of jealousy surge through me.

Cali must have read this in my face because she stepped closer again. “I went to him first because I thought if anyone was going to say no to the idea, it was going to be him, so I wanted to get him on board before I brought the idea to you.”

“But he said yes?” I asked, surprised.

Cali nodded.

I let this information settle in. Cali had probably been right in assuming that Xavier would be less open to the idea, but… he’d said yes, and I couldn’t figure out why. Xavier hated sharing. He always had, even as a little kid, and it had just gotten worse over time.

“I think we know that asking Xavier to share anything is useless, and something so important…” I trailed off and let my eyes range over Cali.

Beneath my examination, her cheeks flushed pink, but she took a deep breath, as if steeling herself. “This time would be different.”

But I didn’t buy that. “It’s not going to work, love. Think about it—when would any true-blooded Alpha agree to share power? It just doesn’t happen.”

“It did!” Cali insisted. “I read about a pack where there were two leaders—co-Alphas. And it worked for them.”

“Which pack?” I asked, frowning.

“It was a while ago, back in the sixties,” she said waving away the question.

I laughed. “Well that explains it.”

“What does?”

“It was a different era, Cali. More…” I paused, searching for the right word. “*Experimental.* Things between Xavier and me aren’t quite so peaceful and loving.” I felt a rumble of old anger and pain deep in my belly. “They never have been.”

But Cali didn’t look ready to accept this excuse. “They could be,” she said hotly, “if you two would just give it a damn try.”

I looked at her for a moment. Her eyes were flashing, and her face was flushed. I knew how much she wanted to work out the Alpha situation—without anyone getting hurt. I knew her heart was always in the right place. “Listen, love, I’ll think about it, okay?”

Her face brightened instantly. “You will? So there’s a chance?”

“I’m not making any promises,” I said firmly, “but I won’t rule it out.”

She thought about this for a moment, then nodded.

A wave of love passed over me, and I pulled her into a hug. I wanted to hold her, to kiss her—I wanted to tell her that everything was going to be okay. But I couldn’t. I couldn’t even convince myself of that. And until I knew more about the witches, I wasn’t going to feel sure about anything.

She looked up at me, her eyes wide and open, and I leaned down, pressing a kiss to her lips. The heat I always felt for her kindled within me, and I felt that physical pull toward her—impossible to ignore. She arched back over my arm as I deepened the kiss. I loved kissing her, but I wanted this kiss to be so much more. I wanted her to be mine—*always.*

Her hands skimmed up my arms to my shoulders and then into my hair, her fingers tangling and pulling as her breath began to hitch.

A moan rumbled deep in my throat as my hands rounded the curve of her ass, pulling her tight against me. Being so close made me want to do a hell of a lot more than just kiss her. In the back of my head, it occurred to me that she and I hadn’t had the chance to really celebrate the battle win…

Cali reached up on her toes, kissing me back, then—gently—pulled away. When she took a half-step back and looked up at me, I could see her lips were swollen from my kiss.

“What was that for?” she asked breathlessly.

I shrugged casually, though my whole body still felt alive with heat. “Do I need a reason?”

Before she could answer, something over her shoulder caught my attention. Xavier was talking to Kira, and as he spotted me holding Cali, I could see he looked unhappy. Something about seeing the displeasure on his face made me smile, and Cali turned to see what I was looking at.

She rolled her eyes with a sigh and took another step away. “Are you seriously trying to make things worse right now by making your brother jealous?”  
 “Not at all,” I said. “But if Xavier’s blowing a gasket watching us kiss, how do you think he’d handle sharing Alpha?”

This stopped Cali for a moment as she considered my point. But—stubborn as always—she set her jaw and looked up. “I guess we won’t know for sure unless you find the courage to give it a try.”

I looked at her for a moment. “I’m trying to figure out if you’re kidding. I hope you are. I hope you’ve never had a reason to question my courage.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Oh yeah?” she asked in a teasing voice, her mouth curving into a smile. “And if you’re so brave, then tell me—why were you hiding out in the garage?”

I closed my mouth. I wasn’t ready the tell her the real reason I’d gone looking for Big Mac, so I just shrugged. “I was checking on Big Mac. She didn’t seem to be taking all this attention all that well. You know how she gets.”

“Yeah.” Cali sighed, looking around. “I do. I guess this whole party is more of a Mrs. Smith thing than a Big Mac thing.”

We watched as my mom directed Cali’s dad toward a tree, telling him to string a garland across the low branches. She looked happy, but a little frazzled.

“Maybe we should go help out,” I said, putting my hand on the small of Cali’s back and guiding her toward the center of the action.

As we drew closer, Xavier stepped away from Kira—apparently having wrapped up their conversation.

Ignoring me completely, he looked at Cali and Mrs. Smith. “I have to go check on something.”

“Xavier,” Cali started, “the party—”

“I’ll be back before it starts,” he said quickly.

“And where do you think you’re going?” I growled.

Xavier glanced at me, then snorted with derision. “None of your goddamn business.” He pushed past me, ramming into my shoulder as he went.

If Cali hadn’t been there, I might have had a different reaction to that, but I could feel her worried gaze on me, and I let Xavier’s assholery slide.

“Let’s go look at what they’ve gotten done,” I said, tipping my chin toward the tent.

As we stepped inside, Cali gasped with surprise. I had to admit, I was pretty amazed myself. It looked amazing. The tent was strung with tiny lights that twinkled like stars, and there were large paper flowers hanging from the roof. With the addition of the lights, they’d been transformed from craft project into something almost magical.

“It’s incredible,” Cali whispered.

“That’s how it is,” I said with a smile. “When the pack gets behind something, they get the work done.” I ran a hand through my hair. “But I do wonder how Big Mac is going to like it. It’s a bit… over the top.”

“I hope she’ll love it because Mrs. Smith loves it,” Cali said. She looked over to her dad, who had moved into the tent and was now standing on the top of a ladder, fixing a garland of tangled lights. “Dad, you got that?”  
 “I’m fine,” he said with a smile. But suddenly he stiffened, and his smile stretched into a grimace.

“Dad?” Cali asked, her voice alarmed. “Dad!”

He didn’t answer, but grabbed his leg hard, as though overcome with pain. This threw him off-balance, and he teetered on the ladder.

“DAD!” Cali screamed.

I lunged forward, barely catching Tom as he plummeted to the ground. As I looked down at him, his eyes flashed an unnatural, iridescent blue. Then there was a deafening, bone-cracking sound, and Tom screamed in agony.

**Episode 1900**

XAVIER

The dark trees flashed past as Kira and I sped toward the lake house. Neither of us had spoken much as we’d driven, but I could feel the tension in the air. I, for one, was hoping to hell that the damn witch mark was gone. I’d had more than enough of witches and revenants and all the other weird supernatural shit we’d been dealing with. I just wanted to get this done, return to my house as Alpha, have the respect of my pack, and have Cali to my own damn self. Was that too much to ask?

I punched the gas pedal as my thoughts drifted back to the memory of Greyson making out with Cali—right out in the open, in front of everyone.

“Um, Xavier? Why are you going so fast?” Kira asked.

When I looked over, she was gripping the edges of her seat so hard that her knuckles were white.

“Sorry,” I muttered, easing off on the speed a little.

“Are you okay?” she asked, looking over at me. “Are you upset about something?”

“No,” I said shortly.

She gave me a beady stare. “It wouldn’t have anything to do with your brother, would it?”

I shook my head, feeling edgy. “No. It’s fine. Greyson and I have never gotten along. This is nothing new.”

Kira raised her eyebrows and settled back in her seat. “I don’t know. Maybe you and Greyson would have had a better chance at a brotherly relationship if the whole *due destini* thing with Cali hadn’t gotten in your way.”

“No way,” I said flatly. “Greyson and I have history. And he came into the pack with ulterior motives. He wasn’t honest from the jump. Being close just wasn’t ever in the cards for us. He and I were never going to be tossing a football around on Sunday afternoons.”

Kira chuckled as she leaned back against the headrest. “Isn’t it exhausting, looking so hard for the negative all the time? Isn’t there anything about your brother that you can relate to? That you respect? *Anything?*” she pressed when I didn’t answer.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess there are certain things about Greyson that I respect,” I finally said, grudgingly. “He’s a good fighter, I guess. But that doesn’t mean I like the guy.” I scowled when Kira laughed again. “And I guess sharing isn’t something I’m used to, so sharing Cali doesn’t make me happy. I doubt I’m ever going to get used to that.”

She frowned at me. “Aren’t you a twin?”

“Yeah? So?”

“Isn’t sharing part of the whole twin thing?”

Now it was my turn to chuckle. “If you’d ever met Colton, you probably wouldn’t be asking me that question.”

The main road curved, but I kept going straight, moving from a paved road to the smooth dirt path leading to the lake house.

The car grew quiet again as we fell into another awkward silence. But I wasn’t bothered. I’d come to expect that when I was with a witch, we just weren’t going to have a lot to say to each other. We’d exhausted the Greyson topic—at least I hoped we had—so I asked the question I’d been wondering about.

“Have you given any thought to moving on, now that Iñigo’s not a threat anymore?”

She gave me a sideways glance. “Moving on to where?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Hasn’t Geoff been dead for a few years? Maybe it’s time you start thinking about yourself again. Maybe find yourself a mate.” I winced at my word choice. “I mean boyfriend,” I corrected quickly.

She looked pale but gave me a shaky smile. “It’s okay. But that mate thing is of your world, Xavier, not mine.” She wrapped her arms around herself and shivered, even though it wasn’t cold in the car. “I figure I’ll know when the time is right for that.”

“And it’s not?” I asked, glancing at her.

She shook her head. “No. Not now.”

I nodded. “Okay. I get that.” And I did. I remembered how hard it had been to move on after everything with Ava. I’d been carrying a lot of other shit around from the end of that relationship as well, but it had still been hard as hell. I’d had to wait until the time was right, too. Thinking of that reminded me of something else I’d been wanting to ask. “I get that you don’t know much about my kind of mate, but… do you know anything about unmating spells? Do you know if they wear off, or anything?”

Kira frowned. “I don’t really know,” she said slowly. “I don’t know much about those kinds of spells, but I can tell you that no spell comes with a guarantee. That’s just the way it is with magic.”

That was not what I wanted to hear, and I gritted my teeth. “I just wondered—”

“Why?”

“I used an unmating spell on Ava, but now I feel like we might be re-bonding,” I said, biting the words out.

“Oh.” Kira looked a little unnerved by this information. “You should watch yourself around her, Xavier—”

“Why do you say that?” I asked quickly.

She shook her head. “I never trusted her, but… I guess now I understand why she’s been sticking around. And—for the record—if it feels like a spell is wearing off, it probably is.”

That was *definitely* not what I wanted to hear, and I gripped the steering wheel tightly.

Kira glanced at me and shrugged. “Sorry, Xavier. I’m just being honest. Better you know, right?”

“I guess so. But that doesn’t mean I have to fucking like it.” And I didn’t like it. Not one bit. Dealing with an unmated Ava was bad enough.

The smooth dirt road rounded, and I slowed as the pack house loomed ahead. It was impressive—there was no denying that—but I still preferred my house. I brought the car to a stop and looked around for a moment. The house looked a little different than it had the last time I’d seen it. Phil had clearly been here—there were piles of two-by-fours and a couple of sawhorses covered with tarps. The standing wall closest to the burned portion had scaffolding up where someone had been working—rebuilding and plastering.

There was no one around now, and the blue tarps flapped in the breeze. Looking around, I had to admit it—I was a little on edge. I didn’t have great memories of this house, and I just wanted to check to see that the witch mark was gone, get back in the car, and get back to Cali. The thought of leaving her alone with Greyson—and giving him more uninterrupted time with her—didn’t appeal to me at all.

“All right,” I said, my hand on the door handle. “Let’s just get this over with—”

“Hang on. Not so fast,” Kira said, putting her hand on my arm to stop me.

“What?”

“First, a few rules.”

I rolled my eyes. “You know, you’re starting to sound more like Big Mac every day.”

She pressed her lips into a thin line. “I’m serious. You should know that witch marks should *not* be taken lightly.”

“I know—”

“They’re magnets for the spirit world, too. Who knows what could be lurking?”

I sighed. “Fine. What are the rules?”

“They’re simple,” she said grimly. “Don’t touch anything. Don’t contradict me. And do what I say. Let me handle this.”

“It’s all yours. I don’t even want to see the damn thing,” I muttered. But I knew that this was something I had to do—as Alpha. “Okay.” I gestured toward the house. “Lead the way.”

Kira climbed out of the car and headed toward the house without a moment of hesitation.

I had to hand it to her—she was really brave. After all she’d been through—overcoming her fear of using her magic to fight—she was still willing to take a risk to do what was needed. I pushed the door open and climbed out into the raw November air, then followed her toward the house.

The smell of smoke surrounded me as soon as I stepped into the reconstruction going on of this wing of the house. Kira was standing where there would eventually be a door, looking around, but as I stepped up next to her, she entered the drafty construction area. The smoke smell still lingered, though it wasn’t as overwhelming anymore, but as we walked, another smell started to mingle with the smoke. It was a bad smell—rotten and foul—and it grew worse as we got nearer to where the witch mark had been burned into the foundation.

My stomach twisted as we walked closer. I was still hoping for the best, but I had a bad feeling about this.

“There.”

Kira had stopped in her tracks, and she pointed down to where the floor had burned away, showing the house’s skeletal foundations.

My stomach clenched. The witch mark was still there. But it was different now. It wasn’t just a mark carved into the wood. Now, it glistened and oozed. It almost *pulsed*, like it was alive.

I ran a hand through my hair. “Well. That can’t be good.”

**Episode 1901**

MARTA

I sat motionless on my bed, too afraid to even move. The muscles in my back and legs were starting to ache from being still for so long, but I was worried I might touch something and accidentally kill it, so I tucked my hands tighter beneath my arms. I glanced around my room, looking for anything living that I could possibly kill. Nothing jumped out at me, but I had no idea what was happening to me, and I wasn’t going to take any chances. Not until I had some answers.

I needed to talk to Big Mac about what was happening—that much was clear. I couldn’t think of anyone else who might know what was going on. But today was the party to celebrate her engagement to Mrs. Smith. The last thing I wanted was to spoil it, but how in the world was I supposed to wait until *tomorrow*? What kind of damage was I going to do in the meantime?

I stared up at the dark beams crisscrossing the ceiling. The supernatural summons for unlicensed necromancy was still hanging over my head, but—as bad as that felt—*this* felt so much worse. Tears clustered in the corners of my eyes as I thought about how hard I’d worked to bring Lilac back from the dead. It had broken my heart when our tether had broken, and it had felt vitally important that I not lose him. And now here I was—scared to death that I was going to kill him all over again.

I flexed my fingers inside the gloves and dropped my head back against the headboard. Vander had been right when they’d warned me about consequences. I hadn’t listened because I hadn’t known what they’d meant. But I should have just assumed the worst. Maybe I should have just let the dead rest.

But then I thought of how happy it made Lilac to eat cereal again, and the joy in his eyes when he felt the breeze blow across his face. I thought about how happy Violet had been to see her twin brother. I thought about what it was like to feel Lilac’s arms wrap around me, and to feel his warm lips press against mine.

There were consequences—there was no denying that—and I was going to have to deal with them, but I knew wasn’t sorry that I’d brought Lilac back from the spirit world. I knew it was worth it. And just knowing that felt good. But I did wish the consequences were easier to deal with—or at least easier to understand.

I looked up when there was a knock on my door. “Yeah?”

Violet open the door and peeked in. “Hey, Marta. Are you busy? Can I talk to you?”

“Sure,” I said, sitting up quickly, trying to look normal. “Come on in.”

Violet stepped into the room. She looked at me with a frown. “Are you cold?”

“What?”

She pointed to my hands. “Why are you wearing gloves inside the house? It’s not cold in here.”

I looked down, my face flushing. Should I tell her?

Then Violet stepped into the room and sat down on the bed, and I instinctively pushed away, putting as much distance between us as possible.

“The ride back from the grocery store was cold,” I lied.

She nodded, though she still looked a little suspicious. “Lilac and Charlie went back to the grocery store—”

“They did?” I asked, surprised. “Wow, fast friends. Already running errands together.”

Violet shrugged. “Not quite… It’ll be a bonding experience for them. But I don’t understand why they had to go at all. Why didn’t you and Lilac get the groceries the first time you went?”

My face felt like hot lava. I just hoped Violet didn’t notice. “Something… *happened*, and we kind of had to rush out.”

“What happened? Did something happen to Lilac? He didn’t mention…” Violet said, looking worried.

“It’s not Lilac,” I said, shaking my head.

“Then what?”

I squirmed. “There was… an *incident*.”

She stared at me. “What kind of incident?” When I didn’t answer she rolled her eyes. “I’m not going to stop asking, so you might as well just tell me.”

I sighed and held up my hands, giving up. “I can kill things with my hands.”

Violet was silent for a moment. Then she laughed. “Right. Sure you can. Just tell me what really happened, Marta.”

“That’s what happened,” I insisted. “I’m not joking. We had to leave because every single time I picked anything up, it instantly withered and died.”

“So… you can kill *vegetables*?” Violet asked slowly.

“It’s other stuff, too. I killed a plant before the grocery store. I think it’s just any living thing.” I clasped my hands together.

“Hmm.” Violet thought about that for a moment. “Well, that is pretty weird. I can see why you left the grocery store so fast.” She looked up at me. “But it’s also kind of cool.”

“What are you talking about?” I demanded, completely baffled. How was any of this cool?

“I don’t know. It could be useful if those vampires ever come back.” She shrugged, grinning.

I shook my head, but I didn’t want to talk about it anymore.

“What did you come up here to talk to me about?” I asked, changing the subject.

“Oh.” She settled back onto the bed. “Well, first, I wanted to thank you for bringing Lilac back from the spirit world. It means so much to me.”

My cheeks flamed again. “Well, you’re welcome, but it was kind of a selfish act.”

“What do you mean?”  
 “I really like Lilac,” I admitted, though my face flushed hot. “I got so used to having him around when we were tethered. He’s a really good companion.”

Violet laughed. “I have to admit, it’s kind of hard for me to picture Lilac as a *good companion* for anyone. I mean,” she added, holding up her hands, “I love my brother to death, but he can be a real pain in the ass sometimes.”

I smiled.

“Anyway, I don’t care *why* you brought him back, I’m just glad you did. It means so much to me to be able to talk to him. To see him and to touch him. But…” She looked down at my gloved hands. “I am sorry if it’s caused problems for you. Is there anything I can do to help?”

“I don’t know—”

“Hey! Have you talked to Big Mac about it?” she asked. “She knows everything. I’ll bet she has a spell that can help.”

“Yeah—I mean, no, I haven’t, but I’m going to. After the party. I don’t want to ruin anything.”

Violet looked at me for a moment. “Well, you can’t just stay up here by yourself. Why don’t you come downstairs? Torin’s baking up a storm. I’m sure we could steal a piece of pie.”

“I don’t know…” I trailed off, looking down at my hands.

“Come on,” Violet said, getting to her feet. “Let’s go. I’ll do my best to make sure you don’t accidentally kill anyone.”

I smiled reluctantly. Truth be told, I’d been smelling the pies baking since I’d come up to my room, and it had been making me hungry.

“Okay,” I finally conceded.

When we got down to the kitchen, almost everyone was out in the yard setting up for the party, and the center island of the kitchen was loaded with pie plates. There must have been a dozen of them, left out to cool.

“Oh my word,” I said, coming to a stop as I stared at them. Pumpkin, apple crumble, cherry with lattice top, sweet potato, and buttermilk. Torin had outdone himself.

Violet had grabbed a knife and was already cutting small slices of the pumpkin and the apple pies.

I glanced over at the clock on the stove. “I wonder when Lilac will be back.” I chewed my lip nervously. “I hope he and Charlie are getting along okay.”

“I’m sure they are. They’re both such good guys.” She licked some apple filling off her fingers and looked over at me. “Don’t worry so much, Marta,” she said, and reached out to hug me.

I jumped back, screaming. “NO! Violet! Are you crazy? Don’t touch me!”

Violet looked rattled, but she backed away. “Sorry. I forgot. Sorry.” She picked up one of the plates and offered it to me. “Pie?” she asked with a grin.

My heart was still pounding, but I was already starting to feel a little self-conscious about my reaction—maybe *over*reaction. Maybe Violet was right. Maybe I *did* worry too much. I took the plate—carefully. “Thanks.”

I leaned against the center island and poked the pumpkin pie with my fork.

Violet set her own plate down and leaned toward me, her eyes wide. “So, what’s the deal with you and Lilac?”

I looked up, my heart beating faster than ever. “What?”

“The *real* deal?”

**Episode 1902**

I rushed over to where Greyson was holding my dad, who had started to shake with the tension of pain. My mom was right behind me.

“DAD! DAD? Are you okay? What’s going on? What’s wrong with him?” I demanded, looking up at Greyson.

My dad was clutching his leg, his face twisted in agony.

“Tom? Tom, sweetheart.” My mom pushed past me and grabbed my dad’s hand. “Talk to me. Tell me what’s wrong. Tom?”

“My bones hurt,” he gasped, barely getting the words out.

“What?” I looked at my mom, then Greyson. “His *bones* hurt? What does that mean?”

“It’s the shift,” Greyson said quietly.

I felt my eyes go wide as dinner plates. “*Shift?* As in *werewolf shift*?”

Greyson nodded. “Yeah.”

My mind reeled. With everything that had been happening, I’d put off thoughts of my dad becoming a werewolf. It hadn’t been an issue I’d had to deal with, and I’d just kind of forgotten about it. So hearing Greyson say it felt like learning about it all over again.

“Someone get Torin!” my mom screamed, turning to the rest of the pack, who were looking on, their faces worried.

“Let’s get him inside,” Greyson said.

“Is he going to be okay?” I asked, my heart beating fast.

Greyson nodded. “Yeah, but it can be a long, painful process. We’ll want to make him as comfortable as we can.”

I watched as Greyson effortlessly carried my dad into the house, and I felt immensely grateful that he was here. His steady presence was powerful, and it helped me keep myself together—which was hard while watching my dad writhe in pain. But he knew what was going on, and that made me feel hope. My dad was going to be fine. He was going to get through this.

Greyson carried my dad into the living room and laid him on the couch. My mom grabbed pillows from every chair and stuffed them beneath my dad, trying to make him comfortable.

“What can I do?”

I looked up as Torin hurried in, his face pale and drawn as he looked at my dad.

“He’s shifting,” I explained. “It’s his first time doing it, and I guess it can be kind of traumatic. And painful. He says his bones hurt.” I looked over as my dad moaned and curled into a ball, clearly in pain. “What can you do to help him?”

Torin swallowed hard. “Nothing.”

“What?”

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly. “I wish I could, but there’s nothing I can do if he’s shifting. It’s a natural process. Anything I could do would interfere with it. It would only hurt him more.”

Rishika—who had come in with the crowd—put a hand on my arm. “I know this is hard to watch, Cali, but it really is normal. It’s just painful the first time. Hopefully it won’t last long.”

It *was* painful to watch. It was awful. I wanted to leave the room, or at least close my eyes and cover my ears. I didn’t want to hear my dad moan in pain. And it felt especially awful because it was my fault this was happening to him. *I* was the reason he’d been pulled into this world in the first place.

I pulled a chair close to the couch and leaned forward, forcing myself to keep my eyes on my father as his face broke out in a cold sweat and his breathing grew more labored.

“Cali, sweetheart.”

I looked up as my mom walked over and put her hand on my shoulder. “I’m sorry, Mom,” I whispered, near tears.

She shook her head. “This isn’t your fault,” she said, reading my mind. “None of this is. We’re going to be with your dad through this. Just stop feeling guilty. That isn’t helping you, or your dad.”

I nodded, trying to swallow my sobs.

“I just wish there was something,” Torin was staying, pacing the room behind me. “Something I could do. I would do anything to help him. But I just can’t think of what I could…” He pulled at his hair, clearly anguished.

“You should prop up his feet more!” Sage called from the doorway. “I remember my mom doing that for me.”

“And get a hot water bottle,” Zainab offered. “That sometimes helps with the pain.”

“Maybe it would be helpful if we could get a little privacy,” my mom said, looking around. “I think Tom would appreciate that.” She looked down at me. “Privacy from everyone.”

I frowned. “But—”

“Cali, please,” she said, taking my hand and pulling me to my feet.

“But…” I didn’t want to leave, but I felt a hand on my back and then Greyson was guiding me out of the room. “I don’t want to leave,” I said, looking over my shoulder at my dad. “I want to stay. We’re supposed to get through this as a family.”

“Give him his dignity, Cali,” he said quietly, leading me away from the others, who were filtering into the kitchen.

We walked into a small office, and Greyson flipped on the desk lamp.

“Greyson—”

“Cali, do you really think your dad would want his daughter there for what’s about to happen to him?” he asked.

His voice was gentle, but I winced. “No, I guess not.” I looked down at my feet. “Do you remember the first time you shifted?”

He nodded. “Like it was yesterday. My bones ached for days beforehand. I didn’t know what was going on, and I didn’t tell anyone. I’d play outside and just collapse from the pain, like your dad did. But I’d just get up when I was called in. The first time hurt so much…” He looked out the window, remembering. “Silas didn’t prepare me for what was going to happen, of course, so it was scary as hell. But I got through it. And so will your dad.”

“I don’t understand why this is happening now,” I said, looking out the window. “The full moon isn’t until tomorrow.”

Greyson raised his eyebrows. “You’ve been reading the moon charts?”

I rolled my eyes. “Of course I have.”

He smiled. “Your dad’s wolf can sense the full moon coming. It wants to greet it. He’s going to be okay.”

“Do you promise?”

He reached for me and pulled me into his arms. “I promise.”

As his arms engulfed me, I felt my muscles relax. He was so sure and certain, and I let myself absorb it. We stayed wrapped around each other for a quiet moment, and I felt my heartbeat return to a normal rate.

It was amazing how my body responded to Greyson. It was beyond how I felt about him—it was instinctive.

I pulled back so I could look up at him. “Thank you. For everything. And for holding me.”

He frowned. “You should know by now that I’ll always be there for you.”

“I do,” I whispered. And as I looked into his eyes, I wished we could stay like this—the two of us, together, forever.

But after a moment, another thought occurred to me—why the hell wasn’t he kissing me?

Was it because of what had happened earlier, when I’d asked him about the co-Alpha thing? He’d said no, but he’d still kissed me, in the yard, in front of everyone. Was he not kissing me now because Xavier wasn’t here to witness it?

I really hoped not.

We were so close, and the feeling between us was so good, I almost hated to bring the Alpha thing up again, but he *had* said that he’d consider it.

I reached up and brushed my fingertips down his scratchy cheek. “Have you given any more thought to sharing Alpha with Xavier?”

Greyson caught my hand and kissed my fingertips, which sent a jolt of electricity through my body. “You do realize it’s only been about five minutes since you asked me the first time, right?” he asked with a smile.

I smiled back, but my heart was racing. His touch made it hard for me to remember my name—never mind dates and times.

“You’re going to have to give me a little more time to consider it. And in the meantime, maybe you could bring your dad some tea. That might help.”

I stepped back but regretted it immediately. “Why don’t you come with me?” I asked, taking his hand.

He smiled. “I’ll go anywhere with you, love.”

His words sent a tremor through me, but I forced myself to turn and start toward the kitchen. At the counter, Greyson stood close as I prepared the tea tray—close enough that my body brushed against his as I moved to gather the cups and tea bags and milk. My mind was drifting to his bed upstairs when I heard a shout from the living room, and the sound of breaking glass.

Forgetting the tea, I sprinted toward the living room. One of the front windows was shattered, and my dad was gone. I looked at my mother, who looked pale and terrified. “What happened?”

“Your dad! He ran out into the woods!”

**Episode 1903**

GREYSON

Orla ran to the shattered window and looked out, her expression terrified. “*Tom*. Where could he have gone?”

“I heard glass breaking. What’s going on?” Torin asked, running into the room, flour smeared across his cheek. He looked around in confusion at the broken glass and the empty couch. “Where’s Tom?”

“He’s gone,” Orla said, her voice shaky.

“*Gone?* Gone where?” Torin demanded. Orla pointed to the window. “Oh no,” Torin gasped, looking stricken.

Cali had run to the window. She’d stepped across the broken glass and had one leg out before I got to her and pulled her back in.

“What the hell are you doing?” I asked.

She looked at me, her eyes wild and panicked. “What does it look like I’m doing? I can’t just let him be out there alone. I’m going after him.”

I sighed as I tugged her back into the room, but I wasn’t surprised. That was just Cali. She would do anything for the people she loved. But Cali running into the forest was probably not the best option—and I had a better idea.

“Don’t worry,” I said gently, taking her by the shoulders and turning her so she was looking at me. “I’m going to find your dad and get him back, okay?”

“Let me go with you! I can help you—”

“You *can* help—*after* I bring him back. Okay? I’ll be better off going alone. I can move faster, and I’ll be able to concentrate. Trust me, love.” I pressed a kiss to her forehead and turned toward the window, shifting as I leapt through the broken windowpane.

I picked up Tom’s scent immediately and hit the ground at a dead sprint. Orla had been right—Tom had headed straight for the woods—though I couldn’t imagine he could have gotten very far. He wasn’t a wolf yet, so he would have been running as a man. And, on top of that, he was new to the area. I didn’t think he knew the woods at all.

I knew Cali was worried, but I wasn’t. The way I saw it, the chances were high that he was going to run for a bit, burn through the energy he felt, get tired, turn around, and come home.

Just before I hit the tree line of the woods, I shot a glance over my shoulder. I saw Orla, Cali, and Torin watching me through the window, their faces tense with worry. The glass around them was jagged, and I sighed at the sight of it. Another thing for Phil to fix next time he came around.

*Don’t worry, love. I’ll bring him back. I promise.*

I saw Cali bite her lip and nod at me, then I turned and headed into the trees.

It wasn’t that I was *glad* that Tom had leapt through the window and escaped in the throes of some kind of shifting fever dream, but I was glad to have an excuse to shift and get out for a run. When things were tense and all else failed, being with my wolf always had a calming effect on me. There was a selfish element to it as well; when I was out here—by myself—I wasn’t Greyson, the Alpha of the Redwood pack. I was just Greyson. I was free to just be myself. I didn’t have to worry about the pack, or about my stubborn-ass brother, or the three witches—or even Cali.

But as I thought about the scared, helpless look on her face when I’d looked back, my stomach twisted with guilt. I hated seeing her like that. But I’d be able to ease that pain when I brought her father back, safe and sound, and I took a certain pride in knowing I’d be able to do it.

But my easy confidence took a hit as I leapt over a creek. It was winter-dry, and as I dropped down on the far side, I realized I’d lost Tom’s scent. I paused—smelling the air—searching for some hint of a scent. Nothing. I walked along the water’s edge for a moment, but it was completely gone.

*Shit.*

I looked into the trees on both sides of the creek, thinking hard. If I were Tom—freaking out about becoming a werewolf for the first time—where would I go?

I walked on through the trees, keeping my nose down and my eyes open, looking for movement or any hint of his scent. I just prayed he hadn’t walked upstream or downstream.

After another half mile, I paused a moment to listen.

*There.*

There was someone tromping through the soggy underbrush a few hundred yards away. It was faint, but my heightened sense of hearing picked up on it. And an instant later, I caught Tom’s scent.

I ran toward it, following the scent and keeping my nose so far down I nearly crashed right into Tom, who was leaning against a tree, ripping his clothes off.

“Hey!” he called, his eyes wide as he saw me. But instead of looking freaked out, he opened his arms. “Go ahead. Tear me to pieces! You’d be doing me a favor!”

*It’s okay, Tom. You’re okay.*

I was trying to help, but my mind linked assurances seemed to have the opposite effect, and Tom looked around, wild-eyed.

“Who *said* that?” he demanded. “What the *hell* is going on? Why are there voices speaking to me in my head?”

*It’s me, Tom. It’s Greyson. I’m able to mind link with you because I’m the Alpha. Don’t freak out. Let me help you.*

Tom looked at me for a long moment, his eyes wild and fearful. “My skin is crawling,” he said, scratching at himself. “It feels like there are bugs underneath it.” He’d already ripped off his shirt and thrown it to the ground at his feet, and now he yanked at his undershirt and started in on his belt and pants.

When he was down to his underwear and socks, he started scratching at his skin so violently, I was worried that he was going to draw blood. And I was glad as hell I hadn’t let Cali come with me. This was normal—more or less—but seeing your dad strip down in the middle of the woods? That was the kind of thing that could scar you for life

*Listen to me, Tom, this is normal. Try to relax. This is all just part of the shift, I promise you.*

But it seemed that my attempts at comfort were having the opposite effect. Tom put his hands to his head and shook it, like he was trying to rid it of the voice he was hearing. He backed away, muttering, “No, stop. Stop. I don’t want to hear it. Stop.”

I didn’t want to agitate the guy any further, but I had to talk to him, so I shifted back to human. “Tom, it’s me. Your family is worried about you. You should come back to the pack house with me. Let the pack help you through this. They know what you’re going through. Orla’s waiting for you.”

Tom stilled for a moment, and his eyes took on a faraway look. “Orla?” he whispered.

“Yeah, she’s there. She’s worried about you. Come on, Tom. Let’s head back—”

“Did you know that she’s the love of my life?” Tom asked me dreamily.

“Uh, yeah, of course I did,” I said quickly. I just wanted to placate him. He was sounding a little punch-drunk, which was not unusual. I’d seen other people get like this during their first shift. It didn’t happen to everyone, but I’d seen it. “She sent me out after you. She’s worried sick about you, and so is Cali. Let’s get you back to your family. How does that sound?”

I hoped mentioning his wife and daughter would help. He was all over the place. I needed the strongest angle I had.

Tom’s face darkened suddenly, like a cloud had passed over it. “What if Orla hates what I’ve become? What if it sickens her?”

“I doubt that will happen,” I said gently. I didn’t say anything because she was Tom’s daughter, but I was thinking of how much Cali loved me. The fact that I was a werewolf hadn’t scared her off yet.

“But what if it *does*?” Tom asked, looking agitated. “What if she can’t stand to be around me, can’t stand for me to touch her? I love her!”

“And she loves you, Tom. She sent me out after you. She wouldn’t have done that if she didn’t love you. She wouldn’t have cared. She would have been happy to let you go, wouldn’t she?”

As Tom thought about this, I took the opportunity to take a cautious step toward him, but I stopped again when there was an earsplitting siren blast. I looked around wildly, searching for the source of the noise.

An instant later, a voice boomed out, cutting through the frosty November air like a knife, amplified through a loudspeaker. “Put your hands in the air!”

**Episode 1904**

XAVIER

Kira stepped away from the oozing, pulsing witch mark. “You’re right about that, Xavier—this isn’t good at all.”

“And it smells like shit, too,” I said, turning my head away as another wave of stench hit me. “Like sulfur mixed with dog shit. What’s up with that?”

“I don’t know,” Kira muttered, looking at the mark with narrowed eyes.

“Perfect.” I was feeling edgy and angry. This was not what I’d been hoping to find. Even when I’d first seen it, I hadn’t wanted to believe it. For a minute, I’d hoped I wasn’t seeing it at all—that it was just the light playing tricks on my eyes—but that theory had promptly been shot to hell.

“*Well?*” I demanded. I wished Kira would start being a hell of a lot more forthcoming with the information. “You’re supposed to be the expert on this, remember? What’s going on? What does it all mean?”

She looked at the witch mark, her brows drawn down in a frown. “It looks like the witch mark is destroying itself.”

I was confused all over again. “Okay,” I said slowly. “And how is that not a good thing? Let it destroy itself. We want the thing gone, right?”

She shook her head. “It’s more complicated than that.”

I let out a frustrated huff. It was always complicated, and I was sick to death of all this dark magic shit. “Who cares! Let the thing chomp itself to death until there’s nothing left.”

“I’m telling you, it’s not that simple,” she insisted. “While it’s being destroyed, dark magic is being released into the atmosphere,” she said, gesturing around.

That didn’t sound great. “And?”

“And it could infect us, for one. Which wouldn’t be ideal. It could also draw the attention of other supernaturals. Ones that we might not want roaming around the pack house.”

I ran a hand through my hair. “Great.” None that that sounded good, but I was particularly worried about the prospect of infection. I’d seen what dark magic could do to people—Artemis and Greyson, to name a couple.

I grabbed Kira’s arm and pulled her back a few feet. “Maybe it would be better if we watched from a distance.”

“It’s okay,” she said, shaking her arm free. “I came prepared.”

I looked at her, baffled. “What the hell does that mean? How does a witch prepare for this?”

“I studied up on dealing with dark magic,” Kira said, rolling her shoulders and loosening her neck, like she was getting ready for a fist fight. “I have a couple of spells I can try to encourage rapid decay. The faster it goes away, the less damage it can do on the way out.”

I liked the sound of that. I wanted to get this whole thing over with as fast as humanly—or supernaturally—possible so I could get back to Cali.

“Okay,” I said, gesturing toward the glistening witch mark. “What are you waiting for?”

Kira took a deep breath, then took a couple of steps forward, moving closer to the mark.

“Is that really necessary?” I asked warily. “Can’t you do what you have to do from back here?” I didn’t like the sight of Kira moving closer to the sickly, oozing wood. I had no intention of losing her to this weird, dark mark. Big Mac cared about Kira, and the last thing I wanted to do was explain to Big Mac that her protegée had been sucked into a hellmouth. It wasn’t that I was afraid of Big Mac—she was a wild card, but I could handle her—but if I’d learned anything, it was that there was nothing to be gained from pissing off a witch, so I avoided doing it when I could.

And it was more than that: I felt really protective of Kira. She kind of drove me crazy, but she was brave and honest, and I’d come to find I could really count on her. I’d grown to like her, and I didn’t want to see anything bad happen to her.

“Come on, Kira, back up,” I said, grabbing for her arm. “You don’t need to be that close to the thing.”

“Xavier, stop.” She shook herself free from my grasp. “I have to channel the dark energy from the witch mark. And I can only do that by being close to it. So just chill out and stay still.”

She put her hand up, motioning for me to stay where I was, and then turned toward the mark. She took a steadying breath and raised her hands into the air. She was still for a moment, and then began to move her hands through the air in strange, complicated patters. She moved slowly, gracefully, almost like she was dancing. She kept her eyes on the mark and started muttering under her breath, but I couldn’t understand the words. I didn’t even think they were English. They sounded familiar, though, and I leaned in, straining to hear, until I realized they reminded me of the words of the unmating bond I’d used on Ava.

I leaned back again with a sigh. Assuming Kira was successful here—and wasn’t pulled through some gaping gate to hell—I still had the extremely unpleasant task of dealing with Ava to look forward to.

But first things first.

Another wave of sulfur stench hit me as Kira continued to murmur the spell. I coughed and tried not to breath in the foul air. I looked around the burned-out area, taking in the skeletal framing and the fire-blackened lawn beyond it. I tuned out Kira’s voice and let my senses take over. If this witch mark called out to supernaturals, I needed to stay on the lookout, in case any heard the bat signal and came looking for it.

But I looked back over when there was an ear-splitting explosion. Smoke engulfed Kira, wrapping around her and snaking into the air above her head.

I watched the smoke’s unnatural pattern warily. “Was that supposed to happen? Are you okay?”

Kira glanced over at me, raising an eyebrow. “Are you worried about me, wolf?”

Before I could answer, the witch mark began to hiss. When I looked over, it started to bubble and boil, and then—with a sucking pop—it disappeared.

Kira looked over at me with a satisfied smirk. “See? You shouldn’t be worried about me. I know what I’m doing.” She took a step toward me and stumbled over a loose floorboard.

I caught her before she hit the ground and lifted her back onto her feet.

“Thanks,” she muttered, not meeting my eyes. Her cheeks were flaming. She cleared her throat. “I’m fine.”

“Okay.” I looked over to the witch mark. “It really is gone.”

Kira nodded, regaining a little of her confidence. “I know. I told you.”

But I’d seen too much to believe anything could happen that easily. Dark magic was a tricky bastard. “But is it really gone, or are you going to tell me that it’s actually hiding somewhere and we’re going to stumble over it during the waning moon when Saturn’s in the seventh house, or some shit like that?”

“No.” She frowned. “It’s gone.”

“Gone-gone?” I asked, still wary.

She signed. “I returned the energy of the mark to nature. It won’t be coming back. And it can’t serve as a beacon for other dark forces, like it was doing before.”

“Okay,” I said slowly, letting that sink in. “Well that’s good, right?”

Kira nodded. “Yeah, that’s good.”

“Great. So let’s get out of here already,” I said.

It felt like a weight had been lifted off my chest. I hadn’t expected it to be that easy, but now that it was done, I was pumped. I turned to leave, feeling great. I couldn’t wait to tell the pack about how I’d helped Kira get rid of the last bit of Letifer’s power. First the battle, and now this—one more feather in my cap. One more way to tip the Alpha balance in my favor.

Even if Greyson agreed to share Alpha—co-Alpha, Cali was calling it—it wouldn’t be long before I showed the pack who the true leader was and took full command. It was only a matter of time before the pack insisted on it.

When we stepped out of the construction zone, it was with a smile on my face. But as we moved toward the car, I put my hand out to stop Kira.

“Hang on,” I muttered. “Keep your voice down.”

“What’s going on?” she whispered, paling.

There was something strange… I sniffed the cold November air. The reeking sulfur smell was still there, burning my nostrils, but beneath it was another smell. One I hadn’t noticed when we’d arrived.

“Xavier?” Kira asked, worried. “What’s going on? What’s wrong?”

I sniffed the air again. “I’m picking up a scent. It’s a werewolf.”

“Who is it?” Kira asked.

I shook my head. My body was tense and on edge. “Someone I don’t know.”

**Episode 1905**

CHARLIE

I glanced sideways at Lilac as he rounded a sharp curve without bothering to brake, sending me slamming into the door for the fifth time. I hadn’t been able to convince him to let me drive to the store, but now I was wishing I’d tried harder—the guy drove like he was new to the whole idea. Someone probably should have warned me about that.

He pushed down on the gas pedal like he had a brick attached to his shoe, going an easy thirty miles an hour over the speed limit down the sleepy Main Street. But we were almost there. As we came up on the store, I closed my eyes as Lilac jerked the wheel hard to the left and into the parking lot, cutting off a line of oncoming cars. He ignored the angry honking and middle fingers.

I gripped the sides of my seat. One way or another, I was going to drive us home.

“Let’s go,” Lilac said, climbing out of the car and hurrying across the windy parking lot.

The automatic doors whooshed open, and we were immediately enveloped by the over-warm air of the store. I looked around. I’d never been to this grocery store before, and I had no idea why we’d had to come to *this* store when we’d passed another perfectly good store five miles back. I glanced at Lilac out of the corner of my eye. When I’d asked him about it in the car—pointing at the store as he’d sped past—he’d been kind of vague in answering. Something cryptic about not being welcome there. Whatever that meant.

Maybe it was because he had been a ghost for so long and was still getting used to being in the living world again. Maybe it was something to do with Lilac and Marta. Part of me wanted to get to the bottom of it, but since Lilac was Violet’s brother, I didn’t want to ask too many questions. Instinct told me to tread lightly—at least at first. Things were tense enough between Lilac and me.

Which was weird. I didn’t get why that was. I was usually pretty good with people, and I got along with almost everyone. It made me wonder what it was about the two of us that made things feel strained.

As if in answer to my question, Lilac turned to me, his dark eyes wary. “So, you’re a hunter?”

It hit me like a punch to the gut. Was that what this hostility was about? Did Lilac not trust me?

I nodded. “Yeah, I am, but—not like you think. It kind of came as news to me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I only just found out. Recently. It isn’t something I’ve always known—and I found out after I realized I’d become a werewolf. That was a really weird month.” I realized I was babbling and stopped myself.

Lilac nodded slowly. “I’ll bet.” He narrowed his eyes. “Don’t hunters hunt werewolves? How’s that working out for you?”

“What?” I asked, confused. I felt a step behind the conversation, like I wasn’t quite grasping his meaning.

He shrugged. “Kind of a conflict of interest, isn’t it? Hunter, werewolf. I mean, do you hate yourself every time you look in the mirror?”

I stared at Lilac, but his expression was impossible to read. I wasn’t sure if he was serious or just busting my chops. For about the thousandth time I wished Violet was with us. She was great at acting as a buffer between us. “Um, no, not really. I mean, no conflict of interest. I’m a new kind of hunter.”

Lilac raised an eyebrow. “Is that so?” Then he looked away from me, turning his attention to the grocery store. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, taking in the smell of the olive bar and the freshly baked bread from the bakery section. “I love the smell of a good grocery store. Don’t you?”

“I guess,” I muttered, baffled at his behavior. Maybe all that time as a ghost had made him forget how humans talked to each other. But we weren’t talking about hunters anymore, so I relaxed a little.

“This is the second trip, so we’re going to have to hurry. We were supposed to have this done a while ago. I’m sure Tom and Torin are wondering where we are.” Lilac took a list out of the pocket of his jeans and consulted it for a moment, then he ripped it in half. “You grab this stuff, I’ll get the rest, then I’ll meet you at the front of the store, hunter.”

I flinched and then glared. “I’m not crazy about being called that in public, man.”

Lilac raised his eyebrows. “Ashamed of what you are?”

A muscle in my jaw twitched as I clenched my teeth. “How would you like it if I called you ‘Wolfie’ every time I talked to you?” I whispered, leaning closer so no one would hear us.

Lilac put his hands up in mock surrender. “Okay, okay. Sorry, man. I didn’t realize the topic was so sensitive. I’ll meet you at the front of the store, if that pleases you, *Charles*.”

Without waiting for my answer, he headed down the bread aisle with his half of the list.

I watched him for a moment and then looked down at my own list, but the words swirled on the paper. I had to let this little spat with Lilac go. He was Violet’s brother, and I wanted to get along with the guy. I took a deep breath. Maybe Lilac was right. Maybe I *was* being too sensitive about being a hunter. It would make sense, after everything that had gone down at camp with Zachery and the other hunters.

*Hot dogs.*

I headed toward the deli section, but we must have been in the hot dog capital of the world, because there must have been thirty kinds of hot dogs behind the glass case.

“What can I get you?” a man in a black apron asked, leaning his arms on the top of the counter.

“Uh, what hot dogs to you recommend?” I asked, eyeing my choices. There were too many, and I was overwhelmed.

The man pointed to a tray just in front of me. “The footlongs. Just got ‘em in. Straight from the factory. Local product. Can’t be beat.”

“Great. I’ll take five pounds.” I glanced around as the deli guy got to work, but I stopped when I caught sight of a reflection in the glass case. There was something familiar about the face. I turned slowly—too slowly—and only caught a glimpse of the guy as he disappeared down the drinks aisle.

“There you go, buddy.”

I looked back to see the deli guy holding out a paper-wrapped package. “Thanks,” I said, taking the hot dogs and hurrying toward the drinks. I looked down at my list, trying to look natural, like a normal guy doing his grocery shopping. But when I caught sight of the guy again at the end of the aisle turning toward the dairy section, my heart rate kicked up. I realized why that face looked familiar—the guy looked like Zachery.

Wait, *Zachery*?

What the hell would Zachery be doing all the way out here? How would he even know where we were?

I stood for a moment, confused, trying to work through these questions. He wouldn’t. There was no way he would. It wasn’t possible.

I gave my head a hard shake. I had to be imagining things. I had to pull it together. I looked around, trying to get my bearings. The drinks shared an aisle with the toiletries and pharmacy, and that’s where I’d found myself. It wasn’t on the list, but maybe I should pick up some shampoo and toothpaste—as long as I was here.

I walked down the aisle slowly, and just after picking up my toothpaste, found myself face-to-face with the condoms. I stopped for a moment, blood rushing to my face.

Things between Violet and me were… *progressing*, and I should probably do the right thing and be prepared for when they reached the climax… of our progression. My face burned even hotter as I thought about it. But our make-outs were getting steamier, and now that we were away from my mom and camp and all those watchful eyes, we could be a real couple. I’d wait as long as she wanted to, but I’d be lying if I didn’t admit, at least to myself, that I was dying. I wanted her so badly sometimes I felt like I was going to lose my mind.

I glanced up at the condoms again. Violet had to know I was ready for that step and wanted that. And she had to know that I was *responsible*.

I shifted my toothpaste and shampoo and was reaching for a pack when a hand shot out and wrapped around my wrist in an iron grasp. It yanked hard on my arm—spinning me around and sending my shampoo flying down the aisle.

When I turned, Lilac was in my face, glaring. “What the hell do you think you’re doing, man?”

**Episode 1906**

GREYSON

*Shit, shit, shit*. What the hell was I supposed to do? The blue and red lights of the cop car were bouncing into the trees, and I stepped back into the darkness as the cruiser pulled to a stop at the side of the road.

*Just stay cool, Tom. I’ll get you out of this.*

Tom didn’t freak out when he heard my mind link, but he twitched, and I wasn’t filled with confidence about the whole thing. I’d promised Cali that I’d bring her father back safe and sound, and then the guy goes and runs half-naked in front of a cop car. Which was perfect. Just what the situation needed. And it was going to make things *so* much easier for me.

I watched from the shadows as two uniformed officers got out of the car and looked over, shining their flashlights at Tom.

“You okay there?” one called.

*Don’t say anything, Tom. Especially about shifting. Humans can’t know anything about werewolves. Just stay calm. I’m going to get you out of this.*

If I could.

I couldn’t tell if Tom heard me or understood, because he didn’t respond.

“Sir? What’s your name, sir?” the other officer called.

Tom frowned, like he was confused at the question. Then—without warning—he hunched over and let out a pained moan.

“Sir? Are you all right?” the second officer asked, moving forward. The first officer followed, somewhat reluctantly.

My pulse was racing. Tom was behaving so irrationally—I was starting to worry that he was going to shift right in front of the cops. This was his first time shifting, so he wouldn’t know how to stop himself. This whole scene had “disaster” written all over it.

But, to my relief, Tom stood up straight again and looked over at the officers, who had moved toward him. “I’m fine, officers, thank you.” He still looked pale and sweaty, but at least he was speaking like a normal human being.

The cops eyed each other nervously.

“You sure about that?” the first one asked.

“Do you need medical attention, sir?” the second one said, taking another step closer. “Maybe we should run you into the hospital to get checked out.”

Tom glanced over his shoulder in my direction. He caught my eyes in the dark, and I slunk a little further back as the cops pointed their flashlights toward me.

“You don’t look familiar to me,” the first cop said. “You must not be from around here.”

Tom shook his head, wiping sweat from his forehead. “No.”

“You lost?”

I could see Tom’s eyes darting around nervously. The pressure was starting to get to him, and I wasn’t sure how much longer he was going to hold out against their questions. I was worried that he was going to really shift. First shifts were famously unstable. There was a real possibility that his hands or leg could fully shift, leaving the rest of his body in his human form. And what would the cops do then?

I hated to even think about that. I might have to kill one or both of these witnesses. I didn’t want to, but there would be too many questions and an investigation, and I couldn’t let that happen. But I didn’t like the idea of killing innocent people either, just for having the bad luck to stumble across this situation.

I thought fast. I needed a distraction so Tom could get away. I did *not* need Tom getting arrested during his first transformation. I looked around the dark forest, debating the few strategies I could employ out here—alone, without resources. I had to create a diversion. Something compelling enough to fully pull the cops’ attention away from Tom. I wouldn’t normally let humans see my wolf form, but this was Cali’s dad, and I’d made her a promise to get him back safely. There weren’t a lot of other choices.

Moving silently through the trees, I made a half-circle around where Tom stood with the cops, to get to the road.

“We’re going to need to see some identification, sir,” the first cop said briskly.

“Come on, Lopez,” the second cop said, sounding annoyed. “How’s he supposed to have ID on him? He doesn’t have pants on. Use your brain.”

“You use *your* brain, Flannigan,” Lopez snapped. “He needs to show ID. I don’t care where it’s coming from—we need to see it.”

I let them argue for a moment—their voices masked the sound of me moving—and didn’t stop until I reached their police cruiser. I knew I’d be quick enough, and I just prayed that Tom was with it enough to know what to do and when to do it.

With a deep breath, I shifted and dropped down on all fours, still listening as the cops kept debating where Tom might be keeping his ID and how they were going to proceed without it.

“—so let’s take him in. He says he doesn’t need the hospital,” Lopez said. “Let him dry out for a few hours.”

“He hasn’t done anything wrong,” Flannigan countered. “We can’t just arrest someone for acting weird. We’d have to arrest half the county if we started pulling that shit—”

“I’m going to take him in, Flannigan—”

I’d heard enough. I moved to the rear of the cop car and sank my teeth into the back tire. It exploded with an ear-splitting bang, making both cops swear and spin around, waving their flashlights around and looking for the source of the sound. As they searched, I darted out, sprinting as fast as I could. I lunged between Tom’s legs and tossed him onto my back.

*Hold on, Tom.*

And then I raced off into the woods.

“What the hell?”

“Go after him!”

“Are you crazy? *You* go after him, Flannigan!” That was Lopez. “I don’t do bears, man! Or wolves!”

I sprinted through the darkness as fast as I dared, praying Tom wouldn’t slip off my back, but when I felt his grip loosening, I slowed down. We were far enough away now, and I doubted the cops had pursued us at all, though they’d probably have a hard time explaining that exploded tire to their superiors.

On my back, Tom groaned in pain. He was having a hard time hanging on. I almost stopped, but when I looked around, I realized that the pack house was close.

*Hang on, Tom. Just hang on. We’re almost there. You can do it.*

“Don’t forget your backpack, pumpkin,” Tom mumbled. He was clearly delirious. “I’ll have pancakes for lunch, Cali.” He paused, and I could feel him tense with pain. “She did a good job choosing you as a mate, Greyson,” he breathed, the pain making him breathless.

I’d never heard anything like that from Tom, and it surprised me so much I almost stopped in my tracks. It felt really good to hear, even if I wasn’t sure Tom knew what he was saying.

We trudged along a little further until I picked up on the sound of voices. When I picked up on the scent of the other pack members, I finally breathed a sigh of relief. We were safe.

In range of the house, I burst out through the densest part of the trees and headed toward the lighted windows. But before I could get there, the front door opened and Orla and Cali burst out, running down the porch steps and toward us. Torin was right behind them, sprinting to keep up. All three looked terrified.

“Greyson,” Cali called breathlessly. She pulled to a stop as they drew close and looked at her dad with wide, surprised eyes. “What the hell happened? Where are my dad’s clothes?”

Orla and Torin were at my side, carefully helping Tom off my back.

As soon as he was safe on the ground, I shifted back to human and pushed my hair out of my face. “Well, he hadn’t shifted, but he got farther than I figured he would. And he might have gotten even farther if he hadn’t run into the cops.”

“Oh god,” Cali gasped. “The police? Greyson, what happened?”

“It was touch and go for a minute there, but I created a diversion, and we were able to get away without too much trouble.” I skipped over the part where I’d been worried Tom was going to start an international supernatural incident by revealing his werewolf form to a couple of jumpy cadets. “But he’s okay, and only a little worse for wear. I don’t think we’re going to be able to find those khakis again, though.”

“Thank you,” Orla whispered, giving my hand a grateful squeeze. Then she wrapped an arm around Tom, and she and Torin led him toward the house, Tom still moaning in pain.

I turned to Cali with a sigh. “Cali, I’m sorry that took so long. There were a few more complications than I was expecting. I should have—”

But before I could say anything else, Cali leapt into my arms and kissed me.

**Episode 1907**

I wrapped my arms around Greyson’s neck and pulled him in closer, crushing myself to him. I had been beside myself with worry that he wouldn’t be able to find my dad—but I should have known better. Greyson had never failed me yet. And I was beyond grateful.

But as he deepened the kiss—arching me back over his arm—all those thoughts faded away, and all I could think about was him. The kiss was searing hot, and the way my body pressed against his naked form made me start to think about other things—

“*Ahem*.”

I pulled away, bleary-eyed, and looked over at Artemis, who had appeared and was looking at us, a vase of flowers in each arm, her foot tapping the ground impatiently. “Yeah?”

“Listen, Cali, there’s no time for this right now,” she said, rather primly.

“What do you mean?” I asked, still confused.

“The party is about to start,” she said, gesturing toward the back of the house.

“Yeah, of course. The party. Right.” I stepped away from Greyson, my face flaming with embarrassment at being caught. I tried to stop myself, but my eyes wandered downward, taking in the rest of his naked body, which was slick with sweat.

Artemis cleared her throat again, and I tore my eyes away, feeling like I was about to melt into a puddle of humiliation. *What is wrong with me?* My sister was standing right next to me. But it was like I couldn’t help myself. My body was acting of its own accord. And it wanted *more*. So much more.

It was Greyson—he just had that effect on me. That kiss had been mind-melting, but it wasn’t nearly enough and had been cut off way too soon.

“Maybe we should head over to the party,” Artemis suggested.

“Yeah, let’s do that,” I muttered, blushing furiously.

Greyson gave me a smoldering wink. “I’d better clean up first.” He raised an eyebrow. “And get dressed.”

My face burned even hotter.

“That’s probably for the best,” Artemis said tartly. She pushed one of the vases into my arms. “Carry that to the main table, will you?”

“Sure,” I muttered, and headed around to the back of the house.

I stopped as I rounded the corner of the house. The space had been transformed. There were twinkle lights strung from every tree, and the bare branches were heavy with the intricate paper flowers the pack had been busy making. The effect was completely magical. My mom had worked her literal magic as well, and flowers bloomed from the frozen ground, scenting the air with their soft perfumes.

“It’s gorgeous,” I whispered, gazing around.

“Yeah, everyone did a good job,” Artemis agreed. “This way.”

I followed her into the tent. “Have you seen Xavier?”

Artemis frowned as she set down her vase. “I don’t think he and Kira are back from wherever they went yet.”

“Really?” I asked with a pang of worry. I pulled out my phone—had he texted me? Where was he?

“I’m sure they’re fine,” she added quickly. “It’s not even nighttime yet. Speaking of which, you should go get ready.”

“Yeah, okay.”

I headed toward the house. I had been excited about the party, but it was hard to downshift into a party mood after what had happened to my dad and now not knowing where Xavier went. I sent him a quick text. *Call me!*

Upstairs, I headed down the hall, pausing only briefly in front of Greyson’s door. My eyes lingered for a moment, but I gave myself I shake and kept walking. I had to get ready—and get my mind out of the gutter.

I headed into my room and hopped into the shower, then pulled on a green velveteen skirt that hugged my hips and a black turtleneck. The sweater was soft and cozy and a good contrast to the tightness of the miniskirt. I was at my mirror, swiping on some mascara, when the door burst open.

“Hey!” I yelped, simultaneously poking myself in the eye and dropping the mascara tube. I turned around, squinting my stinging eyes. “Mom?”

“Hi, sweetheart. Sorry if I startled you,” she said with a small smile. “I’m a little jumpy myself. I just came in to tell you that Dad’s doing fine now; he’s in the bedroom.”

“He’s okay?” I asked, rubbing my eye.

“He is. He’s resting. This wave of the shift seems to have passed since it’s not the full moon just yet.” She paused for a moment and looked at me. “Well, don’t you look nice,” she said, her face lighting up.

“Thanks,” I said, giving my skirt a little yank.

She smiled. “Would you like me to do your hair? Like when you were little?”

I smiled back. I could remember it clearly—sitting on my bed while my mom told me fairytales about exiled princesses, witches, and fairies. Though, now that I thought about it, there was probably more truth to those stories than I could have ever imagined. “Sure. Thanks, Mom.”

She came to stand behind me and picked up my brush. “Cali, I’m so proud of you.”

I looked up, surprised. “For what?”

She drew the brush through my damp hair. “I’ve been watching you, sweetheart, and you’ve handled yourself so gracefully through every challenge that’s come your way. You’ve thought of others and acted responsibly.” She shook her head. “It’s not how I would have acted when I was your age. You truly are a grown woman, Cali.”

I thought about this as my mom tugged lightly at my hair. I’d always thought of myself as stubborn and impulsive—and I was—but maybe she was right. Maybe I had grown.

“And you’ve grown into your magic, too,” my mom continued. “It’s helped everyone in some way or another. There are going to be wonderful things coming everyone’s way soon. I can just feel it.”

I smiled. That was so like my mom. She was always so positive, so eager to believe the very best. I watched her as she pulled the sides of my hair away from my face and secured them at the back of my head with a small, jeweled clip.

“There,” she said, pressing a kiss to the top of my head. “All done.”

“Thank you,” I whispered, getting to my feet and throwing my arms around her.

“You are so beautiful, Cali. Inside and out.”

“Like the princess who rescued the prince from the evil Frog King? Do you remember that story you used to tell me?” I asked, leaning back to look at her.

“You remember that?” she asked.

“Of course I do.” I kissed her cheek. “Now, I don’t want you to worry about anything else tonight. Dad is resting, isn’t he?” She nodded. “Will you consider at least coming down to the party and saying hello? Just for a little bit?”

She thought about it for a moment. “Maybe I will.”

I figured that was as close to an answer as I was going to get, so I gave her hand a squeeze and headed downstairs. When I got to the tent, I looked around. Xavier was still nowhere to be seen. He still wasn’t back, and I felt another pang of worry.

Then the pack started to applaud, and I turned around to see Big Mac and Mrs. Smith coming through the back door into the back yard, hand in hand.

Mrs. Smith put her hand to her lips as she looked around, and her eyes were bright with tears. “It’s so beautiful. Thank you to everyone who made this happen,” she called out.

“You’re welcome!” Zainab yelled back, and everyone laughed.

Someone turned on the music, and Mrs. Smith and Big Mac headed into the tent. Everyone seemed so happy and relaxed. And—maybe because everyone was dressed up—they also seemed less likely to break into a fist fight at any moment, compared to our usual parties.

“Torin!” I called when I saw him near the food table.

“Hi, Cali,” he said, looking up from his pies.

“I’m glad to see you here,” I said, pulling him into a hug.

“It’s nice to be here. And it’s good that I have something else to think about.” He gestured toward the refreshments. “Food. Speaking of—” He looked around, frowning. “Where are Charlie and Lilac? They’re late with the rest of the hors d’oeuvre! And the way these werewolves eat, we’re going to run out in no time.”

I watched as he bustled off. I was glad he had something to focus on, too. And it was nice that we all had something to celebrate. Everyone really needed this after all the pain we’d been through recently.

A new song started, and I looked over as Rishika pulled Artemis to her feet and into the middle of the tent, where a dance floor had been set up. For a moment, Artemis just stood there, looking confused, but then Rishika grabbed her hand and spun her around. I shook my head in amazement as I watched them dance through the song. Who would have thought that my prickly sister would have found such sweet love in that rough warrior girl?

But then Greyson walked into the tent—in a *suit*—and I forgot about everything else.

Like a homing beacon, he found me in the crowd and walked over. He took my hand without a word and led to me to the dance floor. The music changed from a dance beat to a slow dance, and Greyson folded me into his arms.

I sighed and melted against his chest. This was heaven—to dance with the man I loved, surrounded by everyone I cared about, knowing they were safe.

Suddenly, I felt Greyson’s body tense.

I looked up. “Greyson, what is it?”

His eyes were fixed on the darkness outside the tent. “I smell a strange wolf’s scent.”

As if Greyson had summoned him, a man appeared at the mouth of the tent.

The man was built like a tank—tall and muscular—and he scanned the faces in the crowd. “I’d like to speak with the Alpha.”

**Episode 1908**

Greyson stepped in front of me. “Cali, stay back.”

I looked from my mate to the strange man who’d showed up out of nowhere. What was going on now? Greyson had been all smiles and easy affection just a few seconds ago, and now he seemed like a defensive beast ready to pounce on the intruder.

The man walked with an easygoing stride. He seemed completely at home, as if we were all old friends and he was stopping by for a chat. He certainly didn’t seem bothered when Greyson, Jay, and Rishika all moved forward to meet him.

That, more than anything else, set my teeth on edge. *Who wouldn’t be intimidated by those three?*

If I were that dude, I would’ve been bleating in fear by now. But then again, if I were that guy, I wouldn’t even have been here to begin with.

“I’ll ask again,” the man drawled. “Where is the Alpha?”

Greyson puffed out his chest. “Who’s asking?”

The newcomer eyed my mate, like he was sizing Greyson up. His lips turned up into a satisfied smirk. “I figured it was you.”

Greyson didn’t miss a beat. Didn’t bother to correct the man’s assumption. Instead, he stepped directly in the man’s way, keeping him from intruding any farther into the party. “You haven’t answered my question.”

The man eyed Jay, then his gaze landed on Rishika—and lingered.

“Is she your Luna?” he asked Greyson, never taking his eyes off Rishika. “Nice.”

I knew he was wrong—Greyson wasn’t even the Alpha right now—but the implication of my mate being with anyone but me, and the way this guy hadn’t even *considered* that I might be the Luna here, had my hackles rising.

I stepped forward, ready to tell him to drop dead, or at least to stop crashing our party. The newcomer shifted his gaze to me, and I froze. His eyes were an intense gold, and the way he stared at me—half amused like he was far too full of himself, but the look in his eyes made him look like some kind of feral thing—made the hairs rise on the back of my neck.

“And who’s this?” he asked, his voice deadly soft.

Greyson moved even closer, doing his best to physically block me without calling further attention to me. He probably assumed that the less this guy knew about our pack, the better—especially when it came to the alleged Alpha’s vulnerabilities.

“You’re not welcome here,” Greyson growled. “You’d better turn around and scurry back to whatever rat hole you crawled out of.”

He laughed. “Okay, we’re getting off on the wrong foot here.” He held out a hand. “They call me Andrei.”

I frowned. I’d only ever heard people use that kind of phrasing in movies. *They call him Andrei? What does that even mean? Is it his name or not? Who calls him?*

Greyson didn’t take Andrei’s hand. Instead, he stared him down. “Why are you here?”

Andrei looked past my mate and into the tent. “Seems like a fun party you’re having. Why wasn’t I invited?”

I’d had enough of this. This dude had showed up out of nowhere, and he was seriously killing the vibe of this party. Plus, he was clearly doing it on purpose! We’d been through hell recently. Was it so much to ask that we have this time to celebrate and enjoy our lives without dealing with another threat?

I stepped up beside Greyson, my arms crossed. “This is a private pack affair. You’re not part of the pack—so get out.”

I felt a flash of Greyson’s annoyance through our mate bond before Andrei’s eyes swung back to me, and his lips pulled up into a feral grin. “Well, hello, there.”

I blinked. *Seriously?* This guy was so cocky! He made Xavier and Greyson look like paragons of humility.

He turned back to Greyson. “Relax. I’m not here to cause any trouble.”

Somehow, I doubted that. There was just something about this guy that spelled nothing but trouble.

“Like I said, this party is for the pack only,” I reiterated. I could practically feel Greyson’s annoyance that I was making an even bigger spectacle of myself for the newcomer.

Andrei surveyed the people behind me, his eyebrows raised. “You call this a pack? Why do you have vampires?” He met Greyson’s eyes, that stupid, insufferable smirk plastered to his face.

Big Mac stepped forward, her eyes dark. “Watch yourself, wolf. There’s a witch here, too.”

This only made Andrei’s smirk turn into a grin. He turned to Greyson again. “You’re very progressive, aren’t you?”

“Why is it your business?” Greyson snarled.

I stood my ground next to my mate. If Andrei tried anything, I’d blast him into next Tuesday.

But instead of fighting with Greyson, Andrei simply sauntered into the tent and grabbed some chips. He threw them in his mouth and chewed. *Loudly*. With his mouth open. “It’s always interesting to see what other packs are up to. It seems like you’re all keeping busy.”

Greyson growled and grabbed Andrei by the shoulder, spinning him around so he was facing the direction he’d come in from. “You’re overstepping here, pal. You’d better take it down a notch.”

Andrei simply shoved another chip in his mouth and smiled. “You’ve got good eats here.”

Oh my *god*. What was with this guy? Did he have no decency? Or was he simply incapable of picking up on our very obvious signals? Either way, he wasn’t welcome. We’d worked so hard put this party together at the last minute, and there was no one more deserving of a fun, happy night than Mrs. Smith.

This Andrei guy was interrupting everything, and he had to go before he ruined the night entirely!

I stepped away from Greyson and approached Andrei, ignoring Greyson’s hiss of displeasure and the way his hand darted out to grab my arm before I could get too close to the intruder.

“Why are you being so rude?” I demanded. “We haven’t done anything to deserve this kind of behavior. You’re not welcome here—please leave.”

The bastard took one look at me and laughed. All I could see was red. How dared he do this to us? And what kind of ballsy guy stuck around and kept being antagonistic even after everyone had told him *repeatedly* to leave?

Greyson stalked up to me, but he was focused on Andrei. “Either you walk away *now*, or you won’t be able to walk at all. Your choice. What’ll it be?”

My stomach clenched with anxiety. Greyson’s tone promised violence. Not only had he not corrected Andrei when the man had assumed Greyson was the Alpha, but now he was truly acting like the Alpha too.

*Has he changed his mind about fighting Xavier?* *Or does this mean he’s warmed to the idea of being Xavier’s co-Alpha?*

I eyed the ever-thinning distance between Greyson and Andrei. Neither one of them seemed likely to give in, but if both of them refused to concede, then this would only end one way: with a bloodbath.

Andrei glanced back at Rishika, giving her a wolfish grin. “I bet you’re good in the heat of battle, aren’t you? Maybe some other places too?”

Rishika’s jaw dropped, and her hands balled into fists.

*Big mistake, fella.* I fought back my grin. I was going to enjoy watching Rishika kick his ass up and down the yard.

Suddenly, movement blurred out of the corner of my eye, and Artemis rushed forward to stand in front of Rishika, a silver knife pointed directly at Andrei. “Get out, or I swear on the Pit of Evercross, I will gut you.”

My eyes widened. *Holy crap!* I was a little worried about Artemis fighting when so little time had passed since we’d finally defeated Letifer, but there was no mistaking the determined glint in my sister’s eyes.

Andrei—who I was beginning to think might actually just be *super* dumb—brightened. “And who’s this? The defense squad?”

“Artemis, Rishika, stand down,” Greyson said. “Andrei was just leaving.” He slapped the last chip out of Andrei’s hands just as he went in for another bite.

To his credit, the guy didn’t so much as flinch. I shuddered. *He’s so steely. Does anything ruffle him?*

Andrei shrugged. “Well, this pack might be crazy, but at least the Alpha has balls.” Then his eyes flashed with fury. “Nobody slaps me, wolf.”

“I’ll do a lot more than that if you don’t get out of here,” Greyson snapped. “Now.”

I tensed. The last thing the pack needed was more trouble—especially on a night like this, when we were trying so hard to celebrate and enjoy ourselves for the first time in far too long.

The anger in Andrei’s gaze disappeared just as quickly as it had appeared. “I’m not stupid. Or suicidal. I’m clearly outnumbered here.”

Greyson stepped back. “I’m glad you have more sense than arrogance.”

Andrei turned back the way he came, revealing a blood-red “V” on the back of his jacket.

I let out a breath of relief.

“You still haven’t answered my question,” Greyson called after him. “Why are you here?”

Slowly, Andrei turned to face him. “I’m the welcoming committee for the Vanguard pack. Welcome.” He flashed a smile, and I could’ve sworn his eyes lingered on me. “We look forward to seeing you soon, neighbor.”

**Episode 1909**

CHARLIE

“What the hell do you think you’re doing, man?”

I yanked my hand back like the pack of condoms advertising “For Her Pleasure—with Sensual Heat!” had actually burned me and spun around.

Lilac scowled at me, his eyes narrowed and his nostrils flaring. It belatedly occurred to me that my “oh shit” expression might not be doing me any favors, and I tried to arrange my features into something more innocent.

“Um, I, uh… What?” I blurted out, my face heating.

*Great cover, Charlie. Now not only does he think you’re some kind of pervert, he probably thinks you’re stupid too.*

Though, to be completely honest, I was pretty sure Lilac had already decided I was an idiot anyway.

He crossed his arms over his chest. “Come on, man. I might be a bit rusty with the whole living world thing, but I wasn’t born yesterday—I just saw you picking out condoms! Are they for my sister?”

I blinked at him, unsure how to respond. Honestly… this felt like a trap. Did I admit that, yes, I had intentions of (safely!) engaging in sex with Violet? Or did I lie and hope that didn’t somehow make things worse?

*I honestly can’t imagine how this* could *get worse…*

I shook my head and forced a smile. “Nah, man, I’m just...” I looked from Lilac’s scowling face to the row of prophylactics behind me. “Amazed.”

Lilac’s scowl deepened, and his eyebrows knitted together. “You’re *amazed*? That’s the word you were looking for?”

I didn’t even think twice before digging the hole deeper. “Yeah! I mean, have you ever seen such a huge selection? The grocery store in Minnesota only had a few kinds—like, you know, the basic stuff. But look at this!” I grabbed a pack off the shelf at random as I dug myself further into this lie. “This set is glow in the dark! Blue, yellow, *and* green! And this one is heated for her pleasure. I mean wow, I bet the ladies love that.”

News flash: I’d officially made it worse. I knew it, and Lilac knew it too—judging by the way his expression had shifted from angry to just plain freaked out.

*Charlie, just stop talking*, I pleaded with myself.

“And then there’s these…” I grabbed another box at random. “The Magnums. They’re um…” I scanned the box, and my face went approximately as hot as the surface of the sun. “Well, you know what they’re for.”

*Charlie, you can stop now. Nobody wants you to keep talking. Just make your mouth go closed!*

“And these ones have ribs! Talk about some feisty friction!”

*FeIstY fRiCtIoN???*

*FEISTY FRICTION, CHARLIE.*

My soul was trying to leave my body, I could feel it. Every second locked in this goddamn aisle, I died a hundred times over, but I couldn’t stop it.

*This must be what purgatory feels like.*

“Oh cool!” I heard myself saying, “This set has lube on the inside *and* the outside. For both partners! The official condom of gender equality!”

*NOOOOOOOOOOOO…*

I was going to have to change my name. Burn my fingerprints off. Get a disguise and move to another country. There was no coming back from this.

Lilac finally took pity on me and snatched the eight or so boxes of condoms out of my arms. “Enough, dude! God, you’re weird.” He tossed them haphazardly back onto the shelf. “No dude who was actually having sex would say any of that stuff you just did.”

I sighed. “I’m sorry. I’m just trying to be responsible. You know, just in case anything with Violet gets—”

He held up his hands. “And I’m gonna stop you right there. Just stop. Maybe don’t talk again until we get back to the house.” He turned to head down the aisle and shuddered. “Gross.”

Sweat poured down the back of my neck. *I regret everything—especially going shopping with Violet’s brother.*

Lilac reached the end cap and paused before turning back to me. “Did you get buns for the hot dogs?”

I shook my head, and my throat dried up like the Sahara.

“Fine. Let’s just grab them and get out of here.”

“Sure.” I followed him down the aisle, then paused to look back at the mess I’d made of the birth control section.

Lilac, of course, noticed. “Don’t even think about it.”

I flinched and hurried after him. *Sorry, Violet.*

Though honestly, after what I’d just been through, I wasn’t sure I’d ever want to have sex again. And I hadn’t even had sex with Violet!

We paid for the party food in silence, and most of the drive back to the pack house was quiet, too. It wasn’t until we were just a couple miles from our destination that I gathered up the courage to try for another conversation with Violet’s twin. I asked him a few questions about Marta, and the ice between us thawed somewhat.

Still, when the pack house finally came back into view, I was so relieved I could cry.

I’d wanted to make a good impression with Lilac, but now I wasn’t sure I’d ever live the whole condom incident down.

*Oh god, I’m going to have to tell Violet about this.*

Nothing in the entire world sounded worse than reliving my conversation with Lilac, but I wanted Violet to hear it from me instead of her brother.

We grabbed the grocery bags and headed toward the house as Torin rushed up to meet us. “Just in time!” He grinned. “Did you get the pita chips? We’re just about out!”

Violet and Marta met us in the kitchen and helped us unpack the groceries.

My mate stood on her tiptoes to brush her lips against mine. “How did the trip go?”

My lips still a hair’s width from hers, I glanced over at Lilac, who was scowling at me just like he had in the grocery store. “We, um… We got everything on the list.”

“And we almost got a few things that weren’t on the list,” Lilac added. Loudly.

My face flushed. “Like cheese puffs!”

Torin’s eyes lit up. “What are cheese puffs? Can we make them?”

I looked helplessly from Torin to Violet to Lilac, who was smirking. The little bastard was enjoying watching me squirm.

“I’m going to go get ready,” I said. “I want to put on a fresh shirt.” You know, one that *wasn’t* soaked in my own nervous sweat.

“Okay, we’ll meet you in the tent.” Violet kissed my cheek and headed off with the rest of the group to join the party.

I watched her go, transfixed. She was so beautiful. I couldn’t believe I’d ever even considered staying at hunter camp without her. Life without Violet wasn’t a life I wanted to live.

I hurried up to my room, took the world’s quickest shower, and then changed into a new shirt. Things with Lilac weren’t off to a great start, but I was hopeful that we could come to some sort of understanding. He didn’t seem like a bad guy. After all, he was probably only being protective of his sister. And who truly wanted to talk about condoms in that situation?

No normal person.

The memory of Lilac’s voice echoed in my head. *God, you’re weird.*

“It’ll be okay,” I told myself.

I was about to gather up my courage and head downstairs when my phone started ringing. It was my mom.

“Hi, Mo—”

“Why haven’t you called me?” she demanded, cutting me off. “Wasn’t that what we agreed upon? That you’d go back with Violet, as long as you promised *not* to fall off the face of the earth?”

I sighed. “I’m sorry. I haven’t really had a chance to call yet.”

“Is that what happens? Are you suddenly an adult who has no time for his mother?”

My eyebrows lifted. Wow, she was really laying the guilt on thick today. I sincerely hoped this wasn’t a sign of things to come.

Should I mention the agreement I made with Romilly to act like a spy? Did my mom even know about it?

But she’d already moved on. “Just because you’re not at camp anymore, doesn’t mean your responsibilities as a hunter have changed. In fact, your father and I are expecting great things from you, so you shouldn’t let your guard down—or allow yourself to be seduced by Violet.”

“*Seduced?*” I repeated as the condom incident replayed in my head. What was worse? Lilac catching me shopping for condoms, or my mom trying to keep me from being intimate with my mate?

“You know what I mean,” she snapped. “Don’t let her convince you that all werewolves are harmless.”

Oh, *that* kind of seduced.

I frowned. “You do know that I’m a werewolf too, right?”

She let out a long-suffering sigh—one I knew all too well. I decided to change the subject.

“How’s Dad?” I asked.

“He’s worried about you too. He wants to know whether you’re planning to come home for the holidays.”

I hesitated. Honestly, I hadn’t thought about it. I’d only just arrived. I glanced out the window and spotted Violet speaking with Lilac and Marta under the tent. What were the chances Lilac was regaling her with the condom story?

“Did you hear me, Charlie?” my mom pressed.

“Sorry, yes, I heard you. And… it depends. Would it be okay if I brought Violet home for the holidays?”

**Episode 1910**

GREYSON

I wanted to rip that asshat Andrei’s lips from his smug face. And not just because he’d barged in on my pack in the middle of my mother’s engagement party, but also because of the way he’d looked at Cali. Looking at another wolf’s mate like that… The dude had to have a death wish. Nobody got away with that.

And if I ever caught him so much as glancing her way again with that look on his face—all unfiltered want and feral delight—I was gonna rip his fucking throat out.

“Do you know why he showed up here?” Cali asked, staring at the place in the forest Andrei had come from and disappeared into. She rubbed her arms. “He gives me the creeps.”

I sighed and pulled her into my side. “Posturing, if I had to guess. Looks like the Vanguard pack has just moved in, and now they’re meeting their new neighbors and flexing their muscles. I’ve never heard of them, but I have a feeling this won’t be the last time we see one of them.”

“I think you’re right.” Rishika narrowed her eyes on the tree line. “I can follow him, if you’d like. See what the Vanguards are like, and if it’s worth our time to worry about them.”

I paused momentarily, touched not only by Rishika’s offer, but by the fact that she was speaking to me now as if I had the authority to make that call. Andrei must really have gotten under her skin if she was already itching to go scope out his pack.

“Not tonight,” I said, shaking my head. “We can always pick up his scent tomorrow.” I scrunched up my nose in disgust. “It certainly won’t be hard to find.”

Cali slid an arm around my shoulders and smiled. “Tonight, we should be celebrating.”

“All the same, I’d like to organize a couple patrols,” Rishika said. “Even if we’re not going to venture into their territory yet, that asshole’s presence here shows we can’t let our guards down. We should have some basic defenses in place just in case he decides to come back or bring a few friends next time.

“You can count me in,” Artemis said. “I’m not a wolf, but I wouldn’t mind knocking around some Vanguard heads if they’re all like that guy.”

I fought the urge to smile. Rishika and Artemis certainly made a formidable pair. I wouldn’t want to be on the receiving end of their anger.

“No knocking heads, just patrolling.” I met Rishika’s eyes. “Have Ravi, Zainab, and Sage alternate. But I absolutely *insist* that each pair has some food and time to relax a little. Just go easy on the alcohol tonight, okay?”

“Hopefully it’s not too late. You know how Sage is when she’s ready to party.” Rishika pulled Artemis away to go alert the others of the change to their evening plans.

I felt Cali’s eyes on me as I watched the pair disappear into the crowd. Finally allowing that smile to tug at my lips, I turned to her. “Something on your mind, love?”

“So, are you still Alpha then?” she blurted out.

My brows lifted. “I didn’t tell Andrei that I was.”

“You didn’t have to—you certainly implied it, and then you just went ahead and let the guy assume you were the pack’s Alpha.”

And here I’d thought I was so clever. But, as usual, my mate saw right through me.

I laughed. “Was it that obvious?” At first, I’d only wanted to keep Andrei on his toes, to not give him any more information about our pack than he’d accumulate simply by being in our space. But it had just been so easy to fall back into my role as Alpha.

Maybe too easy.

Cali bit her lip. “Greyson, what’s going to happen when Xavier gets back?”

I sighed. “Honestly? I don’t know. But if you recall, Xavier’s time as Alpha was only ever supposed to be temporary. Yes, I refused to fight him for the title earlier, but that doesn’t change the fact of our original agreement.”

“I don’t think that’s how Xavier sees it. And if he’d seen you the way you were earlier… I think there would’ve been a whole lot of trouble. He’d probably want to fight you all over again. Or, who knows? Maybe he’d want to change your call on the Vanguards and go invade their pack.”

Cali wasn’t wrong—Xavier wasn’t going to give up control of the Redwood pack as long as it was within his power to lead. But she was getting herself worked up over things that hadn’t happened yet, things she didn’t have any control over, and I hated seeing her like this.

I rested my hands on her shoulders. “Love, breathe. Don’t worry about this right now. Not tonight. We’ve both earned a chance to relax, and we should enjoy it.”

She smiled. “I’ll try.”

“I like that shirt on you,” I said, eyeing her turtleneck.

“I like your jacket.” She straightened my lapels. “You must be excited.”

“Mm. Why’s that?”

She gave me a pointed look. “Because your mom is celebrating her engagement!”

Oh. That.

“Truth be told, I’m still not used to thinking of Sabine as my mom, but I’m trying. And I am happy for her.” I smiled. “But right now, all I want to celebrate is being with you.”

I kissed her forehead, and her cheeks turned the same lovely shade of pink as the cupcakes Torin had made for the engagement party. My heart swelled just seeing her blush, just knowing that after all the time we’d been together, after everything we’d been through, I could still get that reaction from my beautiful mate. And she could do the exact same thing to me.

It was everything I didn’t know I wanted, and I was the luckiest bastard in the world to have these moments with Cali.

That kiss we’d shared earlier wasn’t nearly enough—not when she looked like this. It struck me all over again how much I wanted her, how essential she was to my happiness. And even though I was happy here and now, it didn’t escape me for even one moment that Cali wasn’t mine alone.

I looked around the party, trying to distract myself from that depressing thought. All things considered, this party wasn’t that different from the one I’d seen in my vision—except *that* engagement party had been for Cali and me.

*I wish it hadn’t just been a vision—that it was real and happening right now.*

I saw Big Mac standing next to my mother, and I remembered the question she’d asked when I’d finally told her about the witches.

*Have they already started making my vision a reality? Or is this just some kind of way to remind me of what’s at stake?*

As if I could ever forget.

“Aww, look at your mom and Big Mac.” Cali sighed wistfully. “They look so happy. Well, Mrs. Smith looks happy.”

I focused on my mother and her fiancée, and laughter bubbled up in my chest. “Yeah, Big Mac looks like she’d rather be cooking up spells than attending a party in her honor.”

“Maybe you could try to help with that. Go talk to her.”

I honestly hadn’t even considered it, but Cali was right. If I was trying to accept my mother’s place in my life, trying to welcome her into it and get to know her better, then that should probably include welcoming Big Mac into the family too. We’d talked earlier, but not in a “you’re marrying the woman who gave birth to me” capacity. Since my mother was going to marry the witch, I might as well make an effort here.

“Great idea.” I took a few steps toward the couple, my arm still wrapped around Cali’s shoulders, but she stopped.

“No, you should do this on your own. You’re not going to hide behind me.”

The determined set of Cali’s shoulders told me there was no use arguing with her. With a mock-salute, I reluctantly let her go and headed toward Big Mac. When I reached her, she was pouring something into a little glass.

She held it out to me. “How about some moonshine?”

“Don’t mind if I do.”

She passed me the glass, then poured herself a measure of the clear liquid. We stood there together for a moment in awkward silence. If the pack were in danger and she and I needed to coordinate, talking with her would have been the easiest thing in the world. But this? Making small talk?

I had no idea where to begin.

Forcing a small smile, I lifted my glass. “To you and Sabine.”

I was about to tilt the glass back when Big Mac reached out and caught my arm.

“You should start calling her ‘Mom.’ It would make her really happy.”

Her words surprised me. “Does that mean I should call you ‘Step-Mom’?”

Her expression darkened. “I wouldn’t go that far.”

“I guess I’ll drink to that, then.” I downed the shot—and then coughed. It burned like hell. “You sure this isn’t paint stripper?”

The witch laughed darkly.

After a moment, the burn turned to a pleasant warmth. I turned to Big Mac. “For what it’s worth, I’m glad you and… my *mother*… found each other.”

“It was a long time coming. I’m crazy for her. I always have been,” she admitted. “I’d do anything for her.” Then she pinned me with a glare. “And if you tell her that, I will not only deny it, I will cast a spell on you.”

“Fair enough.”

She laughed—and my jaw dropped. Was Big Mac seriously laughing right now? I couldn’t recall a time I’d ever seen her so much as smile.

I glanced back and saw Cali watching us. She gave me a thumbs up and a smile. I nodded and smiled back before looking around.

Everyone seemed to be having a good time. Relaxing, just the way they deserved to. This was the future I wanted—Cali, my pack, and my family.

Then, over Cali’s shoulder, I saw my brother appear at the tree line with Kira.

Xavier and I made eye contact, and his voice slipped into my mind.

*We need to talk.*

**Episode 1911**

XAVIER

My brother needed to learn his fucking place.

I held eye contact with Greyson as I approached the party, trying like hell to control the anger boiling inside me. Here I was, out taking care of packing business, only to come back to find my brother holding court over the pack like some kind of goddamn prince?

*I* was the Alpha here, not Greyson. He’d given up control at a crucial moment in our fight against Letifer, and even when the fight against the revenants had finished, he still hadn’t wanted to buck up and fight me for the title of Alpha. I thought that made it loud and clear who was in charge, but apparently Greyson still thought he could do whatever the hell he wanted while I was gone.

At least I hadn’t come back to find him with Cali. Though who knew what had happened between them while I was gone? Greyson never had been one to miss an opportunity to royally piss me off.

I watched Greyson say something to Big Mac, pass a small glass over to her, and then head over to me. He slipped his hands into his pockets as he approached. “What’s up, little brother?”

I ground my teeth. I fucking *hated* it when Greyson called me that. “Attending to pack business.”

“Oh?” His brows lifted. “What business kept you away for so long? Anything I should know about?”

My eyes narrowed. “I should be asking you the same thing. I picked up an unknown scent on the way over here, and it’s still lingering.”

“Oh, we just had an unexpected visitor.”

My stomach tightened. What the fuck did that mean? Unexpected as in the way all our Fae guests had popped up and made themselves at home in our pack houses? Or was it something else? I’d smelled the same werewolf I had at the other pack house—had there been a confrontation? Or was this wolf just scoping us out? Whoever they were, they clearly hadn’t stuck around for the party.

“And what did you do about it?” I pressed.

“I took care of it—like an Alpha should.”

My eyes narrowed. It was taking every ounce of my not-so-depthless self-control to avoid ruining Sabine and Big Mac’s engagement party by cracking my brother’s skull.

“Well,” I gritted out, “with Kira’s help, I just took care of the witch mark on the lake house, like an Alpha should.” I glanced around for Kira, but she must have read the room and slipped away so Greyson and I could talk.

My brother raised an eyebrow at this new information, and I had to bite my tongue. I’d told Cali I’d share Alpha with him, but it was pretty obvious that Greyson hadn’t signed on for that. He was acting way too cocky—like he was still the lone Alpha here.

But the only true lone Alpha between the two of us was me, and I wasn’t about to let him forget it.

“What happened while I was gone?” I snapped.

“Let’s discuss this in private. I don’t want to spoil the party.”

I followed Greyson away from the tent and closer to the porch, my eyes drifting back to Cali. I wanted to go to her, to hold her and be with her and finally enjoy this new peace we’d found.

But I had to make it clear to the others that the pack was a priority for me, which meant that first I had to have this fantastic conversation with my brother, and *then* I could enjoy the evening with the love of my life.

“The uninvited guest,” Greyson began. “He’s from a new pack. He called himself our neighbor and came over to throw his weight around and introduce himself. He was a real piece of work.”

Fuck. That didn’t bode well. “I traced his scent from the lake house all the way back here.”

“So it’s the same person,” Greyson concluded. “We’re being scoped out. The werewolf—his name is Andrei—said he was a member of the Vanguard pack. You ever heard of them?”

I blinked, racking my brain for some bit of information, but I came up empty. I shook my head. “Never. Maybe Gabriel’s run across them. I can look into it… What did this Andrei guy want?”

Getting this information out of Greyson felt like pulling teeth. I was the Alpha here. I was the one who needed this intel to make decisions that would help lead the pack—him keeping all the cards close to his chest wasn’t doing anything but hurting all of us. Why couldn’t he see that? Why couldn’t he just work *with* me this once instead of being a gigantic ass of a roadblock?

Suddenly, I had a new appreciation and understanding for Cali’s request for us to share Alpha.

“As far as I can tell, he just dropped in to taunt us a little—and to talk to me.”

“Why you?”

Greyson smiled. “It seemed he had a message for the Alpha.”

My vision went red.

Fucking. *Asshole*.

I grabbed Greyson by the lapels with a growl. “Stop being a dick. You got to play Alpha with this guy—great, I’m happy for you. But what was the message?”

“You’re wrinkling my jacket.”

I released him with a shove—I couldn’t help it. Honestly, a little shove was the *least* violent thing I wanted to do to my brother right now.

He smoothed his lapels and then paused dramatically, making me wait an extra string of seconds before he said, “Andrei came to welcome us.”

Well that just sounded ominous.

“I think they’re probably trying to move into our territory,” Greyson continued.

“Fuck.” This was not the news I wanted to hear right after we’d survived the fight of our lives. Was it too much to ask for some down time to relax and recover before we were thrown into a new dangerous situation?

But as much as this news was *inconvenient*, it also wasn’t surprising. There were tons of packs in the world, and only so much space for them. We’d been lucky that, for a long time now, we’d had so much space. The land around the two pack houses, and even the stretch of forested miles between them, had been exclusively ours for so long. It was always going to be a matter of time before another desperate pack started sniffing around.

“I suspect the Vanguards are taking advantage of the Blue Bloods returning to their pack house and the demise of the Samara pack,” Greyson added. “There’s probably never gonna be a better time than now to invade and try to stake a claim.”

“I get it. There’s always someone ready to fill a power vacuum—”

“Oh, look at you two getting along!”

I lifted my head to see Cali coming toward us, a bright smile on her face.

“Are you discussing becoming co-Alphas?” she asked.

I fixed Greyson with a pointed look. “I don’t know. Are we?”

I’d honestly been surprised to realize that Greyson was still holding out on agreeing to Cali’s suggestion, but now that she was standing right in front of us and looking so damn hopeful, I suspected Greyson would go along with it just like I had. She was nearly impossible to say no to.

Plus, on top of being a way to please Cali, both of us working together as co-Alphas would buy some time until we settled on an official way to resolve our dispute.

Greyson glanced at Cali. “If that’s what we need to do to deal with the Vanguard pack, then I’m willing to talk about being co-Alpha.”

My brother was so predictable, yet I still had to hide my disappointment. Part of me had been hoping he’d refuse—not only so I wouldn’t be forced to share power with him, but so Cali could see firsthand that Greyson didn’t truly put her and the pack first. That he was selfish. That he wasn’t worthy of her.

Not like I was.

But he’d pretty much just agreed to it for now, and the thought of having to split decisions—and the respect the Alpha received—was beyond annoying. Alpha was rightfully mine. Why had I ever agreed to share it?

I glanced at Cali, and her hopeful eyes answered my question.

But this was still nothing more than a Band-Aid—one I’d rip off when the time was right.

Suddenly, a loud blast of microphone feedback screeched through the air. Then there were three deep booms, as if someone was tapping on a microphone. “Is this thing on?”

We all turned to see Lola standing on a little makeshift stage, a microphone in hand.

*Good god. Who gave her a microphone?*

“It’s so great to see everyone together,” Lola gushed.

*It’d be much better if “everyone” didn’t include my brother. Maybe he can run off and join the Vanguard pack when everything’s said and done. I’m sure he’d fit right in.*

Lola raised a glass. “To Mrs. Smith and Big Mac!”

“To Mrs. Smith and Big Mac!” Everyone at the party cheered and took a drink.

Then Lola grinned. “All right, it’s time to get this party started. Who’s ready to play a game?”

**Episode 1912**

*Hoo, boy. Who thought it was a good idea to give her a microphone?*

While my best friend tried to cajole the party members into playing a game, my mind was still trying to process what I’d just learned.

Greyson had said he would co-Alpha with Xavier.

To say I was relieved to hear this news was the world’s biggest understatement. I mean, sure, Greyson’s agreement was pretty conditional. The emergence of the Vanguard pack was his reason for agreeing to share power with Xavier more than anything else, which was disappointing.

Maybe it was naïve, but I’d been hoping Greyson would agree not just for the pack, but for me as well. Because he, like Xavier, knew how much it tore me apart to see them fighting all the time, and he was willing to compromise on being Alpha if it meant giving me some peace of mind.

But… whatever his reasoning, this was still the outcome I’d hoped for. And I’d take it. For now.

I grabbed Xavier’s and Greyson’s hands and smiled. They both smiled back. This was how it was meant to be, I was sure of it. Both of my mates, here with me, collaborating and working together to lead the pack instead of constantly fighting with each other.

I just hoped it would last long enough for them to see how much easier everything would be if they just stopped fighting all the time.

Their smiles slipped away when they met each other’s gazes, and instantly their expressions turned steely.

*Yeah, this isn’t going to last very long at all, is it?*

“Come on, guys,” Lola said into the microphone, still trying to convince the crowd of her plan. “This is supposed to be a party! Parties have games! Let’s play!”

“What game?” Zainab shouted back.

“What do you want to play?”

The group threw out a few suggestions.

“Mad Libs!”

“Let’s do a ring toss!”

“Bridal Jeopardy!”

“Two Truths and Lie!”

“Charades!”

Lola drummed her fingers against her chin. “Hmm… Two Truths and a Lie it is!”

On either side of me, Greyson and Xavier groaned. Clearly, neither one of them wanted to play this game.

*But hey, at least they’re in agreement!*

“Come on.” I urged them forward, back toward the party. “If you two want to lead, you need to be seen celebrating the good times too.”

By the time we reached the group, it had been agreed upon that the guests of honor—Mrs. Smith and Big Mac—would go first. Mrs. Smith was laughing and glowing as she climbed up onto the small stage with no difficulty.

The same could not be said of her fiancée.

*Big Mac does* not *want to play this game*, I realized. She was stiff as a board as she approached the stage. Her body language screamed discomfort, and she honestly looked like she wanted to be anywhere else.

It was kind of weird seeing Big Mac like this. Usually, she was so tough and capable—willing to do anything that needed to be done, though not without sharing her feelings on things first. She could control a room with the slightest effort, yet a public game at her own engagement party was her undoing.

*Huh. I guess Big Mac contains multitudes.*

The witch took the microphone from Lola and turned to the crowd, her expression flat, and her tone deadpan and monotone. “I’m a witch. I’m a blonde. I love the Miami Dolphins.”

Next to her, Lola let out a long-suffering sigh while the rest of the group groaned.

“I think maybe you’re confused about the rules,” Lola said.

Big Mac shook her head. “No, I know the rules.” Then she passed the microphone over to her fiancée without any further explanation.

For her part, Mrs. Smith looked absolutely delighted to be playing the game, even if Big Mac was less than enthusiastic about the whole thing.

Mrs. Smith pretended to consider her response. “Well, I know for a fact that MacKenzie is a witch, and she’s definitely a blonde. Which leaves only one solution: she doesn’t love the Dolphins.”

“Congratulations,” Big Mac said, her voice flat. “You’re correct.”

Lola shook her head. “Oh, you’re just no fun at all.”

“Kiss!” Rishika shouted at the couple, and soon the rest of the party joined in.

Big Mac glowered at them all, and I worried for a second that we were about to have a mass-cursing on our hands, but then Mrs. Smith grabbed the witch’s hand and pulled her into a sweet, lingering kiss.

The crowd went wild.

*Wow. It’s such a relief to have something to celebrate again.*

I glanced between my mates. What would it be like to be able to do that in front of everyone without raising a few eyebrows or starting yet another fight between the two of them? The thought was sorely tempting, and yet I could barely wrap my head around it.

*Maybe someday.*

“Speech!” Artemis shouted. Apparently, my sister and her girlfriend had taken it upon themselves to keep the party going—even if it meant (gently) publicly bullying the honored couple.

Big Mac glared at my sister in response. Okay, then. The surly witch didn’t want to talk—noted.

Mrs. Smith, who still held the microphone, smiled beatifically at the crowd. “I have a few words I’d like to share…” She cleared her throat. “First of all, I want to thank everyone for putting this party together on such short notice. It’s beautiful, and it’s perfect, and there is no other group of people on this earth that I would rather celebrate this happy news with than all of you. We’ve all been through so many difficulties lately, and yet everyone showed up today to give MacKenzie and me an evening we will never forget.” Mrs. Smith’s eyes were shining, and I felt my own eyes burn at the emotion resonating in her voice. “I feel truly blessed to be standing here amongst my pack members—and with the woman I love with all my heart.”

I lifted my gaze to Greyson. How did he feel about this? Seeing his mother celebrating such a huge milestone? Or did he even see this night that way? He’d admitted that he was still struggling to wrap his head around Mrs. Smith being his mother. Maybe he simply saw tonight as a warm celebration for a fellow pack member?

Xavier squeezed my hand, and when I looked over at him, he smiled. Butterflies exploded in my stomach at the simple gesture. Was it always going to feel like this with my mates?

I glanced over at the party. Artemis and Rishika were holding hands, and nearby, my dad, who’d cleaned up and joined us, had an arm slung affectionately around my mom’s shoulders. Everyone looked happy and healthy—absolutely radiant with joy.

*All the people I care about most are finding happiness. When will it be my turn?*

Then I realized I was still holding both my mates’ hands, and all the joy bubbling in my chest flattened out. How on earth was I ever going to resolve this?

Lola directed Mrs. Smith and Big Mac to exit the stage. “Thank you so much to the happy couple for participating,” she said in what I assumed was her best impression of a game show host. “Now, does anyone else want to play?”

Several pack members crowded the stage, all wanting to take their turn.

“Greyson.”

Jay had come over, and he was holding a camera. “The happy couple would like you to be in the pictures.”

Greyson’s eyes widened, almost comically. I’d seen him face down countless threats without a hint of fear, and yet it looked like the idea of a family picture absolutely terrified him. I squeezed his hand and then let go.

“Go on,” I urged him gently. “This can be another way to prove that you’re a part of Mrs. Smith’s life. Go be the supportive son.”

I half-expected him to argue, and I was so relieved to be wrong. Instead, he nodded and followed Jay back over to where Big Mac and Mrs. Smith were standing near the balloon arch.

Then Xavier stepped in front of me, blocking my view of the awkward family. “Are you okay?” he asked.

I frowned. “Why wouldn’t I be? This is such a happy vibe!”

“I mean, that strange werewolf showed up out of nowhere. That must have been unsettling, at the very least. He didn’t threaten you or anything, did he?”

I thought back to the golden-eyed werewolf. Andrei. And the last words he’d said to me.

*We look forward to seeing you soon, neighbor.*

Honestly, that part had been creepy as fuck. But I wasn’t going to tell Xavier that—it’d only make him want to hunt Andrei down, and that would ruin all the good vibes of the night.

“Sure, it was disturbing to have him show up here and act like he owned the place. I was worried he’d ruin the party.”

Xavier pursed his lips. “I’m sorry. I wish I’d been here to set him straight.”

“Where did you go, by the way?”

“We had to make sure the witch mark was gone from the lake house,” he explained. “As the Alpha, it was something I had to do.” His eyes sparkled, drawing me in. “But now that I’m back, there’s something else I have to do.”

“What’s that?” I asked breathlessly.

Music started playing beneath the canopy, and Xavier pulled me toward him. “May I have this dance?”

**Episode 1913**

My heart was in my throat as Xavier took my hand and led me out onto the dance floor.

Pop music blasted from the speakers, and the lights strung beneath the canopy glimmered overhead. This was like something from a movie, the moment when the girl and the guy dance together and their romance is forever cemented.

No pressure there.

Oh god, what if I screwed it up? I’d never danced with Xavier before. I honestly hadn’t even known he *knew* how to dance, or that he was willing to participate at all.

My stomach fluttered with nerves.

*I’m the queen of embarrassing accidents—this is a trauma just waiting to happen.*

Nearby, Rishika and Artemis were dancing together. Well, Rishika was dancing. Artemis was just sort of hopping around in time to the beat, but they both seemed to be enjoying themselves.

Maybe we could do that. Just… dance around? No pressure. Just fun. I let go of Xavier’s hand and stepped back, ready to dance with him while the music pulsed around us.

But he reached out and snagged my wrist again, pulling me back into him. And instead of a fast, upbeat dance, or even the low-key grinding I could see some of the other pack members doing on the dance floor, Xavier slipped one arm around my waist and held my hand against his chest. Then he led me into a slow dance, even though the music wasn’t slowing one bit.

I tensed at first, not sure what to do, how to move. Then Xavier leaned down, and his lips tickled the shell of my ear as he whispered, “Just follow my lead.”

Slowly, I relaxed and allowed him to lead me into a simple yet graceful slow dance. We were chest to chest, our fingers entwined. Xavier was all I could see, and his scent wrapped around me as he guided me on the dance floor.

And after everything we’d been through and done together, I suddenly felt as if we’d never been as close as we were right now. His eyes never broke away from mine, and in them I thought I saw something like reverence—and a deep, deep love that made my belly twist like I’d skipped a step going down the stairs.

If I’d told my past self that slow dances and lingering, lovesick looks were on the menu when I’d first met Xavier, I never would have believed it. He’d seemed so foreboding back then, so closed off. And while I was comfortable with him now, while being with him was as easy as falling asleep, I couldn’t forget the anxiety I always used to feel around him.

If I hadn’t been lured in again and again by the undeniable pull of our mate bond, Xavier’s tough guy facade might have scared me off entirely. And I never would have gotten to enjoy moments like this one. I never would have seen this side of my mate—the side that was gentle and nurturing and graceful.

The side that made me love him even more.

“How did you learn to dance like this?” I finally asked. Slow dancing didn’t seem like the kind of thing a tough werewolf or a mercenary would ever learn.

He smiled wistfully and whispered in my ear again, “I’ve had lots and lots of practice.”

My stomach tightened, but I wasn’t nervous. I was *jealous*. Who were these girls who’d been allowed to see this sweet, secret side of my mate? Was he talking about Ava?

The rush of emotion must have shown on my face, because Xavier laughed. “My mother taught me. She insisted her boys learn to dance—she even made Colton and me practice together, if you can imagine that.”

I could imagine that. Two young, gangly twins holding each other at arm’s length, their bodies stiff and awkward as their mother tried to teach them the proper way to move to the beat.

I snorted. “I bet you two were so cute!”

He groaned. “Colton has two left feet. I’m honestly surprised I didn’t sustain permanent damage.”

Suddenly his grip on me tightened, and he lowered me into a dip.

I was completely unprepared for the world to turn on its side, and I let out a small scream before Xavier pulled me back into the safety of his arms.

He smiled. “You’re safe, tiger. I would never drop you.”

My cheeks heated. *Great work, Caliana. Xavier tries to literally sweep you off your feet, and you scream in his face. Very romantic!*

Still, clutched his strong, muscular shoulders, my heart was racing from more than just the shock of being dipped. This moment with Xavier was everything I’d ever dreamed of—awkward moments and all. How long had I been wanting to be swept off my feet like this?

And after all this time, I still couldn’t quite believe that Xavier was the one to give it to me.

The music shifted to an EDM dance beat, and some of the people crowding the dance floor went to grab some refreshments. Over Xavier’s shoulder, I noticed that my dad was sitting by himself on the fringes of the party.

I tapped on Xavier’s shoulder. “We should go talk to my dad. He had a shifting… incident earlier.”

Xavier’s eyes went wide. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It wasn’t on purpose, there’s just been so much going on,” I said. “Would it be okay if we go talk to him?”

“Of course, Cali. You know that.”

Smiling, I took his hand and led him toward my dad. On the way, I caught Xavier up on everything that had happened with my dad while he was gone, including how Greyson had been the one to bring my dad back safely.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there to help,” he said tersely. There was an edge to his voice that hadn’t been there before. Was it because we’d stopped dancing? Or because I’d mentioned Greyson?

My dad lit up when he saw us approach.

“You two make quite the couple.” My dad smiled, and my cheeks heated again.

Had he been drinking or something? Or was he just dazed from what had happened earlier?

“I understand you had quite a scare,” Xavier said.

My dad nodded. “I thought for sure I was losing my mind, but thank goodness your brother was there to rescue me. I probably would be behind bars right now, otherwise.

“That is lucky.”

“Really, that Greyson fellow seems like a great guy,” my dad went on. “He’s been so helpful. And he’s so smart and capable—keeps a cool head when the pressure’s on. He’s really the kind of guy you’d want to have in your corner when things get tough.”

I blinked. *Okay, so Dad is waxing poetic about* both *of my mates tonight?*

I looked over at Greyson who was still talking with Mrs. Smith and Big Mac. I couldn’t help but smile a little. It was so wonderful that they were becoming a family in their own way. Then I glanced back at Xavier. The tension in his jaw looked strong enough to break bone.

“Well, if you have any more questions about becoming a werewolf, feel free to ask,” he said to my dad. “Don’t hesitate.”

The realization hit me. *Xavier and Greyson are competing for my dad’s affections, aren’t they? Great.*

I leaned in and kissed my dad’s cheek. “I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

“Me too.” His expression brightened. “Have you tried the dip yet? It’s delish!”

Just then, Torin came over to speak to my dad. “I’ve finished making the pies for tomorrow. I think—” He stopped when he saw Xavier and me. “Oh, Cali, I’ve been wanting to ask you: who was that guy with the golden eyes? He looked so dangerous!”

“Don’t worry about him,” Xavier cut in. “We can handle anything. By the way, Torin, I wanted to thank you for everything you’ve done to help this pack. I meant it when I called you an honorary wolf. You’re part of this pack.”

My jaw dropped, and Torin’s eyes went wide.

“Would you turn me?” he gasped.

“That’s enough of that!” I blurted out. “We don’t know if that’s possible, and I already have to deal with my dad turning. Let’s not get ahead of ourselves!”

Torin began peppering my dad with questions about his shift, and Xavier pulled me away.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

His eyes glittered. “I want to talk to you.”

I knew that look. Xavier wanted to do a lot more than talk. He led me away from the tent and into the light of the nearly full moon.

“Why did you bring me here?” I asked.

He gestured back toward the party. “I wanted a moment alone with you. Cali… I never would have left the pack today if it wasn’t important. You know that, right?”

I nodded. The intense look in his eyes took my breath away, made me afraid to speak. I wasn’t afraid of Xavier, I just didn’t want to ruin the moment. Hot, heavy tension bubbled between us, and that gleam in his eyes never flickered for a second.

“I love you,” he said, leaning in.

We were so close that my body was shaking with need. Xavier was my mate. I loved him. And right now, I needed his lips on mine.

**Episode 1914**

LOLA

“*Cali!* Wait up!”

I hurried after my best friend. If she thought she could sneak off with Xavier while we were supposed to be celebrating, she had another thing coming. It was selfish to blow off Mrs. Smith and Big Mac like that. Besides, I needed party game players!

“Caliana!” I cried. “Don’t you dare walk away from this party!”

I found them a ways off, locked in an intense kiss. My eyes narrowed, then rolled—seriously, they were checking out of the party to go hook up? They could do that any old time!

I cleared my throat. Loudly. “*Ahem*.”

They immediately broke apart, and I couldn’t hold back the smirk tugging at my lips as Cali’s face went tomato red.

“W-What’s up, Lola?” she asked, smoothing down her top.

I raised my eyebrows, giving them both a pointed look. “What’s *up* is that I can’t have you two bailing on the party to go get some nookie. You both need to get back in there! Barely anyone is playing Two Truths and a Lie, and we’ve got more on the agenda this evening! If everyone bails now, they’ll miss the rest of the fun!”

Xavier pinned me with a skeptical look. “What makes you think we want to play any of those games? Just get Jay to play.”

“He *is* playing, but we need more people. Come on, you guys! This is for Mrs. Smith and Big Mac.”

He rolled his eyes. “Right. Mrs. Smith and Big Mac—they’re all you care about, right?”

Cali grabbed his arm with a defeated sigh. “Come on, Xavier. She’s right. We need to be supportive.”

I grinned. I knew I could get them to come around to seeing things my way. Guilt was a powerful ~~manipulator~~ motivator, especially with Cali. I honestly wasn’t sure whether Xavier was capable of feeling that particular emotion, but that was fine. He didn’t need to, so long as Cali was around. She was the one calling the shots—regardless of what either of her mates thought.

“I’ll see you back in there—but hurry! It’s rude to keep your guests of honor waiting!”

I left them alone to make themselves decent and hurried back to the party just in time to catch Jacqueline talking to Jay beneath the light-strung canopy.

*That devious little vamp. You can’t turn your back on her for a second.*

I rushed up to Jay’s side and snuggled into him. I might as well have been slapping a sign on his chest that said “Property of Lola—no homewrecking vampires allowed!”

“Did you get some good pics of the happy couple?” I asked Jay in a sing-song voice. “You looked so cute holding your camera.” Then I turned to the vampire girl, my face twisted into a sickly sweet smile. “Don’t you think he looks cute, Jacs?”

She rolled her eyes. “Whatever. I need a snack.” And without further ado, she headed off to the snack tables.

I grinned. *Game, set, match.* Then I unwound myself from Jay’s torso and playfully smacked his shoulder. “Why were you even talking to her?

He shrugged. “She asked me a question? What, did you want me to just ignore her?”

“I mean, obviously, but that’s not the point. Don’t you know when someone’s flirting with you?”

“You’re being ridiculous. We were just talking—there was no flirting happening.”

Maybe not on Jay’s end, but I’d seen Jacqueline’s body language. She’d looked like she wanted to climb Jay like a tree. There was no doubt that she’d set her sights on him and had taken advantage of my distraction to try to sink her claws into my mate. She’d been eyeing him ever since Tottenville.

*Good thing he’s apparently oblivious to that kind of thing.*

I looked over toward the stage, where the small group of gamers was already beginning to break apart. Dammit, the party had only just gotten started. I couldn’t let things fall apart already.

Maybe it was the pending full moon, but I wasn’t even remotely ready to call it quits yet. This party still had a ways to go.

Lilac approached, tossing an orange up and down in his hand. “Hey, Lola—”

A lightbulb flicked on in my head, and I snagged the orange in midair.

“Hey!” He frowned. “Give that back. I’m starving!”

I scoffed. “Seriously? You’ve done nothing but eat since the party started. This is literally the farthest from the snack table you’ve been in the last hour.”

“I have nearly a year of lost eating time to make up for! What do you expect?”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m pretty sure it doesn’t work like that. Now, stay there for a second. I need you to help me keep this party going.” I rushed over to the stage and grabbed the microphone. “Okay, guys, I can tell you’re all in the mood for something a bit more engaging, perhaps something a bit more competitive?” I raised my brows and held up the orange I’d stolen from Lilac. “Now for our next game, Pass the Orange!”

A few of the partygoers cheered, while others groaned. Some of them just looked confused.

“Pass the Orange?” Artemis repeated. “Did you just make that up?”

I cheerfully ignored her. “Lilac, I need you to help me team people up.” I glanced around the party, doing a mental headcount. Where was Ravi? I needed him to join in.

On the edge of the party, I saw his retreating back. He was following Ava away from the group.

*Huh. That’s weird.*

“How do you want me to team people up?” Lilac asked.

“Oh. Well, in two groups, of course!”

With Lilac’s direction, several couples joined in—Tom and Orla, Rishika and Artemis, Charlie and Violet, and Mrs. Smith even dragged Big Mac along to play. I smiled when I noticed Lilac chatting with Marta on the sidelines.

*Cali’s right. They sure do make a cute couple—the medium and the boy she brought back to life. It’s like something out of a romance novel.* My brows knitted together. *But why is she wearing gloves?*

Speaking of Cali… She was standing like a barrier between Greyson and Xavier, looking extremely uncomfortable. *Guess there’s no easy solution for those three—as usual.*

Everyone—except Cali and her mates—was paired off, but I wanted to shake things up a bit. “Okay, you beautiful couples, split up to form two groups!” I called. As Jay moved to join the group on the other side of the tent—the team I couldn’t help but notice Jacqueline was on—I reached out and grabbed his arm to pull him back. “Except you. You’re on my team.”

He smiled. “Not gonna abide by your own rules?”

I shrugged. “I have the microphone. I’m above the rules.”

His laugh warmed me from the inside out. “Okay, everyone, form two circles!” I quickly explained the rules, and then tossed my orange to Mrs. Smith. In the other circle, Violet grabbed an orange from the snack table and tossed to Tom.

“And… go!”

One thing became immediately clear: as a group, we were a hell of a lot better at fighting revenants than we were at playing this freaking orange game.

But we had fun. Laughter and squeals and cheers echoed through the night, and I watched Tom transfer the orange to Big Mac—which was one of the strangest sights I’d ever seen. Meanwhile, in my own circle, Kira passed the orange to Jay, who moved to pass it to me. The slight brush of his skin against my own sent a wave of heat washing over me.

*Maybe we can play something like this later. Alone.*

The thought of finding someplace private with Jay to work off the vampire heat was almost distracting enough to make me drop the orange, but I managed to pass it on to Cali, who—predictably—fumbled it before passing it on to Charlie.

The other circle was ahead of us, as Xavier got the orange to Artemis, who transferred it with amazing skill and reflexes to Greyson.

Cali caught my eye, and we shared a smile. “This was such a fun idea,” she said.

It was. But it was even more fun having my best friend back. I couldn’t believe we’d argued for so long. I glanced over at Jay, and he gave me a thumbs up.

I felt invincible, like I was on top of the world. We’d survived the fight against Letifer, Cali and I had made up, and despite all the odds stacked against us, things with Jay had never been better. Plus, I was totally killing it at this party host thing.

I turned to see how Charlie was doing as he handed the orange off to Jacs, whose heartbeat I could hear from across the tent.

*Why is Jacqueline’s heart racing?* My eyes widened. *Could she be interested in Charlie?*

Maybe I should have foreseen that, somehow? Jacqueline had made herself quite a reputation for being thirsty AF. I could have moved her next to Rishika.

Suddenly, the orange fell to the ground, and everyone groaned in disappointment. My eyes, though, were focused on something else: Jacqueline baring her fangs as she leaned in toward Charlie’s exposed neck.

**Episode 1915**

VIOLET

I gasped at the ever-shrinking space between Jacqueline’s mouth and Charlie’s throat, and my body tensed, instinctively ready to pounce on this threat to my mate.

*Um, what the actual hell?*

My eyes had already been on the pretty vampire girl throughout the night—I’d honestly felt a little self-conscious ever since I’d met Jacqueline and seen her undead perfection—but now her fangs were out, and she was clearly aiming for my mate!

*Sorry, Lola, but I’m not letting my mate get turned into this crazy vamp chick’s evening snack.*

I was about to lunge between them when a flash of orange caught my eye. I blinked, and then Jacqueline was standing still, the orange Charlie had thrown caught between her teeth. Realization hit me: she hadn’t been trying to sink her teeth into my mate—she was just catching the stupid orange.

It was a clever way to catch it, even if she looked like a showoff for doing it that way. *But how the hell did she move so fast?*

It wasn’t as if I was out of practice dealing with vampires, but still—I’d never even seen her coming. Was she going to keep playing the game like this? Should I say something? I definitely wasn’t comfortable with her flashing her fangs at my mate every time he passed the orange.

I looked over at Lola, who frowned at Jacqueline. “That’s not allowed!”

I let out a sigh of relief and turned back to my circle’s efforts to pass the orange. It really wasn’t cool of Lola to split up all the couples and then still be on the same team as Jay. At least I didn’t have to worry about the vampire girl making a move against my mate—outside of the game. If Jacqueline had actually been trying to bite Charlie, this party would have taken on a whole different vibe very quickly.

The game continued for a while, and I did my best to stay focused on my own circle. Still, I couldn’t help but look over at Charlie every now and then, though whether I was worried about Jacqueline because she was a vampire or because she was a drop-dead gorgeous girl, I honestly wasn’t sure.

In the end, Mrs. Smith’s team took the win, and the two groups dispersed. I wasted no time hurrying over to Charlie, who was still standing next to Jacqueline.

“Hey, Vi—”

I grabbed him by the collar and planted a big kiss on his lips. I felt Jacqueline’s eyes on us the whole time, and boy did I milk that for everything it was worth. Finally, I broke away from his lips.

My mate’s cheeks were pink, and he blinked at me slowly. “Um… good game?”

I grinned. “Better now.”

Jacqueline wandered off, probably disappointed that the orange was the only thing she’d be sinking her teeth into tonight. I glanced over to the periphery of the tent, where Marta was sipping a soda. She’d sat the game out, for understandable reasons.

*Maybe now that Kira’s back, she can help Marta.*

I grabbed Charlie’s hand and tugged him over to Marta. “Hey, Marta. Maybe you can join everyone for the next game? Whatever that one is?”

Lilac popped up next to the medium and put his arm on the back of her chair. It was a simple gesture, one he probably hadn’t done consciously, but it said a lot about the state of their relationship and their level of comfort with each other.

I glanced between the two of them, trying to read their body language. Marta had leaned back slightly when Lilac had shown up, like she was subtly trying to get her body closer to his. Another small gesture that didn’t quite scream “we’re mates!” but also wasn’t exactly the kind of behavior you’d normally see between two friends.

*Huh*.

I mind linked with Charlie.

*What do you think about Lilac and Marta?* I asked.

When I’d talked to Marta earlier, she’d clammed up when I’d asked about what was happening between her and Lilac. She’d gotten so flustered and had excused herself, it was pretty obvious that she had caught the feels. That made me smile. After everything both Marta and my brother had been through, they deserved some happiness.

The arm he’d thrown around my waist tightened. *What do you mean?*

The warm weight of his arm wrapped around me gave me pause. It was so nice to simply be held like this by my mate. To feel the rise and fall of his chest against mine, to not have to worry about being found out as werewolves, or having to hide how we felt about each other.

Talk about a much-needed change of pace.

*Do you think they’re in love?* I asked after a moment.

*I don’t know*, he replied. *That’s their business, isn’t it?*

I looked up at him, my brows knitting. “Is something wrong?” I asked, out loud but softly.

Charlie’s eyes darted over to Lilac and Marta, lingering for just a beat on my brother before his cheeks went red. “Um. Nothing. Just… trying to mind my own business, you know?”

I rolled my eyes and mind linked again. *But do you think they’re, like, going to be a couple or something?*

He shrugged. *Maybe… But can I talk to you for a second? Alone?*

*Um… Sure.* I nodded, both confused and intrigued by Charlie’s odd request. What could he possibly need to talk about that required more privacy than mind linking?

I glanced around. Either way, the party could last on its own for a few minutes. And hey, maybe I could sneak a few kisses into that “alone time” with my mate. The thought sent a tingle of longing down my spine.

Charlie took my hand and was leading me away from the tent when Lilac jumped into our path. “Where are you two going?”

His question was directed at Charlie.

“Um… We’re just, um…” my mate stammered.

I scowled at my brother. “Mind your own business, Lilac. Besides, shouldn’t you be with *Marta*?”

“*You* mind *your* own business!” he snapped before stomping away

I blinked, shocked. “Wow…” I turned to look at Charlie. “What was all that about?”

The redness in his cheeks darkened. “Well, uh, it probably has something to do with the fact that your brother thinks we’re having sex.”

My jaw dropped. “I beg your what?”

“He thinks—”

I held both hands up. “No, I heard you the first time! What I mean is, why would he think that?”

My mind was spinning with this information, almost too fast for me to keep up. I couldn’t understand how Lilac would jump to that conclusion, or why he’d care even if Charlie and I were sleeping together. It wasn’t like it was wrong, or anything. I mean, technically Lilac’s assumption was *incorrect* because… you know, Charlie and I weren’t having sex yet. But the bigger question was: why was Lilac even thinking about my sex life in the first place? Awkward. Beyond awkward.

Also, how did *Charlie* know what Lilac thought? My brother was bold, but he wasn’t *that* bold.

Charlie looked like he wanted the earth to swallow him whole. “It happened at the grocery store,” he blurted out.

“What happened?”

“Your brother caught me looking at condoms and… I may have alluded to my intent to use them with you.” He blushed even deeper now and grimaced. “And I may have said some other embarrassing stuff when he caught me because I didn’t know what else to do.”

My lips twitched. “Embarrassing how?”

He shook his head. “I don’t think I can survive living through that twice.”

I bit back a laugh. I had no idea why Lilac was giving Charlie such a hard time. We’d grown up in a werewolf pack, and wolves were pretty freewheeling when it came to things that were sexual in nature. Sex was just a part of life, something everyone did at one point or another, when they felt ready.

“It’s okay, Charlie.”

“Is it, though? I mean, I’m relatively new to the pack, and I don’t want to cause trouble or infighting. And this isn’t just some pack member we’re talking about here. Lilac’s your twin brother. This wasn’t exactly the first impression I wanted to make with him. I would hate for him to assume that I’m with you only for… that.”

I pretended to be confused. “That, what?”

“You know…” He looked around and then lowered his voice. “*Sex*.”

I couldn’t contain my grin. “I see.”

“I’m being serious, Violet. You and I are mates, and there’s so much more to our connection than just the physical side.”

My smile softened. God, he was just too wonderful sometimes. How did he always know the perfect string of words to make me absolutely swoon? “I know. I’ve felt that connection since that first time I saw you jogging by my car.”

“I’m glad.” He slipped his arms around my waist. His color seemed to be evening out. Maybe he was finally getting past the immense embarrassment. “Because I want you to know that I want our first time to be special.”

I leaned in and kissed him. When we came up for air, I whispered in his ear, “Then why don’t we make *tonight* special?”

**Episode 1916**

GREYSON

I kept my eyes on the rim of the glass as I poured champagne for my mother. My gaze was glued there primarily so I wouldn’t overpour, but also because it was a hell of a lot easier to watch the pale, bubbly liquid cascade into the champagne flute than it was to meet my mother’s eyes.

She was all smiles, of course. The picture of a joyful, blushing bride to be. My avoiding her gaze wasn’t out of fear of something bad happening, or because I wasn’t happy for her. Quite the opposite, really. I didn’t know how to look at my mother, how to meet her eyes, without being completely terrified by all the love and happiness she radiated. Love and happiness she wanted to share with me.

Her son.

I still couldn’t wrap my head around it, though I’d had plenty of time to do so. For so long, I’d thought my mother was dead. I’d looked to my father as proof that parents did nothing but screw their kids up, and if I’d thought about my mother at all, it had been to tack on that trauma of losing her, of never truly knowing her, to all the reasons why I was such a monumentally screwed up mess.

How many hours, days, and years had I spent wondering about the big fat question mark that was my own mother? Trying to imagine what she was like? Pretending not to miss having one, telling myself, “You can’t miss what you never had in the first place,” even as I felt some unfulfilled, dark place inside me ache with absence?

I’d longed for a mother for as long as I’d been aware of what it meant that I didn’t have one.

Well, now I did have one. And the jury was still out on whether or not Sabine could truly be considered a good mother—some part of me would always hold those omissions and mistakes against her. But I knew for certain that she was a good person*.*

And that was a hell of an improvement, compared to my father.

I knew I should’ve been overjoyed. That—especially now that I was free of Letifer and we no longer had to live in fear of the revenants—I should’ve been celebrating and making up for lost time with the woman who’d brought me into the world.

But everything was so goddamn awkward. The best I seemed able to do was play the role and grit my teeth through all the parts that made my skin crawl.

I was trying to be a good sport about it. I knew Cali would want me to, but god, it was harder to sit through “family pictures” than it had been to face down an army of revenants.

“Thank you, Greyson.” Sabine’s arms wrapped around me suddenly as she caught me in a side hug and kissed me on the cheek.

I tensed. And rather than registering it as a sign of affection, my brain immediately went into overdrive. Had she ever kissed me before?

I imagined myself as a baby—before she’d run for her life and hadn’t been able to take me with her and I’d been raised by Silas alone. Before she’d fled for her life, had she ever held or kissed me? Did we have any of those moments together?

I managed to pat her back and forced a smile. “I need to check on the patrols. I guess Alpha habits die hard.”

I walked away before she could reply and tracked down Rishika, who was slow dancing with Artemis. I hated to interrupt them, and not just because I knew the two of them could probably hand my ass to me if they wanted to. They certainly made a formidable couple—the battle-tested werewolf warrior and the scrappy Fae bounty hunter.

*I wonder what kind of parents they’d be...*

And then I kicked myself.

*Stop making everything about your mommy issues.*

Rishika met my eyes as I approached and stepped away from Artemis to meet me.

“I just wanted to check in on the patrols,” I said. “You don’t need to stop on my account.”

“Ravi’s up next, and he’s already been alerted.”

“Oh. Well, thank you for taking care of that,” I said.

Rishika shrugged. “As far as I’m concerned, you’re still the Alpha here.”

My eyes widened. Really? I’d kind of assumed Xavier had Rishika’s vote after he’d stepped up and led the pack against Letifer and the revenants.

“Thank you,” I said again, “but you might want to keep your thoughts about that to yourself. I don’t want to be the cause of any more infighting, and I’d prefer if you at least appeared to be neutral about this.”

She nodded. “I understand. I’ll let you know if any more werewolves from outside our pack are detected.”

Despite what I’d said, I wondered: if Rishika wanted me to be Alpha, who else did? There was no way I was going to bring up the co-Alpha thing Cali kept pushing for. Entertaining the idea was mostly for her sake—she was hard to say no to. But doing anything official regarding Alpha—even in a co-Alpha capacity—could be a bad idea. I didn’t know whether the dream I’d had was just that or a premonition of some sort…

Still, I could check for any intruders. That was a general pack duty. Not only something for an Alpha.

At least that’s what I’d tell myself.

After she returned to the dance floor, I took it upon myself to check the perimeter. It never hurt to have an extra set of eyes—plus it kept me busy enough that I didn’t have to play doting son to Sabine. Guilt tugged at my stomach at that last thought.

I knew she deserved better than that. I just wished I knew how to be the son she truly deserved.

I walked along the tree line before ducking into the forest. I doubted the Vanguard pack would be up to anything else tonight—if we were going to have trouble with them, I imagined it would happen down the line.

Shadows moved in the woods ahead of me, and I crouched lower and crept forward. Was I wrong about the Vanguard pack? Were they already doubling back? To what end?

I peered through the trees and nearly gasped when I saw Ravi—making out with Ava. Shock and confusion spilled into me, and I didn’t hesitate to break through the trees. “What’s going on here?”

“Ah!” Ravi jolted back, his eyes wide. He looked like a kid who’d just been caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

Ava, on the other hand, was cool as a cucumber. “Isn’t it obvious? I would’ve thought you’d know.”

I grabbed Ravi’s arm and pulled him aside. “Whatever the hell you think is going on here, you need to end it. Now. And you’d better hope Xavier doesn’t ever find out what you two were doing.”

Ava scoffed. “I can *hear* you.”

Ravi just hung his head in shame. “I know this is a lame excuse, but the truth is, I can’t help it.”

“You’re right. That *is* a stupid excuse, man. What the hell do you mean you ‘can’t help it’?”

“I wish I could explain it better, but haven’t you ever felt that way about your mate? Like no matter how hard you try to resist, you always get pulled back in?” Ravi eyed me hopefully.

He wasn’t wrong. That was exactly how I felt around Cali. These days, I was an enthusiastic participant in our bond, but as I thought back to all the times I’d tried to put some space between Cali and myself, I remembered how I’d never been able to resist her for long. And then my brain stuttered on the implication of Ravi’s question.

“Wait. Are you saying that Ava’s your *mate*?”

He grimaced. “I hope to hell she’s not, but that’s what it feels like. I think something happened between us when I gave her some of my blood. And now… we’re like this.”

I shook my head. “You need to resist her a little harder.”

Inwardly, I wasn’t sure the solution was so simple. How could Ravi have formed a bond with Ava through a blood transfer? Did that mean they were mates now? I’d never heard of this kind of thing.

I grimaced. Whatever it meant, it couldn’t be good news. Not with Ava involved.

“Focus on the patrol,” I reminded him, before heading back toward the pack house. I didn’t glance Ava’s way again.

When I got back to the tent, I looked around for Cali but couldn’t find her. My stomach tightened with dread. Was she with Xavier? I’d seen them dancing earlier, and that had been borderline painful to watch. If I hadn’t been cornered into taking pictures, I probably would have found an excuse to break them up.

I scanned the party and noticed Xavier was doing shots with Jay—and Cali was nowhere to be seen. I continued my search for her inside the house and caught sight of her just as she stepped into the pantry.

Suddenly, I was hit by a strange sense of déjà vu. It was like something was pushing me to go after her. I would have anyway, but this tug between us felt different now. It was almost like destiny was pulling the strings.

I slipped into the pantry behind Cali, who was clearly looking for something.

“Can I help you find something?”

She jumped. “Oh my god!” Her face split into a smile when she saw that I was standing behind her. “I think I can get it myself.” She reached up onto her tip-toes for a container of cheese puffs.

I couldn’t contain my smile. Despite her heels, she wasn’t quite tall enough. She grabbed for the tub but lost her balance and fell. I rushed in and caught the tub in one hand and my mate in the other.

Cali stared up at me, her cheeks a delicious shade of pink. “Thank you.”

I stuck my foot out and closed the pantry door. “I think you and I have some unfinished business, love.”

**Episode 1917**

For a guy that tall and broad shouldered, it was amazing that Greyson could be so stealthy. I was still coming down from my shock when he set the cheese puffs on a lower shelf and then, with his arms still locked around me, he gently pressed me against the shelf and kissed me.

My body instantly moved from *oh my god someone popped up behind me* shock and into *oh my god my sexy mate is kissing me in the pantry* hunger, and I wound my arms around his neck, kissing him back with just as much intensity as he was giving me.

Being with Greyson was always like this—intense and all-consuming, yet wrapped in the comfort of coming home. Even though we were making out in the pantry like a pair of horny teenagers, and a can of coffee grounds was digging into my back, the sense of belonging was so strong that I didn’t want to be anywhere else. Not when my fingertips could explore the muscled expanse of Greyson’s chest just beneath his shirt, or when the alternative was getting lost in the taste of him, the warm, sensual heat of his tongue sliding against mine, or the hot wash of his breath on my neck when we broke apart and he immediately kissed a hot ribbon down my throat.

His hands bracketed my waist, pinning me between the unyielding shelves and the hardness of his body pressing against mine. There was no denying length of him, urgent and firm as it pressed against my hip.

I nipped his lower lip, and he rolled his hips into mine on a groan. The sound went straight to my core.

Those broad, warm hands slid down my hips to hitch one of my legs around him. “Where has this skirt been?” he asked, gripping my thigh as I squirmed against him.

“I had it,” I breathed.

“Wear it more often,” he said, slipping his hand underneath the fabric. All that separated his hand from my skin was my tights, which were feeling way too restrictive now. “Or better yet, don’t wear anything at all.”

A soft moan left my lips as I parted them, waiting for him to kiss me again already. Reaching up, I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled his lips down to mine. I kissed him hard—I couldn’t get enough of him, my mate, the man who never failed to drive me crazy, to make me lose all my senses except how very hungry I was for him.

*We’re going to have sex in the pantry, and I don’t even care.* All I wanted was to feel him against me, inside me. It had been far too long.

My arms unwound from around his neck, and I reached for the hemline of his shirt, untucking it from his dress pants. My elbow knocked down a pile of cans in the process, but even the dissonant *clank* as they hit the ground wasn’t enough to stop us.

Just as my fingertips brushed against his bare abs, Greyson pulled back with a wet sound that made my thighs clench.

“Don’t stop,” I whined. “We’re not done here.”

He grinned down at me, not the least bit repentant. “Oh, I am nowhere near done with you yet, love. I’ve got all sorts of things planned. Just not in this tiny-ass pantry.”

My jaw dropped. Had he really worked me up for nothing? “But—”

He dropped a kiss against my lips. “Something for you to think about later.” Then he released my leg, grabbed the tub of cheese puffs, and handed it to me with a smirk before he left.

I was still trying to catch my breath. Trying to get my blood to migrate from between my legs and back up to my brain.

*What just happened?*

I stood there in the pantry, still as a statue, for a long string of seconds. Even though Greyson was long gone, I could still feel the burn of his hands all over me. Could still feel the heat of his lip against mine, the pleasure-pained edge of his teeth against the soft skin of my neck.

He’d gotten me all worked up—only to leave me high and dry?

Well, figuratively speaking. My body ached with unfulfilled desire, and that twisted up my emotions. I didn’t know whether I was relieved he’d stopped things before we became the type of people who screwed in a shared pantry during a party, or if I was just pissed off that he’d worked me up without any intention of seeing it through.

Then again, those things weren’t mutually exclusive.

I took a deep breath, then tried to smooth my hair. I didn’t want anyone to get suspicious about why I’d gone in search of cheese puffs ten minutes ago and come back looking like I’d just been fucked six ways to Sunday.

Oh, Greyson was going to get it.

Once I was decent, I peeked out of the pantry, the cheese puff tub tucked under my arm, half-expecting Greyson to be standing in the kitchen waiting to tease me some more. But he was gone. I was alone, and more than a little disappointed about it.

After returning all the food we’d knocked onto the floor to its rightful place, I set the cheese puffs on the counter, in case anyone came looking for them, and ducked into the bathroom. When I saw my reflection in the mirror, I let out a gasp.

Despite my best efforts to smooth my hair, it was still a mess. How the heck had I managed to get a terrific case of sex hair when I hadn’t even done the deed? On top of that, my cheeks were bright pink, and my lips were so swollen there was no question what I’d been up to. I smelled like thyme and cinnamon, and the scent made me cross my legs together.

I squeezed my eyes shut as a wave of unresolved pleasure coursed through me. My body knew what could’ve come next, maybe if the pantry had had a lock on it. I grabbed onto the counter to steady myself.

“Fuck,” I whispered to myself.

Opening my eyes, I adjusted my hair and tried to smooth out the new wrinkles in my skirt and top. I had to get it together and look presentable again. And hurry up.

*But thank god I didn’t just go straight back to the party. Lola would’ve known. Xavier would’ve known. Everyone would’ve known.*

And while I hadn’t necessarily done anything wrong by making out with Greyson, it was still kind of tacky to bail on Mrs. Smith and Big Mac’s engagement party to go hook up with Greyson in the pantry.

Which was exactly why I needed to pull myself together before heading back outside. I ran some cold water onto my hand and patted it on my cheeks. Suddenly a turtleneck seemed like a truly terrible idea.

I smoothed the last of my tangles away with a sigh. How the hell had one moment done all that?

I knew the answer: Greyson. There didn’t seem to be a limit to his ability to make me come absolutely undone—for better or worse. At least he seemed to be feeling better now, and Xavier too.

I snorted. *Yeah, the break from life-threatening monsters is clearly benefiting everyone.*

But even that Andrei guy showing up hadn’t been without its perks. Now Xavier and Greyson had agreed to work together—something I wouldn’t have thought possible only days ago.

I took one last, long deep breath and headed back to the party. Hopefully the others hadn’t noticed how long I’d been gone.

I made it halfway out the door before I realized I’d forgotten the cheese puffs. Torin had been so excited about their mere existence, so of course I’d offered to grab them out of the pantry for him. Torin was going through the darkest time of his life, and there was nothing I wouldn’t do to cheer him up. Grabbing a tub of cheese puffs seemed like a no-brainer.

I rushed back to the kitchen, grabbed the tub off the counter, and hurried back out the way I’d come—until I ran smack into Lola.

“Oh, there you are.” She grinned, looking me up and down. “What have you been up to?”

“Umm… cheese puffs! Torin wanted… He asked for some cheese puffs.” I shoved the tub at her as proof. “He loves them! Who doesn’t love them? Have you had them? That’s why I got them—so everyone can enjoy the crispy, cheesy goodness!”

Lola’s brows rose, and I noticed her gaze lingering on my still slightly mussed hair. “*Okay*, you got the cheese puffs. Noted.” She brushed past me and reached into the pantry for a bag of chips. “You’re acting like—”

She stopped, and her eyes went wide. “Wait, oh my god. Did you just hook up? In the *kitchen*?”

My face heated. “Of course not! What kind of girl do you think I am?” I wasn’t the kind who hooked up in the kitchen; I was the kind who hit first base in the pantry.

“The kind whose libido runs wild around her mates and gets her into trouble. Believe me, I’m not judging.”

“Well, that’s—it’s—you’re wrong,” I spluttered.

She shook her head. “Don’t you lie to me, Caliana Hart.”

I glanced around to make sure nobody else was nearby, especially Xavier. I knew he was okay with me being with Greyson, technically. It was all part of the *due destini* curse for them to share me, but that didn’t mean I wanted to rub it in his face.

“Okay, fine,” I conceded. “Greyson and I made out in the pantry a little bit.”

She raised an eyebrow. “It looks like more than a little.”

I was about to object when a thunderous howl ripped through the night. Both of us jumped and turned where we’d heard the howl. I reached for Lola’s hand, and she squeezed mine tightly.

“What *was* that?” I asked. “Is it the Vanguard pack?”

**Episode 1918**

MARTA

I jumped up out of my seat, my mouth bone dry with fear as I squinted into the darkness of the woods. *Are we being attacked?* The entire pack bolted in the direction of the howl as Lilac came up and tapped me on the arm.

“Come with me,” he said, smiling wide.

I dug in my heels, resisting his pull. “No thanks! I’ve had enough deadly encounters to last me a lifetime.” I looked down at his hand, which lingered on my shoulder. “And how many times do I have to remind you not to touch me?” I yanked away from him, images of him wilting and dying like the lettuce flashing before my eyes.

“First of all, we’ve already seen that your touch doesn’t affect me.” Lilac seemed so sure, and I didn’t know why. There was no way he could know more about this weird death-touch than I could, so how was he so certain that simply touching my skin wouldn’t turn him into a life-sized prune? “So no worries there, and there’s no need to be frightened. The wolf isn’t going to attack anyone—he’s my wolf.”

“Your wolf?” I didn’t understand what he was talking about. *His wolf?* “What, did you get a pet wolf while I wasn’t looking?”

Did werewolves make a habit of taking wolves as pets? That seemed wrong for some reason.

Lilac laughed. “No. I’m a werewolf—”

“Whaaaat? No way!”

“Stop it, Marta!” Lilac said with faux exasperation. “What I’m trying to say is that when I came back from the spirit world, my wolf didn’t come back *with* me. It’s like we got… untethered,” he said with a wistful smile that held a hint of sentimentality for our own untethering. “But come on. I want you to see my wolf.”

I hesitated, feeling a little sad and guilty all of a sudden. *Is this yet another consequence of me bringing Lilac back? Am I responsible for detaching him from his wolf?* I wasn’t sure, but true to form, Lilac was taking it in stride and looking on the bright side.

“Quit stalling, Marta. I promise, everything will be fine. We have to see my wolf before he runs away—he’s a little shy.”

Lilac reached out for me, but I shrank out of his grasp.

“I’m serious, Lilac, you shouldn’t touch me.”

“Oh, yeah, it’s like I can’t help myself,” Lilac said with an eyebrow wiggle.

I sighed and followed him to where the others had gathered in a semi-circle, staring at a wolf that was lingering at the edge of the woods.

The closer we got to the wolf, the more nervous I became. “So, does your wolf have a name?”

Lilac arched an eyebrow. “Uh… Lilac, like me. He *is* me. Well, sort of.”

“That’s confusing. Can’t we give him a nickname or something?”

Lilac shrugged. “Well, I used to talk to my wolf all the time when I was little—I called him Plum.”

I glanced at the large, fierce wolf. *Plum?*

Lilac went over and knelt beside the wolf, greeting it. I hung back, not wanting to rush into a situation when I might get touched, or touch someone. This whole “avoiding making contact with people” thing was fast becoming a nuisance, but I didn’t want to hurt anyone. I couldn’t get that image of all that destroyed produce out of my head.

“Come on, Marta, don’t be scared. Plum can’t wait to meet you.”

Everyone’s eyes were on me as I slowly made my way toward Lilac and Plum. I was taking my sweet time getting to them, but Lilac didn’t seem to mind. He beamed at me, pride dripping from his pores as he ran his hands briskly back and forth over Plum’s back. All I could think was that there was no way I was going to touch Plum, even with these gloves on. I didn’t know what I would do if I somehow harmed Lilac’s wolf.

Lilac and Plum nuzzled each other, and witnessing the love between them really warmed my heart. Lilac was so caring and sensitive; I’d always liked that about him. He was unlike anyone I’d ever met, and I cared so much about him—which made me even more nervous about the prospect of hurting him in some way. Finally, I couldn’t stall any longer, and I found myself standing right in front of Plum. Up close, Plum appeared even bigger and more ferocious—yet Lilac was so at ease with him. It was clear that they belonged together. I wondered if there might be a way to reunite them.

“So glad you could finally join us,” Lilac said with a lopsided grin. “I want you to pet Plum right here,” he said, motioning to an area near the scruff of the wolf’s neck. “He’ll be an instant fan if you do that.”

“Are you sure? Maybe I shouldn’t—”

“Marta, I promise it’s going to be fine. You won’t hurt my wolf. Or me.”

Lilac seemed so confident, so sure, and he wanted to share this with me. I knew, despite my hesitancy, that if I turned away now I’d be hurting Lilac no matter how I tried to avoid it. Making sure that my gloves were on tight, I reached a shaky hand toward Plum. Plum fixed his eyes on me, and I easily recognized Lilac in his stare. How could I not have seen it before? Plum sniffed and nuzzled my hand.

It was wild that when Lilac came back through the portal, it also brought back his wolf—separate, but still—and that he was solid, too. *Wait, so does this count as me bringing back* two *lives, not just one?* I shook off the thought. I did not need more problems.

Lilac beamed even wider. “We like you.”

“Are you sure that I should pet him?” I was holding my hand a few inches from Plum’s back, still afraid to take the chance. What if I touched him and his hair started falling out and he turned as brown and dried out as those veggies?

Lilac rolled his eyes and laughed. “Um, of course I’m sure. I told you, everything will be fine.”

Holding my breath, I stroked the wolf’s thick fur, jumping back when Plum let out a low growl. “Whoa,” I breathed as I backed into the vampire girl, Jacqueline.

“I want to pet it!” Jacqueline said, pushing past me without missing a beat.

Plum bared his canines and snarled savagely. He wasn’t Jacqueline’s biggest fan, I guessed. I wondered if that was the case with all vampires, or if Plum just didn’t like Jacqueline in particular.

“It’s okay, Plum,” Lilac said, pulling Plum’s huge head into his chest and patting him reassuringly.

Jacqueline, oblivious, stroked Plum’s neck, her eyes shining with excitement. “He’s so… big! Does he like treats?”

Plum growled again, and somehow this one was even more menacing than the first.

Finally getting the message, Jacqueline reared back. “See what happens when I try to be nice?” She turned up her nose and walked away.

“See, Plum doesn’t like just *anybody*.” Lilac grinned at Plum, and the large wolf whimpered happily and nuzzled Lilac’s neck. “Marta, do you think it would be okay if I went for a run with Plum? Maybe when I get back, you can help me find a comfortable place for him to spend the night.”

I nodded slowly, still amazed by it all. It had been so strange to see Lilac’s eyes looking back at me from Plum’s face like that. It was almost a little creepy. I waved as Lilac and Plum took off into the woods, then turned at the sound of Xavier’s voice rising up behind me.

“Where are you going?”

“Not too far,” Lilac called back. “Just going for a little romp in the woods.”

I watched until they both disappeared into the forest and then turned back to the party, feeling a little disappointed. Lilac had been by my side for so long that it was strange not to have him here with me right now. I always felt better when Lilac was by my side. I guess I’d gotten used to being tethered to him—so much so that him leaving me felt unnatural. Uncomfortable.

Big Mac came over with a drink in her hand. I could tell that she was doing her best to relax, but something about her still seemed a tad out of place in the festive, lively surroundings. “Hey, how you doing, Marta? Must be a little jarring to see Lilac with his wolf.”

“What—you mean Plum?”

Big Mac scowled as if she’d tasted something bitter. “What kind of a name is that?”

I shrugged. “That’s what Lilac calls him.”

“Noted. So, how are you?”

“Well…” I began, deciding how much I wanted to reveal to Big Mac. This was her party after all, and I didn’t want to kill her vibe with my problems. “If I’m being honest, I feel a little off-balance.”

I had no idea how I’d expected Big Mac to react to that statement, but her expression barely changed.

“I’m not surprised,” she said, taking a thoughtful sip of her drink. “I think that since Letifer, everyone is feeling a little off-balance.” Big Mac turned to consider the enormous table of food a few feet away. “Have you eaten anything?”

“No, I haven’t.” There’d been so much going on and I’d been so preoccupied with my hands that I hadn’t even thought about eating—or maybe I was blocking out everything associated with food after that traumatic experience at the grocery store.

“Well eat, eat! Sabine would never forgive me if I didn’t see to it that you were taken care of.” Big Mac turned to head for the table but stopped when she caught sight of the gloves on my hands.

“Why do you have those on? The heat lamps not doing the job? It’s not even that cold tonight, actually…”

“No—they’re not for the cold,” I said quickly. “I just have… poor circulation.”

*Okay, so that was an awful excuse and a dumb one, to boot. But I suppose there are worse things to be than a bad liar.*

Big Mac gave me her patented skeptical look. “Don’t lie to me, Marta. Why are you wearing those gloves?”

**Episode 1919**

XAVIER

Lilac and his wolf bounded off into the woods, and soon after Rishika appeared at my side with a worried look on her face.

“Do you think we should stop him from running around out in the woods?” she asked.

Despite the bit of awkwardness between us with the whole Alpha fiasco, I really valued her as part of the pack for this very reason—she was always in tune with the needs of the pack above all else.

“Good question. I’m not too crazy about him running around either, but there are patrols out there, and I’m pretty sure that Lilac’s wolf wouldn’t let anything happen to him—just make sure everyone knows that they’re out there.” I gazed out at the woods, the smallest shred of unease settling in my stomach.

“Will do,” Rishika said, though she didn’t look quite convinced.

“One thing I don’t get—why are Lilac and his wolf separate physical beings? I’ve never seen that before.”

Lilac didn’t seem all that fazed, but it was definitely a shocking sight. If Lilac’s wolf could be pulled away from him, could that same thing happen to any of us?

“I’ve never seen anything like it either,” Rishika said. “But then again, have we ever seen someone pulled back from the spirit world like that?”

“Good point,” I said distractedly. Ava came to mind, but I didn’t mention that. Ava’s situation had been different, and unfortunately, she’d come back as one with her wolf. Somehow, I felt like it would have been easier to get rid of her if she’d come back without it, like Lilac had.

“I guess I’ll head over to let the patrols know to keep an eye on Lilac and his wolf,” Rishika said, heading off.

Since we had that Vanguard asshole wagging his tail around, I knew there was at least a little risk in letting Lilac run around out there unprotected. I thought back to how it had felt when I’d lost my wolf after killing Ava. I’d felt unmoored. Hollow. I’d hate for Lilac to suffer like that. But Lilac was all right, and I was happy to have him back in the world of the living—and even happier that he had Violet and Marta to help him through all this craziness. He’d been through a lot, and this latest bit of strangeness had to be taking a toll on him, though Lilac wasn’t the type to get down about things. I glanced over at Ava. *Would she be different if she’d had someone to look out for her after she returned?* I scoffed.

“Not my problem,” I muttered.

I headed back to the tent, combing the mass of partygoers for a glimpse of Cali. I was feeling a little… frustrated. Lola interrupting our kiss to get us to play that stupid orange game had been annoying and badly timed. I’d been looking forward to having Cali in my arms all night, and I didn’t appreciate our time together being cut short.

*Where are you, Cali?* *Maybe we can pick up where we left off?*

I spotted her fairly quickly. She was talking to Artemis, who locked eyes with me as I made my way toward them.

“I’ll give you two some privacy,” Artemis said, excusing herself.

I grazed my fingers lightly on the small of Cali’s back and came around to face her. She looked absolutely beautiful tonight. There hadn’t been much to celebrate lately, so it was rare for me to see Cali relaxed and dressed to the nines like she was tonight. I bit my lip as an image of her skirt and sweater strewn across my bedroom floor floated through my brain.

“You okay?” I asked.

“Of course I am. Why wouldn’t I be?” She took a quick look around before loosely grasping my hand—she was probably checking to see where Greyson was, but I let it slide. What else could I do? Confront her about it?

I laughed. “Oh, I noticed how scared you looked when Lilac’s wolf made a surprise appearance.” I took a look around myself and didn’t see Greyson anywhere. Sometimes I forgot how nice it was to be near to her without Greyson champing at the bit, trying to steal her away or otherwise win her attention.

Cali cocked her head. “That was strange, right? I didn’t even know that wolves could dissociate like that.”

I nodded. “Rishika and I were just talking about that. I’ve never seen anything like it before, either. We think that it has to have something to do with Lilac coming back from the spirit world. I mean… who knows what goes on over there? I guess the rules change when you come back from the other side.”

“That makes sense,” Cali said, something else obviously on the tip of her tongue. “Well, to tell you the truth, I *am* a little worried about the Vanguard pack. That Andrei guy was a little unsettling.” Cali shivered a little.

I clenched my jaw, angry that he’d managed to get under Cali’s skin, but I did my best to hide my irritation from Cali. She didn’t need my anger adding to her stress.

“Fuck that guy,” I said as nonchalantly as I could. “I don’t want you to worry about that. I don’t think there’ll be much trouble, at least not in the near future. Even if the Vanguard wolves do try to start something, trust that I’ll make sure they understand what they’re up against. We’re the Redwood pack. We defeated Letifer.” *And I was the Alpha who made that happen.* “Who would want to mess with us after all we’ve been through?” I lifted Cali’s chin and gazed deep into her eyes, warmth spreading through me from head to toe. “I’m back now, and I’ll make sure that you’re safe.”

“I know,” Cali said, smiling and looking up at me in that way that made my heart melt. Even after all this time, Cali could still make me lose my breath just by looking at me. No one had ever captivated me like she could.

I flashed a sly grin. “I’d like to keep making sure that you’re safe.” I pulled her closer.

“What do you mean?”

“Would you like to spend the night with me?” Even saying the words sent a bolt of expectation through me. Just to have her all to myself, alone…

“To sleep?”

“I’m not making any promises.” I leaned in close so that I could inhale her scent. She smelled like expensive perfume—a light, floral fragrance that I couldn’t remember her wearing before. Maybe it was something she only put on for special occasions. She was driving me crazier by the second. I was truly impressed by my own self-control, given all I wanted to do was steal her away. Last night, I’d kept my word and we’d just slept, even though I’d wanted her, and I was pretty sure that she’d wanted me too. It had reminded me of when we were first getting to know each other. Back then, she’d tempted me, and I’d gotten a kick out of teasing her. I couldn’t remember if I’d ever thanked Colton for bringing Cali into my life—I’d have to do that next time I spoke with him.

Cali’s cheeks reddened, and she looked a little flustered. “Can I think about it?”

“Of course—you know I don’t want to pressure you. But I can’t stop thinking about that kiss.” I stepped even closer to her. “I feel like we were robbed.” I laughed as a smile spread across her beautiful face. “Tell you what—you have until the stroke of midnight to decide.” I leaned in and planted a kiss on her forehead, letting it linger.

There was a flurry of commotion, and we turned to see Lilac and his wolf emerge from the tree line. Lilac was panting and, of course, the wolf was not.

Cali excused herself and hurried off to help Tom, who was struggling to carry a tray of drinks. She glanced back at me once as she went, and our heated gazes connected, sending a flurry of hope through my body. I wanted her so badly I could taste it.

“Hey, Xavier?” I turned to see Lilac approaching. He sounded a little nervous. “Can we talk, in private?”

“Sure. I’m a little surprised that you’re back so soon. How was the run?”

“It was good—fun. I just wanted to spend a little time with my wolf… But while I was running, I started thinking, and… I need some advice.”

*Oh no, what’s wrong now?*

I followed Lilac to a spot a little ways away from the activity of the party. “Well, what’s up?”

Lilac shifted uncomfortably, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck. He was having trouble making eye contact. “It’s about Marta. She’s—She’s, um…”

I didn’t know what it was that he was having such a hard time saying, but it was clear that he was embarrassed. A bead of sweat lingered on his brow, and I knew that it wasn’t from his run. “What, is something wrong with Marta?”

Lilac shook his head and looked around nervously. “Can I talk to you about… sex?”

**Episode 1920**

GREYSON

My little romp with Cali in the pantry still had me on cloud nine. My pulse quickened as I recalled the sight of her flushed cheeks and mussed hair. Her body had been so soft and warm under my touch, and I could even still feel the press of her lips on mine—her soft, sweet lips… I was feeling pretty confident about our future when I spotted her talking to Xavier. Talk about a buzzkill. They were standing so close… Too close for my liking, but there was no use getting worked up every time I saw them together. I had to accept that this was how it was going to be.

But despite my efforts to make myself okay about it all, I gritted my teeth as I watched Xavier kiss her forehead.

*Well, I got much more than a peck*, I thought to myself, feeling a bit of smug satisfaction as my mind wandered yet again to our heated exchange in the pantry. If I was lucky, I’d have a chance for more later tonight, and if I got that opportunity, I would savor every single moment. I sighed. A drink sounded good right about now, and it would be the perfect distraction from rushing over to pull her away from Xavier.

I was making my way over to the bar when Artemis intercepted me, offering me a glass of something.

“This is for you,” she said.

I was surprised by the gesture. I took the glass from her, sniffing it. “What is this? Some Fae concoction?”

Artemis grinned and shook her head. “No. It’s whiskey.” Artemis looked happier than I’d ever seen her. Her cheeks were flushed, and she was breathing hard like she’d just finished dancing.

I laughed and took a sip, appreciating the way the whiskey burned its way down my throat. “Thanks, I needed this.”

“You’re welcome. I thought that we could have one together, like we did at the place you took me in Portland? Right after we left the Fae world?”

“Wow, yes, I remember that. It seems like a lifetime ago, now.”

Artemis was still the fierce Fae that she’d been back then, but now there was a happiness in her eyes that hadn’t been there before. I knew that Cali had to be ecstatic about how content Artemis was, now that the trouble was over.

Artemis chuckled. “Tell me about it.”

“So, how are you feeling overall? Better, I hope?”

Artemis nodded and took a sip from her glass, thoughtfully swirling the liquid around in her mouth. “Much. I’m the only one in my head now. And you?”

“I feel like myself again.” It wasn’t lost on me that Artemis was the only person who understood what it was like to have Letifer banging around inside my head—and she’d had to deal with it for much longer than I had. “Hopefully, there are better times ahead.”

We clinked our glasses and took a long drink. I excused myself when I caught sight of Ava emerging from the house.

“Hey, Greyson,” Ava said tentatively, her gaze narrowed as if she expected me to throw her out right then and there. She wasn’t too far off base.

“I have to admit, I’m surprised that you’re still here.” I couldn’t imagine living in a place where almost everyone wanted me gone. Ava definitely had a lot of nerve.

Ava sighed warily and crossed her arms over her chest, giving her long dark hair a flip. “Is that a problem?”

I shrugged. “It might be. Hard as I try, I can’t stop thinking about how you tricked me into thinking that you were Cali. I hate myself for that—I should have known right away.”

Although it hadn’t been my fault, I still didn’t like that Ava had made me do something that could be seen as a betrayal of Cali.

Ava sucked her teeth and turned on her heels to walk away, but I stopped her.

“You can’t take a hint, can you?” Ava glared at my hand where it rested on her shoulder. “Ava, I want you to leave the pack. The sooner the better.”

“Oh yeah? And why should I take orders from you? You’re not the Alpha, are you?” She gave a small laugh, like she’d gotten the upper hand.

I couldn’t help the growl that slipped out of my mouth. I knew that she was trying to get to me—that was the type of person she was, needling and prodding and picking all the time, and she was good at it. I knew how Xavier felt about her, and though there were so many things between my brother and me that would never be settled, I didn’t like that Ava, who had caused Xavier so much heartache, was continuing to stir up painful memories just by being here.

“That’s exactly why I want you to go,” I said. “You’re not good for the pack. You’re always trying to stir things up—particularly between me and Xavier.”

Ava threw her head back and laughed. “Are you kidding? I don’t have to stir the pot. You two seem to do a good job of making a mess of it all by yourselves. You know what? I have a suggestion. Why don’t *you* leave? Think about it, you could go and take Cali with you and not be bothered with the pack and all the trouble that comes with it.”

I opened my mouth to give a biting reply, but I couldn’t ignore the truth behind her words. The offer from the witches, the visions… A life with Cali, just the two of us. Away from all of this.

I squeezed Ava’s shoulder, not too hard, but hard enough to let her know that I meant business. “I’m not going to give you a hard deadline, but I would’ve thought that you were smart enough to know when your time is up. And that time is now.”

Ava smirked and looked down at my hand again. “You gonna hold me all night, Greyson?” She shot a look over at Cali. “Your mate might get jealous.”

“Don’t you talk about my mate,” I said, releasing her with a shove.

Ava rolled her eyes and sauntered away. I stood there, watching her for a moment, a mix of emotions—all of them negative—swirling around in my stomach. It was a shame that Ava was so much trouble. She could have been a great asset for the pack—any pack, really. *Too bad.* I turned my attention to Cali, where she stood talking to her parents. I wanted to go to her and follow up on what I’d told her in the pantry, the unfulfilled promise of things to come. I wanted to make good on that. *No time like the present.*

Tom and Orla both looked up at me and smiled as I approached. “Thanks again, Greyson, for your help earlier. I know I was being a little… crazy,” Tom said.

“Oh, stop—it was nothing, Tom. Happy to help.”

It definitely didn’t hurt to have Cali’s father on my side.I was happy that I’d been around to help Tom, though I’d felt a bit of regret when I’d heard about Xavier and Kira taking care of the witch mark at the lake house. That was certainly a job for the Alpha, and I was more than a little annoyed that I hadn’t known about it. It made sense, though, that Kira would go to Xavier. They were closer, and she trusted him more. But because they’d been off handling that, I’d been able to be by Tom’s side while he went through the effects of becoming a werewolf. There *were* certain advantages to having Xavier tied up with taking care of pack business.

“Orla. The party—everything—it’s beautiful,” I said as I took a sip of my whiskey, happy that we could all take a moment to relax and cut loose a little—and in gorgeous surroundings like this. I had no idea how Orla, Tom, and Torin had managed to put it all together so fast, even though I’d been roped into helping with some of the preparations.

“Oh, thank you, Greyson. It was my pleasure to do it. I even think Big Mac is enjoying herself,” Orla said. We all turned to look at Big Mac, who looked like she’d rather be anywhere else as Violet talked to her animatedly about something. “Well, as much as Big Mac enjoys anything,” Orla added. We shared a laugh.

“Tom, how are you feeling at the moment?” I asked.

“I don’t completely feel like myself, but I expect that’s normal—like you said.”

“Yup, soon the worst of the symptoms will be over and you’ll be able to adjust to your new normal.”

Tom nodded, and we clinked our glasses. Even though I enjoyed talking with Cali’s parents, all I could think about was Cali. *How am I going to get her alone?* And then the opportunity presented itself.

Torin came running up to us, his eyes wide. He looked like he was about to collapse in anxiety. “Kitchen disaster!”

“Oh no!” Tom and Orla said in unison. Without another word, they followed Torin back inside.

Seizing my moment, I leaned in close to Cali, whispering in her ear, “I can’t stop thinking about earlier. It’s driving me crazy, and I want more. Tell me you’ll spend the night with me.”

**Episode 1921**

Greyson’s hot breath tickled my ear, making my cheeks burn and my heartbeat quicken. His closeness was enough to make my knees feel like jelly, and heat spiked in my belly as a flash of memory invaded my mind, taking me back to the pantry. I could almost taste Greyson’s lips on mine again, and my stomach tightened as I remembered the way his tongue had twisted into my mouth with an urgency that mirrored what he *really* wanted to do to me with his tongue. He’d pressed his taut, warm body tightly against mine while his hands had traveled all over, snaking over my ass and diving between my legs. He’d shown impressive restraint as his fingers had danced across the hot, damp fabric of my panties while bags of food shook off of the shelves and rained down around us.

We’d made so much noise, made such a mess, and I hadn’t cared one bit. It had taken every ounce of self-control I had not to let him take me right there in the pantry. One thing was for sure, I would never look at cheese puffs the same way again.

Greyson laced his fingers through mine, sending waves of heat coursing through me and snapping me back to the present. The pull between us was undeniable. *This damn* due destini*!* It was making tonight so difficult! Once again, I was torn between the men I loved—two headstrong brothers who never took a break from being at each other’s throats, and who were constantly trying to claim my time.

“So, what do you say? Will you stay with me tonight?” Greyson tugged me closer, and I pressed my hands flat against his chest, getting lost for a moment in how firm his pecs felt against my fingertips.

I looked into his eyes, struggling to speak. I was so caught up in the moment, caught up in Greyson, caught up in memories of the heated moments we’d shared, even before the pantry had added an interesting backdrop to our intense make-out session. I couldn’t say yes to him, but I also couldn’t say no. I needed to focus, and having him so near was making that damn hard to do. It was annoying how much control they had over me, how easily all reason flew out of my brain whenever I was close to either one of my mates.

I took a deep breath and pushed Greyson away as gently as I could manage. “I need some air.”

“Of course,” Greyson said, stepping back and holding up his hands like he was confirming his innocence, but there was no mistaking the fire burning in his eyes.

“Will you co-lead with Xavier?” I asked suddenly, needing to cut the tension and shift Greyson’s focus to something, anything, other than me. If he kept looking at me the way he was right now, I was going to give in, and that would cause more problems than I was prepared to deal with today. Xavier’s request that I stay with him tonight echoed through my brain, driving home the stakes that were at play.

Greyson fixed his gaze on mine. “I’ll think about it. Now, are you going to answer me? Will you spend the night with me?”

I paused and smiled at him. “I’ll think about it.”

Greyson squeezed my fingers gently before leaning in close once more. “That’s all I need to hear,” he whispered, making sure his lips brushed against me as he spoke.

Again, the heat of his breath tickling my skin sent a shock of electricity racing through me. I leaned into him, and he lingered for a few moments before walking away. I watched him, working overtime to steady myself. Maybe it was the alcohol, or maybe it was just Greyson, but I was feeling unsteady on my feet. I let out a breath as Lola approached, holding up two frosty glasses.

“I think you need this. You look like you just saw a ghost.” Lola’s eyes followed my gaze and landed on Greyson. “Oh… One of your mates. Worse than a ghost. You definitely need this, then,” she said, pressing a drink into my hand. “What happened?”

I tore my eyes away from Greyson and focused on Lola. “I’m not really sure…” My encounter with my mate was still swirling through my mind, and my cheeks were probably still flushed red. “I told Greyson that I’d think about sleeping with him tonight.”

What was I thinking? Had I really just double-booked myself with my mates?

“Yeah, and? Wouldn’t be the first time,” Lola said with an exaggerated wink.

I tossed my drink back without even asking what it was, grimacing as it burned its way down my throat but appreciating the warm feeling that spread through me as the alcohol did its job. “Well, the problem is that I told Xavier the same thing a short time ago. What am I gonna do, Lola? I’m so tired of this!”

“I don’t know what you’re going to do, but a threesome is out of the question, so you’d better decide.” Lola waved at Jay. “I wish I could relate, but I know who I’m sleeping with tonight.” Jay waved back, and they shared a heated stare that was full of so much suggestion that just witnessing it felt awkward. “Don’t worry, girl. Maybe nothing will come of it.”

I could already tell that Lola’s mind was elsewhere, and without another word, she dashed off to join Jay. I stared after her, happy that she had Jay, but also feeling a little jealous that things were so simple for her. Meanwhile, I was caught between two men who pretty much hated each other and vied for my time like it was their full-time job.

I was busy debating what I should do when Artemis appeared at my side.

“Isn’t it so great that Rishika helped pull all of this off tonight?” she said, gazing lovingly at the woman where she stood grazing at the finger food table a few feet away.

Glad for the distraction, I turned my full attention on my sister, noting how happy and bright she looked. “Yeah—she did a good job. You two are so lucky to have found each other. It’s so great to have a night like this after… everything. If she helped do all this for Big Mac and Mrs. Smith, just imagine the lengths that Rishika would go to for you!” I joked.

Artemis blushed and ducked her head. “Yeah, I’m pretty lucky. Oh, by the way, were you still interested in training with us? Even though the battle with Letifer is over, you can never be too prepared.”

I hadn’t really thought about it, and tonight training to fight was the furthest thing from my mind, but Artemis had a point. “Yes, I am. I think I might finally have the time and attention to devote to it—so I’d be fully immersed.”

“Great!” Artemis said, jumping up and down as we hugged. “A warning—this won’t be a walk in the park, I hope you know. Rishika and I put together a serious training program, and we’re hoping all the other pack members might join in.” Artemis paused. “We’re not sure about Torin, though. He’s more at home in the kitchen than the battlefield.”

“That’s for sure,” I agreed, and we both laughed.

Sage and Zainab came over to join us.

“Just wanted to let you know that we completed several sweeps of the perimeter and didn’t run into any trouble. There’s no one out there,” Sage said to Artemis.

“Thanks. That’s great news. I’ll let Rishika know.”

It made me happy to see how quickly Artemis was getting back into the swing of things, having quickly restored the pack’s respect and trust in her—even after Letifer had possessed her. That had been such a dark and difficult time for all of us, and I was proud that we’d all been able to recover so quickly—a sign that we were loyal to each other and wouldn’t let anyone tear us apart.

Artemis was about to go relay the message to Rishika when Torin emerged from the house carrying a tray of food.

“The affogatos are ready!” he sang, all but bouncing down the steps with the platter displayed proudly in his hands. My parents were right on his heels, and it looked like they were arguing.

Artemis and I exchanged a look.

*What’s wrong now? Things were going so well…*

Artemis and I headed over to them as mom planted her hands on her hips. “Your father is being ridiculous.”

“If ridiculous means being practical and realistic, I’m guilty.”

“You know that’s not what being ridiculous means, Tom! Really!”

Seeing them argue like this reminded me of their fight over my mom not telling my dad about Kadmos. I remembered how scary that time had been. I’d really thought that their marriage was in serious jeopardy. It was always strange seeing them argue, since it was such a rare occurrence. Whatever was going on between them right now, I was sure that it didn’t hold a candle to their Kadmos fight.

“What’s wrong, Mom?” I asked, ready to mediate some petty disagreement over how to prepare a dish, or my father’s desire to go do some crazy werewolf thing now that he was transitioning.

Mom whirled to face me, her eyes flashing. “What’s wrong? I’ll tell you what’s wrong! Your dad is going to jail!”

**Episode 1922**

XAVIER

“Sex?” I shook my head, not sure if I’d heard Lilac correctly. Lilac blushed and kicked at the ground. *Yup, I heard him right.* “Hang on a second, how old are you again?”

Lilac glared up at me. “Old enough.”

“I’m sorry for asking, man, but you like look you’re twelve.” And the question alone made him feel like he was.

“Twelve? Thanks a lot. For your information, I’m eighteen. I was killed when I was seventeen, and then I had to celebrate my eighteenth birthday as a ghost. Do you have any idea how much that sucks?”

I thought about it. Sure, having a ghostly eighteenth birthday had to have sucked for sure, but something wasn’t adding up. “Hold on, if you were dead when you celebrated your birthday, doesn’t that mean that you’re still seventeen? I’m first to admit that I’m no expert in ghost aging, but I would think that dying kind of, you know, stopped the clock, so to speak?”

“No! And that’s not the point! Are you going to tease me or help me?”

“Sorry. I’m sorry, Lilac. Of course I’ll help. So… What is it exactly that you want to know?”

“I’m not sure. That’s why I’m asking. How can I know what I don’t know? I mean, there’s so much to think about. How can I make things special? How do I actually… Argh!” Lilac kicked his foot into the dirt again, and I could tell he was getting more flustered by the minute.

“Take it easy,” I said. Then I groaned. *Why me? Do I look like a sexpert or something?* “So, I assume you want to have sex with the medium?”

“Her name is Marta,” Lilac snapped.

I held up my hands. “Okay, okay, take it easy. Marta. You want to have sex with Marta.”

“Do you want everyone to hear?” Lilac hissed.

“Sorry! So, why don’t we start at the beginning? Do you know how babies are made?”

Lilac rolled his eyes and glared at me. “*Seriously?*”

“What? I’m just covering all my bases. We can’t exactly afford to have any pups crawling around right now, let alone strange… witchy… werewolf pups.”

“I know about protection. Can we get back on topic?” Lilac sighed.

“Right… yes…”

“What I want is to make sure Marta is happy.”

I sighed. Never in a million years had I imagined that I’d be having this conversation, but it was obvious that this was hard for Lilac. I threw an arm around his shoulders. “Listen, you came to the right guy. Be glad that you didn’t get stuck talking to Colton.”

Lilac looked down at his feet and asked, “So, do you just put it in?”

*Really? Poor Marta!* “Just put it in? No, you don’t want to just put it in. You might want to try a few things first.”

“Like what?”

I was starting to wish he *had* gone to Colton. I glanced longingly at the metal ice tubs flanking the bar, filled to the brim with delicious frosty beers. Lagers, IPAs, anything the heart desired. I could sure go for one of those right now. Or three. “Um, so there’s something called foreplay that you want to use before… sticking it in.”

“Foreplay? Does that mean I do four of something? Four kisses, or four cheek caresses?”

*Is he serious?* “No, it doesn’t have anything to do with the number four. It’s *fore*, like *before*, you know? Before sex. It can be anything really—kissing, touching, rubbing… humping.” I winced. “Whatever it is, it’s done to get you both ready for the main event.”

“Sex is the main event, right?”

“Yes,” I said, deadpan.

“Is there one type of foreplay that’s better than others?”

“Well… It’s specific to the person.” I couldn’t help but think about Cali and all the foreplay that I wanted to do to her right now. In fact, if I was lucky—and I considered myself to be a pretty lucky guy—I’d get the chance to apply her favorite kind of foreplay tonight. “Some women like you to perform cunnilingus on them.” I winced again. I didn’t think I’d ever said that word before, but I wanted to use the proper terms with Lilac. No use teaching him any bad habits, especially since in my limited interactions with Marta, she’d seemed like the traditional type—but then again, I didn’t know her very well. Maybe she liked the racy words.

“Cunnilingus? That’s going down on a girl, right?”

“Exactly.”

“How… do I do that?”

“You… open your mouth, stick out your tongue, and lick,” I said with a shrug. “But like I said, kissing and touching might be all you do, and that’s fine. It’s just about touching her in a way—er, place—she likes. All of what I mentioned is foreplay, and that’s what you want to do before actually fu—I mean, before intercourse. What I usually do is take things slow and steady—and all the while I pay attention and listen and watch for cues. Kiss softly, use your fingers on her—focus on the clit.” I coughed, waiting for him to ask what that was. I nearly jumped with glee when he didn’t. “Touch her all over, see what she likes. Pay attention to things, like if she moans or arches toward you. And a lot of times, women will say outright if they like something.”

“What if she outright says that she *doesn’t* like something?”

“Then you stop doing it. Just listen and always keep her pleasure in mind while doing what feels good for you, too. Chances are if you like it, she will too.” This wasn’t the most comfortable conversation I’d had today, but I wasn’t doing too badly, and I was even starting to relax a little.

“Hmm,” Lilac said, nodding slowly. “Is that what you do with Cali?”

I leaned in close. “We’re not talking about that. Ever.”

“Sorry! I just don’t really know *how* I’m supposed to know what she wants. It’s all well and good to try things out and see what she likes, but what if I do something off the bat that she hates, and it throws everything off? Then what?”

*I kind of already told you this, kid.* I was tense again, and fantasizing about being anywhere but here. “One thing that you can always do is ask. The wrong thing to do is assume.” I gave Lilac a pat on the back, and he nearly toppled over. I sighed, my eyes drifting back over to the piles of beer. “Good luck, kid.”

“Thanks a lot, Xavier, I really appreciate it. I know you’re busy being Alpha and all,” Lilac said, still recovering from the slap on the back. “I’ll be sure to let you know how it goes.”

*That is literally the last thing in the world that I want to know.* I almost told Lilac as much, but I didn’t want to hurt his feelings. Besides, it would be easy to avoid him if I saw that a future conversation was heading in that direction—I’d shift and sprint away.

“Whatever you do, Lilac, don’t kiss and tell,” I said, wanting to leave him with some additional words of wisdom.

Lilac responded with a tight nod, and, unable to resist them any longer, I bounded over to the tent and grabbed a beer. I popped it open and chugged it, as if I could use it to wipe the taste of that awkward conversation out of my mouth.

When I really thought about it, Lilac was lucky. That talk we’d had was way more than I’d ever gotten—especially from Silas. The only advice I could remember getting was when Colton and I were young: “Don’t get anyone pregnant.” With my advice, which definitely filled in all the blanks that I’d had growing up, Lilac would be all right. He was a good, sensitive kid, and I knew that considering how Marta felt in all of it would come easily to him. I only hoped that our little talk was the end of it. I had no desire to become the sex ed teacher for the Redwood pack.

Finishing my beer, I tossed the empty into the recycling bin and looked around for Cali. Deep down, I only hoped that I wouldn’t see her engrossed in conversation with Greyson again. With the way I was feeling at the moment, seeing them together canoodling or something would probably do me in.

I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw her at the far corner of the tent, engaged in a heated conversation with her parents. I frowned. *What’s that about?* After my talk with Lilac, I was in no mood to step into whatever it was. I figured that when Cali and I were together later tonight, she’d tell me all about it. That was fine by me, since I was always happy to listen to her. I was smiling to myself at the thought when I saw Greyson approaching. I took a quick look behind me, hoping that he was making a beeline for someone other than me. *No such luck. Incoming!*

Greyson got right in my face and wasted no time letting me know what was on his mind. “Are you actually considering this co-Alpha thing?”

**Episode 1923**

VIOLET

I was trying my best to enjoy myself—it was a party after all—but all I could think about was what I’d told Charlie about making tonight special. Though we hadn’t discussed exactly what “special” meant, I’d had a clear idea of what I intended when I’d said it, and I was pretty sure that Charlie did, too. We’d parted ways with a loaded glance, and now I was nervous.

Charlie wasn’t a virgin—one look at him made that obvious. Plus, of course, all the time he’d been dating Sandi. But also the fact that he was too handsome, too hot—he probably had girls throwing themselves at him, probably had plenty of chances and plenty of options. In fact, I’d seen it in action with Sophie back at hunter camp. Charlie was smart, athletic, sweet, gorgeous. It would’ve been strange if he *hadn’t* had a girl crushing on him at a hormone-filled place like that. I wasn’t jealous, but I was worried about living up to expectations—both his and my own. I wanted tonight to be special in every sense of the word, and I had no idea how to make that happen. I needed some advice, quick.

I made myself a soda at the bar and took a lap around the party, looking around. It was nice seeing everyone having so much fun—mingling, laughing, talking, drinking, dancing. The pack house was truly in rare form, and the stress from before was nonexistent. People wanted to unwind, connect, cut loose—which meant that it would probably be easier than usual to find someone willing to coach me through this sensitive moment without making a big deal about it.

But who was the right choice? I could immediately eliminate all of the guys from the running—the men in the pack were good people for the most part, but I preferred a woman’s outlook for this particular issue. That left me with Big Mac—no way, especially since she’d been giving me the cold shoulder since I’d cornered her and talked a little too much earlier in the evening. There was Cali… but she had enough of her own problems without throwing mine into the mix. Then there was Orla, but she was a mom, so no. Rishika? Artemis? I didn’t know them all that well. Then, my eyes landed on Lola. Of course! She was the one who’d encouraged me before with Charlie, and taken the time to explain the whole mate thing to me. She was smart and outgoing and kind of like a big sister, and I knew that she had plenty of experience with her mate, Jay.

I steeled my nerves and made a beeline for her where she stood leaning against the bar. The “bar” was essentially a row of high-top tables set up next to each other with a tablecloth draped over them, but I couldn’t get over how real it looked. Torin and Orla had decorated the bar top with pictures of Mrs. Smith and Big Mac, and had placed voluminous and colorful floral arrangements end to end. There was a tall shelf behind the bar lined with bright string lights and stocked with more liquor and wine than I’d ever seen outside of an actual bar—not that I had much experience with bars, yet.

“Hey, Lola!” I said, speaking loud enough to be heard over the pumping music.

“Violet! So happy to see you.” Lola pulled me into a tight hug. She wasn’t drunk, but I could tell that she had a couple drinks under her belt. She tossed back what she had in her cup and sat it on the bar in a quick measured movement before returning her attention to me. She looked beautiful, as always, and while she was typically a bubbly person, she was in in rare form tonight—which put me even more at ease. “Isn’t this party a blast? I haven’t seen everyone let their hair down like this in a long time.”

“It’s been a while since we had a good excuse to do so. Torin and Orla and the others did such a good job putting it together.”

Lola nodded, and I hesitated for a moment before deciding to just come out with it. “Lola, I need some advice… Should I sleep with Charlie tonight?”

Lola’s eyes went wide. “You mean you *haven’t*? The two of you?”

“No, we came close a few times, but we’ve never gone all the way.” I thought back to the shed at the hunter camp where things had gotten really hot and heavy. It had gotten so heated, in fact, that we’d planned to—perhaps—do the deed at the B and B, but that had never come to fruition for obvious reasons. Revenant attacks and obsessive hunters with silver knives had a way of killing the mood.

“Wow, I have to say that I’m surprised. You’re such a cute, attractive couple.” Lola cocked an eyebrow. “I would have thought that you two would have a hard time keeping your hands off each other—not that there’s anything wrong with taking your time. It’s better to wait than to just dive in.”

I winced at Lola’s choice of words. A couple of pack members jostled us as they whooped and hollered their way past, preparing to do belly shots on the bar. The bar was perfect for serving drinks, but I wasn’t sure that it could handle that sort of activity, and I didn’t want to be anywhere nearby if it went south. Torin would probably blow a gasket if the bar got ruined. Lola and I looked at the raucous group and exchanged a glance.

“It’s getting crazy out here; let’s go inside,” Lola said, grabbing my hand.

I followed her inside, and she pulled me into the den. “So, Violet. The most important thing is to decide if you’re ready. Like with Jay, I wanted to rip his clothes off the first time we were alone—I knew I was ready without a doubt.”

“Really? *How* did you know? Does, like, a light go off somewhere inside you or something?” If so, I thought that maybe that light had been on for a while now, but I wasn’t sure.

Lola paused and looked up at the ceiling, thinking. “Well, only you can answer that. Just don’t overthink it. Let’s say you think you’re ready and you two… start getting into the heat of things. You can always stop if you get uncomfortable or if you get too nervous. Remember, Charlie’s your mate. Whether tonight is the night or not, it’ll work out.” Lola took me by the shoulders and looked me in the eye. “Whatever you do, be smart. Play it safe.”

We hugged, and I felt better. I was glad I’d talked to her.

“Thanks, Lola.”

“Don’t mention it. Now let me go find that hot hunk of mine,” Lola said with a wink before bounding back out to the party.

I went upstairs, still not completely sure about what the right thing to do was, but I was leaning toward going through with it tonight. Lola was right—Charlie was my mate. We were going to end up sleeping together sooner or later. Why not now?

I went into my bedroom and shut the door, doing a quick survey of the space. I needed to tidy up a bit. I knew that there were a lot of stupid things associated with the first time—not to mention a lot of pressure to make everything perfect—and I didn’t want to fall into thinking that this one thing would dramatically change my life. Still, as I looked at the dirty laundry piled near my dresser, the unmade bed, and my unpacked bags shoved into the corners, I knew that this environment didn’t quite set the mood.

I jumped right into cleaning up, realizing after a bit of time had passed that I was going overboard—my room was cleaner now than it had probably ever been in my entire life. *Anything to keep my mind off tonight.*

Lola’s words echoed in my head. *Be smart. Play it safe.* And then it hit me. Condoms! I knew that Charlie hadn’t been able to get any—thanks to Lilac—but there had to be some somewhere in this house. Even though the pack was pretty open about sex and all that, I didn’t want to ask anyone outright for condoms—that would be way too awkward. It went without saying that I couldn’t ask Lilac—he was probably in the same boat as me and wouldn’t be helpful. Besides, Charlie would die if I asked Lilac after their little run-in in the condom aisle.

*Maybe Colton has some*, I thought. He seemed like the type who would have a case of them somewhere in his bedroom.

I left my room and crept down the hall to Colton’s bedroom. He hadn’t been here in a long time, but I was hoping that he’d left a few supplies behind, just in case. As I was searching through one of his drawers, I heard someone come up behind me.

“Ahh!” I screamed. I turned around and came face-to-face with none other than Lilac.

“Violet! What are *you* looking for?”

**Episode 1924**

GREYSON

Xavier was taking his sweet time giving me a response, as if he were deciding right then and there. Finally, he grunted, “Yes. I told Cali that I would act as co-Alpha with you.”

“Really?” *Color me shocked.* “*You*. The guy who was trying to fight me yesterday to be Alpha?” My surprise quickly gave way to suspicion. *What is he up to?* I didn’t get along with Xavier, but I knew him extremely well, and he’d never been one to play nice with others.

“Listen, despite whatever is between us, I only want to do what’s right for the pack,” Xavier said matter-of-factly. He wasn’t exactly acting like himself. It was almost like he was trying to play the nice guy, be the reasonable one for a change. I wasn’t buying it.

I shook my head, trying to choose my words carefully. I didn’t want him running back to Cali and making out like I was being the difficult one in this whole thing. “Forgive me for being a little skeptical—but since when are you concerned with doing the right thing?”

Xavier scoffed and sucked his teeth. “Oh, that’s rich coming from you, Greyson. I’ve always been concerned with doing the right thing, especially when it comes to the pack—definitely more than you have, if we’re being real. Should I remind you, once again, of how many times you’ve abandoned the pack? Or is that too inconvenient a fact for you?”

“Pssh. I could say the same thing about you.”

Xavier wasn’t one to be tied down by anyone or anything. He was used to having things his way, and that meant that he didn’t do well with any obligation that didn’t fit his agenda. Running a pack sometimes wasn’t at the top of his list, but for the sake of keeping things moderately civil between us, I held myself back from listing all the times he’d left the pack and gone off on his own.

“Listen, I don’t think standing here arguing about this is going to solve anything. The point is, why not do it to make Cali happy?” Xavier asked.

“I would love to do that.” *And I plan to do just that later tonight.* “But Xavier, have you thought about this? How it would all work? How the two of us would actually work together? Are we going to put a schedule together or something? Or do we just have to agree on everything, all the time? We have such a great history of doing that, after all.”

“I’m with you—I know that you and I wouldn’t agree all the time, and I’m not sure about the schedule or exactly how it would look, but I’m open to suggestions. Maybe we can just split responsibilities—I’ll take on the important ones, and you can do all the fluffy stuff,” Xavier said with a smirk.

There it was, the slight that I’d known was coming all along. He was playing all diplomatic, but I knew better. “I think you’ve got that reversed, little brother.”

Xavier winced but recovered nicely. “How about you pretend to be co-Alpha, *big brother*, and you leave all the decision-making to me?”

“That’s your best plan yet.” I was getting annoyed. Was he really serious about this or not?

“Listen, I told Cali that I would act as co-Alpha, and I’m not going to lie to her. So the ball’s in your court.”

“What, are you trying to say that I would lie to Cali?” I said, not bothering to hide the anger in my voice. He was really trying to get under my skin with this whole thing, and it was working. I wondered if Cali knew, when she suggested this whole co-Alpha thing, that her beloved Xavier wouldn’t waste the chance to use it to get under my skin.

Xavier shrugged, keeping his expression neutral. “I’m not implying anything. But if you remember, you didn’t tell Cali about having revenant eyes, did you?”

I said nothing, keeping my jaw clenched tight. Xavier wouldn’t waste any time poking holes in whatever rationalization I could give for that decision. That hadn’t been my finest moment, but I’d truly kept that from Cali because I was trying my best to protect her, not because I was trying to hide it from her.

Xavier gave me a thoughtful look, and again it looked like he was attempting to be the agreeable one. “I don’t know about you, but I’m going to go and enjoy the last of the party. You let me know what you decide.”

Without another word, Xavier walked off.

I had no choice but to consider the possibility that Xavier was telling the truth and was willing to share responsibilities. As unbelievable as that seemed, it made a certain kind of sense. He was right that it would make Cali happy if we were able to put at least one of our major conflicts to bed. It would also settle things down within the pack—but only if we didn’t kill each other first. There were no guarantees that we wouldn’t rip each other to pieces the first time we had a real disagreement about how to handle any big issues that the pack might face. I had a fleeting thought about the Vanguard pack. Although I didn’t know how things were going to play out, if anything went wrong with them it would be one of the first things that Xavier and I would have to face as co-Alphas, and frankly, the thought of collaborating with Xavier in any way stressed me out. One thing was for sure—if I did agree to do it, we were going to have to lay out some clear rules about how co-Alpha-ing would work.

I turned at the sound of Cali’s voice as it rose over the noise of the party. “Jail? Why would you got to jail?”

She was arguing with her father, practically shouting at him. I didn’t think I’d ever seen her this upset with him the whole time I’d known her. *Why are they arguing about jail?* I thought with a thin feeling of dread. Had the cops managed to somehow track Tom down?

“Calm down, Cali,” Tom said, putting up his hands. “Both you and your mom have misunderstood—I have no intention of going to jail. But I do need to be locked up.”

“Oh, well that makes sense!” Orla said, throwing up her hands.

I was even more confused now, and more than a little worried. I rushed to Cali’s side. She was angry, but also on the verge of tears. I touched her hand gently. “Cali, what’s going on?”

“Dad’s freaking out about shifting and wants to be locked up in jail!”

“Come on now, that’s not exactly what I said.”

“Cali has it right,” Orla said wearily.

Deciding that I needed to be the voice of reason since Cali was so freaked out, I turned my attention to Tom. “What’s going on, Tom?”

“I’m just trying to tell them that—”

“That he thinks he’s too dangerous to roam free,” Orla said.

“No, that’s not exactly—”

Cali jumped in. “And that the safest place for him is in a jail cell!”

“Listen, Orla, Cali, would it be okay if Tom and I went and discussed this somewhere quieter?” *Away from the both of you so the poor man can talk.*

To Cali, I mind linked, *Don’t worry, I’ll go talk some sense into him.*

Cali nodded at me and wiped her eyes as she mouthed the words “thank you.”

“Greyson, yes! By all means, let’s go inside.” Tom was already heading toward the house. I followed him inside and down into the basement. He led me to stand by the silver chains that had once held me imprisoned, which brought on a wave of unpleasant memories. Thinking back to when I’d been chained up here for the good of the pack made me realize how similar my situation had been to what Tom was going through now—back then, I’d been worried that I couldn’t be trusted not to harm the people I loved, too.

“We all know that I’m going to shift tomorrow. We also know that I’m new to all this. I have no idea what I’m going to do—or what I’ll be capable of—and that’s what worries me.” Tom picked up one of the chains. “I don’t want to hurt anyone, so I think it’s best that I be restrained with these here in the basement tomorrow before the full moon.”

“Tom, I don’t think that’s necessary. Turning into a werewolf doesn’t mean that you’re becoming some sort of mindless, out-of-control maniac.” *Like Xavier.* “I know you’re frightened about becoming a werewolf—it’s a scary, new thing that you’re going through, and you’re right, you don’t know exactly what to expect. But you’re in a house full of werewolves—and we know how to look after our kind.”

Tom dropped the chains, and they clattered menacingly against the wall. I watched them for a second before snapping my attention back to Tom, who, to my surprise, still seemed entirely too freaked out by the process of shifting. A line of concern tightened my lips. “Hey, Tom, look, it’s gonna be—” But he cut me off before I could offer any more assurances.

“Greyson, if I ask you to do something for me, without telling Cali or Orla, will you do it?”

**Episode 1925**

VIOLET

Lilac was staring at me with his eyes narrowed to slits and his arms crossed over his chest. “What are you doing rummaging around in Colton’s room?”

“Lilac, that’s none of your business. Besides, why do you care?”

Lilac broke into a big smile and pulled me into a hug. “I’m only messing with you. I’m just glad to be back and annoying my favorite sister.”

*Okay, he’s being weird.* “What’s gotten into you? You’re acting strange.”

“Strange? Can’t I just be happy to see my twin?” He did a little dance on his tiptoes.

“I’m glad to see you, too, Lilac, but I have something to take care of right now.”

“Oh, okay, can I help? What do you need?”

*I need condoms. But I can’t tell you that.* I shrugged. “Funny thing, I think I forgot.”

Lilac’s eyes widened. “You forgot what you were looking for?”

I sighed, hating lying to my brother. I threw up my hands. “If you really want to know, I was looking for condoms.” *There, I said it. His fault for being so nosy. Now we’ll both suffer the embarrassment.*

Lilac’s jaw dropped. “I knew it! I knew that was what Charlie wanted at the grocery store!”

I groaned. “Yes, and because you stopped him from getting them, I’m on the search for them now. You shamed Charlie into not buying them.”

“Ah man, sorry about that, but you know I was only thinking of you. I don’t know Charlie all that well, but if you think that Charlie’s the guy, then I support that.” Lilac reached out and squeezed my shoulder.

I hadn’t thought that I needed his approval, but now that I had it, I was happy that he was okay with me being with Charlie—and *being* with Charlie. “I appreciate that, Lilac. It means a lot. So, what are *you* doing in Colton’s room?”

Lilac looked away from me and blushed. “I’m looking for condoms, too.”

Whoa, apparently the twin link thing was real. Who would’ve thought that we’d both be on the hunt for condoms at the same exact time?

“Marta and you? I knew it!” I said, clapping my hands and jumping up and down.

“What did you know?”

“You two are mates!”

“Uh, I’m not sure about that. I’d like to think that we are, but I don’t know. What I do know is that I’m falling for her.”

“Aw, Lilac!” I pulled him into a hug, happy that he had someone like Marta by his side. “How nice that you’ve come back from the dead and have a serious crush—and you’re being responsible about it.”

I loved Lilac and all, but I wasn’t ready to become an aunt just yet. Even thinking about Lilac being a dad made me shudder a bit—not because I didn’t think he could handle it, but because it was a hell of a responsibility for anybody to take on, especially so soon after coming back from the dead. *Werewolf pack problems.*

“Okay, well back to it.” I turned around and opened another drawer, but it was nearly empty—except for a dozen facial masks. “Wow, are these all Colton’s?”

I picked them up, examining them. They looked expensive, and there were all different kinds: pore minimizing, exfoliating, fragrance free… I put them down slowly and shut the drawer.

“Have you checked Colton’s bedside table? I saw a movie once where the guy kept them there.”

“Good idea.” We ran over and yanked open the drawer, rummaging through a pile of random junk until finally we found the golden prize—one genuine condom. I felt like Charlie Bucket with the golden ticket. I held it up in the air and waved it around. “Jackpot!”

Lilac dove into the drawer and rummaged around for a bit, and then his face fell. “For real? There’s only one?”

“Let’s check the other one.” We rushed over to the other bedside table, but the drawer was empty.

We both eyed the condom like it was the last juicy steak on the platter. “Shoot, well it looks like this is all we’ve got. What should we do?”

“Rock paper scissors?” Lilac suggested. “Best two out of three gets the goods.”

“Well if we’re being fair, it should be mine. After all, I was here first, and I’m the one who found it.”

“No fair, I was the one who suggested searching the bedside drawers. Without me you’d still be ogling Colton’s facial masks.”

“Well, I was the one who came in here in the first place because I knew that Colton was the type to have one. Plus, if you hadn’t scared Charlie off from buying condoms at the grocery store, we wouldn’t even *be* in this predicament.”

“Hey, he could have easily still purchased them, you can’t pin that all on me.”

“Wait, wait,” I said, not liking where this was going. “I don’t want to fight over it. If it means so much to you, you have it,” I said, holding out the condom.

Lilac was just about to take it when he asked, “You really like Charlie, don’t you?”

I smiled. “Yes. I love him.”

Lilac didn’t take the condom and instead pushed it back toward me. “Go ahead, sis. But I don’t ever, ever, *ever* want to hear about it. Okay?”

“Deal. Believe me, I have no intention of ever discussing this again.”

I kissed Lilac on the cheek and hurried out of the room, not looking back just in case he changed his mind. Hormones were going crazy in the pack house tonight, after all, and desperate times…

The moment I got back to my room, all the doubt and anxiety I’d had before came flooding back. I stared at the condom. I was being smart and playing it safe and all that, and I loved Charlie, but I also remembered another thing that Lola had said. *Don’t overthink it.* I sighed and slid the condom under my pillow, then went into the bathroom and started up a hot shower.

I couldn’t stop thinking about Charlie while the hot water pelted my skin, and while I’d hoped that the shower would relax me and put things in perspective, I was still a ball of nerves when I got out. I dried off and put on a tank top and shorts. I could still hear the party raging outside, but I wasn’t in the mood to party anymore. There was too much on my mind.

There was a soft knock on my door, and instantly my mouth went dry and my heart nearly jumped right out of my chest. I didn’t need to ask; I knew it was Charlie. I took a deep breath and opened the door.

“Wow,” Charlie said, his eyes wide. “I… I was just looking for you downstairs.”

Without saying anything, I pulled Charlie inside and closed the door. I pressed him back against the wall and kissed him, letting loose all the anxiety and fear and nerves and channeling it into what felt easy and right—the passion I felt for Charlie. Just seeing him standing there at the door had reminded me of why I’d gone looking for a condom in the first place.

Charlie moaned against my lips, his hand warm on my stomach and sliding ever so slowly up toward my breasts. He pulled away. “Is it okay if I…”

“Go ahead,” I whispered, capturing his mouth with mine again. I froze and relaxed as his hand rose to cup me over my shirt. He kneaded softly as he walked me back toward the bed. Ever the gentleman, he used his other hand to cup my other breast, but he didn’t go beneath the shirt.

The backs of my legs hit the bed, and I fell onto the mattress, Charlie landing on top of me. I rolled him onto his back and straddled him, grinding my hips against him and enjoying how warm and solid he felt beneath me. His tongue pressed gently into the depths of my mouth, and he held me tight against him, his other hand gravitating up to my chest again. This time his hand slipped under my shirt, and I pulled away, out of breath.

“Don’t even ask, go ahead,” he said as I hesitated at the waistband of his jeans.

I unbuttoned his pants and pulled them off, leaving him in his black boxer briefs. I hopped back on top of him and kissed him hard, realizing that my uncertainty was melting away. I was starting to feel like this was the right thing to do. I was here with the guy I loved, and he was so sweet and respectful—and *so* hot. I sat up and grabbed the bottom of my tank top, ready to pull it off, but Charlie covered my hands with his, stopping me.

“I can’t—we can’t—go through with this. I don’t have any protection,” he said, groaning and dropping his head back on the bed in frustration.

I hesitated for the quickest moment before I reached under my pillow and pulled out the condom. I flipped it back and forth in front of him before handing over the crinkling gold package. He took it, his eyes lighting up like he’d just won the lottery. Then a bit of uncertainty colored his eyes as he looked up at me and mind linked, *Are you ready to do this?*

**Episode 1926**

LOLA

I was feeling pretty proud of myself. Though Cali had always been like a sister to me, and I was technically older than her, I’d always considered us to be the same age. But after talking to Violet, I felt like I’d acted just like a big sister should, imparting my vast wisdom to a sort-of younger sibling. Violet was a good girl, and Charlie was a nice guy, and I was happy that they’d found each other—I truly believed that it would all work out for them, however tonight went.

I’d been like Violet once upon a time, nervous and excited and wanting everything to be perfect, especially that first time. I remembered exactly what it was like to fall in love—the rush, the butterflies, the overwhelming need to be with the person you loved. For me, that person had always been Jay. There had never been anyone else. Even when I was in the midst of dealing with my vampire heat, Jay was there. Even when I’d had my memory of Jay wiped out, we were still destined to come together. We were meant to be.

Whatever foolish feelings I’d had for Emmett had no doubt been a product of the vampire heat. There was never any love there, or any true feelings for him—not like what I had for Jay. Emmett couldn’t hold a candle to my mate. For me, no other man could. The more I thought about Jay, the more I wanted him.

I glanced around the party. It was finally starting to wind down a bit. I spotted my target across the dance floor, immersed in a conversation with Mrs. Smith. I looked at him, a tall drink of water oozing with confidence. My eyes dragged over his arms, admiring the way his biceps stretched the sleeves of his shirt. I took in the sight of his broad chest, his strong, angular jaw, the sexy eye patch that made him look like the badass he was. My insides ached for him. Before I even knew that my feet were moving, I started toward Jay—only to run into Cali.

“Crazy parent alert,” she said, grabbing my arm. “I gotta tell you—wait, did you hear what happened?”

“Yeah, I heard. I’m sure Greyson will help Tom—your mate is knowledgeable and stuff,” I said, my eyes still riveted to Jay. “I’m sure everything will work out.”

“Yeah, but if…”

I was only half listening. All I could think about was Jay. I wanted him right now. I wanted to kiss him, and touch him, and do other things that I didn’t even want to think about for fear that I might start drooling all over myself.

“… and heaven help us if he turns into a werewolf while—”

“Cali, I’m sorry, I have to… tell Jay something really important,” I said, leaving her there with her mouth hanging open. I was sorry to leave her hanging, but there was only one thing that I could think about right now. If I didn’t get to Jay soon, I wouldn’t be responsible for what happened. I could feel the vampire heat burning in my chest like a raging inferno. Every nerve ending in my body was standing at attention. It was like I had tunnel vision, and at the end of that long dark tunnel there was only Jay. There was no one else in the world that I even wanted to see. Everyone around me melted into a blur, and right there—only a few feet away, clear as day—was my Jay. I was all but panting in contemplation of what I was going to do to him as soon as I got him alone.

As I approached, Jay was laughing over something Mrs. Smith was saying. I grabbed his hand, tugging him close. Merely touching him sent the heat soaring through my body. Blood rushed in my ears, and my breath quickened in my throat.

“I’m so sorry, Mrs. Smith,” I said breathlessly, hoping that she couldn’t hear the raw longing in my voice. “I… desperately need Jay’s help with something.”

“Oh, oh of course!” Mrs. Smith said, raising her glass in a salute before backing away with a knowing glance.

I yanked Jay toward the house.

“What’s wrong, Lola? You’ve been drinking, haven’t you?”

Thinking that being drunk sounded better than telling him that I was actually going mad with desire for him, I agreed.

“Yes, yes, that’s it. I’ve had *so* much to drink!” I placed the back of my hand on my forehead as we went into the house and fake wobbled on my feet. “I’m not even sure that I can make it up the stairs!” I said as soon as we reached the bottom of the staircase.

Jay scooped me up into his arms, and I swooned, nearly combusting in his arms. As we climbed the stairs, I couldn’t help running my fingers up and down his warm, strong, arms. He was wearing a black V-neck, and I played my fingers along the edge of the V, squirming as I anticipated seeing his bare chest in all its muscular glory.

As soon as we got to the room, I wriggled out of his arms and launched myself at him, kissing him hard and running my hand down to his crotch, already preparing to yank his pants clean off.

Jay pulled away. “No, you’re drunk.” He gave me a stern look and held me at arm’s length.

“No, I’m not. I was only kidding, see?” I said, doing a mock sobriety test in front of him, balancing on one foot and then the other while I touched my fingers to the tip of my nose. I didn’t know if I was doing it right, but he got my drift.

“Um… Why were you pretending?” Jay asked, looking even more confused.

“Because I needed to get you alone. And it worked!”

Without warning, I ripped his shirt off and tossed it on the floor. I planted a trail of kisses from his neck down to his pecs and across to the other side of his neck.

“Whoa, Lola, what’s gotten into you?” Jay said, a pleased smile playing across his lips.

“You gonna ask questions all night, or are you gonna get me on that bed?” I asked between kisses. I moved up to his mouth and brushed my lips against his.

“Shutting up,” Jay said.

He pinned my hands to my sides and kissed me, walking me over to the bed. He collapsed onto the bed, pulling me down with him. I crawled on top of him, thrusting my tongue into his mouth so deep that I felt like I might devour him whole. I pulled away and ripped my shirt off and then unclasped my bra, tossing them both to the floor. Jay moaned and took my nipples between his rough fingers, gently squeezing them as I rotated my hips so that I could feel the press of his growing erection in all the right places.

“You’re so fucking hot,” Jay grunted, a lazy smile on his lips, his eyelids heavy.

He sat up and pulled me tight against him, his light spray of chest hair scraping deliciously against my breasts. I threw my head back as he planted wet kisses on my neck and face before leaning back and taking my left breast into his mouth, suckling it and flicking my taut nipple with the tip of his tongue. In a quick move, he flipped me over onto my back and immediately covered my body with his. I unbuttoned my jeans and wriggled out of them while his lips trailed to my other breast, covering it with kisses. He pulled away to help me out of my panties, and then he got down on his knees and pulled me to the edge of the bed.

“I’ve been waiting for this all night,” he said, burying his face between my legs and wasting no time thrusting his hot tongue deep inside me until I arched up on the bed. I spread my legs wide as he pumped his tongue in and out, taking his time and using his fingers to press rhythmically on my clit. It felt good, but I had other plans.

I got up and slid away, already shaking with pleasure.

“Sit up on the bed!” I commanded, getting down on my knees. “Shh,” I said, when he opened his mouth to protest.

He rose to sit on the bed, and I yanked his pants off in one go, impressed with my own speed and finesse. Everything I did was faster and better than it used to be. There were definitely some plusses to being a vampire. I flung his pants over my shoulder, and they knocked something over with a loud crash.

“There goes the lamp,” Jay said.

“Fuck the lamp,” I said, and we both laughed.

I slid between his legs and took his heavy girth in my hand, stroking it up and down before popping him into my mouth. I took my time pumping my lips up and down on his shaft until he tensed and pushed me away.

“Oh no, I don’t want to come like this.” Jay got up, then lifted me up from the floor and tossed me onto the bed.

“Jay, you’re so strong!” I giggled. The heat coursing inside me was so hot that I felt I might burn up from the inside out.

I spread my legs, and he laid down on top of me. He was about to thrust inside when a sharp, agonizing pain shot through my body, replacing the heat of passion immediately.

“*Ow!*” I screamed.

“Oh my god, are you okay? Did I hurt you?” Jay sprang away from me like I’d shocked him.

I wanted to answer him, but I couldn’t even say one word, the pain was so intense. I looked at Jay, my eyes watering with pain. What the hell was happening to me?

**Episode 1927**

GREYSON

I looked at Tom, my concern growing. What exactly was he going to ask me to do? Kill someone? That seemed extreme, but he was acting so mysterious—which was unnerving, since usually he was a chill guy who liked to cook and bake and hang out with his wife. I hoped that him becoming a werewolf wasn’t changing him already—I’d never known someone’s personality to shift when they became a werewolf, but what I didn’t know about the world could fill a large book.

“Greyson, I want you to lock me up down here with these chains,” Tom said. “I know it sounds crazy, and I know you don’t think you need to, and I know it’s not ideal—and of course Orla and Cali don’t want me to do it. But the reality is that I’m scared. I have no idea what’s going to happen to me tomorrow, and if I hurt my girls… I’d never forgive myself.”

*Memo to self, I need to have Phil remove these things and throw them away.*

I was relieved that the request wasn’t something more sinister. “Tom, like I’ve said a million times, there’s nothing for you to worry about. There’s no need for us to chain you up down here like a wild beast.”

I remembered all too clearly how awful it had felt to be trapped down here like some sadistic criminal. It wasn’t fun, and I didn’t think Tom realized how painful it would be to touch silver once he transitioned. Silver pain was unlike any pain I’d ever felt—and I’d been wounded in battle too many times to count, so I had a lot to compare it to.

“Also, Tom, I don’t think you want to mess with silver—not when you’re going to be a new werewolf. One wrong move and you could die—it’s nothing to play with when you’re a werewolf, trust me.”

Tom didn’t look convinced. How was I going to calm him down?

“Tom, there’s no need to lie to anyone about this. I’ll be here for you tomorrow when the full moon hits its peak, along with the entire pack. I promise.”

Tom’s shoulders finally relaxed a little, and it looked like he was starting to straight. I could only hope that I’d finally gotten through to him. It had to be pretty unsettling to shift at his age—especially given everything that had happened lately. He’d been privy to a lot of werewolf politics and fights and infighting, and he’d seen that some werewolves were complete assholes. It was no wonder he was worried about what he would become.

“Greyson, I trust you, so… I’ll take your word for it,” Tom said finally.

“That’s all I ask. We have your back, really.”

I followed him back upstairs. Tom pulled me into a tight hug, surprising me at first. I relaxed into the embrace as he gave me a couple of strong pats on the back before releasing me and heading upstairs to bed.

I watched him go, still reeling from the hug. It had definitely caught me by surprise, but there was more to it than that. I’d never even gotten a handshake from my father—demonstrations of affection hadn’t exactly been Silas’s style. Tom was a good man, an amazing husband, and a loving, caring father. There was no doubt in my mind that he would be a good werewolf, too. I paused for a moment, remembering when I’d thought that Fenrir was my son. While it hadn’t turned out that way, I’d really enjoyed spending time with him. It had made me wonder what kind of father I would be. I hoped that one day I’d have the chance to find out. The only thing I knew for sure was that I would never be like Silas—which was admittedly a low bar.

I ran into Sabine in the living room.

“Greyson, can we talk?” she asked.

“Everyone seems to want to talk with me tonight, so why not? What’s up?” After that hug, I was feeling surprisingly good about things—especially about the prospect of letting Sabine in a little more. It was a hard thing to wrap my head around, having a mother all of a sudden, but she’d always meant well. Maybe it was time to change our dynamic.

“Did you have a nice time tonight?”

*If I removed Xavier from the picture, I’d have had a blast.* “Yeah, hard not to, but how about you?”

“I did, thanks for asking. It was really amazing—Orla and the others really outdid themselves.”

“They did—and I’m glad you had fun. You and Big Mac deserve it.”

“Thanks, Greyson… Listen. I was wondering if you’d be comfortable being involved in some of the wedding stuff?”

I was ready to move forward a bit with Sabine, but being involved in the wedding…

“How involved are we talking? I don’t know much about it—or weddings in general.”

“You never know, helping out with this could come in handy one day, when you do something of your own,” she said with a smile.

She was keeping things pretty vague, probably by design, but I felt my chest swell. Hopefully, Cali and I would have something like that one day—like in the visions. That was the only thing I wanted in the entire world. Cali to be mine. All mine.

“I’m happy to do whatever you need,” I said.

Sabine beamed, squeezing my hand. “Thank you, Greyson, that means so much to me.”

I was feeling better than I had in a long time. Between Tom and Sabine and the high from the party and the amazing energy in the house, I couldn’t remember the last time I’d felt this… light. “I’m really glad that we were able to celebrate.”

“Me too, honey.”

“Goodnight… Mom?” It still sounded weird saying that. The word felt thick and clunky coming out of my mouth, but somehow, it still felt right.

Sabine smiled even wider. “Goodnight, son.”

I paused for a beat, watching Sabine go up the stairs, thinking how it also sounded weird, hearing someone call me “son.” Silas had said it plenty of times, but he’d said it with such venom and evil that I’d almost never wanted to hear anyone call me that again.

“I might need some time to work on the whole son-mom thing,” I called.

Sabine turned back to me and laughed, her eyes shining. “No rush, take your time. I’m not going anywhere. Have a good night.” I was turning to go when she added, “You deserve it.”

I lingered downstairs for a bit, watching Torin and the others bring empty bottles and serving trays and glasses back into the house. Torin looked happy and satisfied, and I felt the same—but I certainly wasn’t in the mood for clean-up. I tiptoed away before Torin could set his sights on me and headed upstairs, pondering the last few minutes.

First, Tom had hugged me, and it had felt good—and then I’d called Sabine “Mom.” What was happening to me? Was I going soft? I chuckled to myself. *Maybe I should go see Ravi and get a little sparring in tomorrow. As long as Ava’s not sinking her claws into him.* I hoped Ravi would do his best to steer clear of her. She wasn’t to be trusted, and he was definitely playing with fire, getting tangled up with her in any way. Just because something looked good, didn’t mean that you should touch it. Ravi was a good guy, and it would be a shame to have him follow Ava down some dark, twisted path.

I sighed as I reached the top of the stairs, heading for Cali’s room. We still had a bit of unfinished business, and she’d seemed more than open to the idea of spending the night together. For the millionth time that night, I thought about how hot things had gotten between us in the pantry. I’d wanted to rip her clothes off right then. She’d looked and smelled so good. I closed my eyes, picturing her. That was just the beginning; I had so much more in store for her.

I got to her room and poked my head in. Empty. *Perfect. Nothing like surprising my mate.* I went into her bathroom to wash up. I took a quick shower and then swished some mouthwash around in my mouth, checking myself out in the mirror. *I look good, right?* I paused as I heard the door to her bedroom open and close. My heart fluttered in my chest. I couldn’t wait to see Cali’s face. I hoped we could pick up right where we’d left off in the pantry. I could picture her beautiful naked body draped across the bed, waiting for me…

I wrapped a towel around my waist and walked out into the bedroom, only to see Xavier lounging on the bed instead.

**Episode 1928**

XAVIER

The bathroom door opened, but it wasn’t Cali who walked out.

It was my brother, wearing nothing but a towel.

I clenched my jaw hard enough to hurt. “What the hell are you doing here?” I demanded, sitting up. I fought to look past Greyson and into the bathroom—was my mate in there? Had the pair of them just had a fucking shower together?

I stopped breathing through my nose, because the idea of taking in the scent of what had happened in there made me wanna hurl. My blood was boiling, and everything got even worse when Greyson leaned against the bathroom’s door frame.

“You should go, brother,” he said coldly. “Cali’s expecting *me*. Not you.”

His words resonated through all the jealousy. Cali wasn’t in the bathroom, nothing had fucking happened. I could breathe through my nose again.

“You’re the one who’s got it wrong,” I told Greyson. “Cali’s going to be with me tonight. You should leave. Now.”

Greyson’s face had this cocky expression to it that made me want to punch him. Over and over again. He didn’t move, just shook his head while staring at me with disdain. “I’m not going anywhere.”

This bullshit was getting old. I walked up to him, staring him dead in the eye.

“I don’t think you understand. I’m not giving you a choice here.” I pointed at the door. “*Leave*.”

Greyson smiled. He was really begging for a fight. “Is that a threat, little brother?”

I took a step closer, invading his personal space like you never should do to an Alpha unless you want to draw blood.

“I’m ready to cash it in anytime you want,” I said. Part of me hoped that Greyson would take the bait—we could have it out and get it over with. Not only would it settle the Alpha thing, I would also have Cali for the night.

Yeah, I was presumptuous, but what about it?

Greyson rolled his eyes. “Why are you so eager to fight? Don’t you realize that regardless of who the Alpha is, Cali is still mated to both of us? Being Alpha won’t help settle that.”

Greyson was right about that, but I’d be damned if I admitted it.

“Maybe it wouldn’t solve the *due destini*, but it would sure feel good kicking your ass,” I said. “Or are you going to chicken out again?”

Greyson’s eyes flashed with anger. His pride was wounded, and he was the one to take a step closer now. “Do you *really* think that’s why I refused to fight you?”

His words got me thinking, though. My brother might have been a dick, but he wasn’t a coward. That wasn’t something that I’d ever tell him, of course—it was just a general observation. Which begged the question—why was he unwilling to fight, really?

Something was up, I realized.

But what?

I knew Greyson—I remembered that during the lead-up to the Lupo Finale, my brother had been all cryptic about his motives, and it had turned out that he’d known about Silas. What the fuck was he cooking up now?

“What are you hiding this time, brother?” I asked, eyes narrowed as I stared at him.

Greyson looked away, shaking his head. “I have nothing to hide. It’s just that there’s no upside to fighting right now. It will cause the pack to choose sides at a time when we need everyone to be on the same side.”

I scoffed. “Save the lecture on pack politics. The Redwoods just came out victorious after defeating the biggest threat we’ve ever dealt with—and by the way, I was the Alpha during that time—so I don’t understand why you think our people can’t undergo a little friction.”

Greyson laughed. “A *little*? You think another Lupo Finale would be a just a blip on the fucking radar?”

“If it’s for the greater good, yeah.”

“And what’s the greater good?” Greyson asked.

“Me being the one and only Alpha, brother,” I said.

He seemed amused, and I wanted to punch him a million times more. “I thought you wanted to be co-Alpha?”

I scoffed. “It’s what Cali wants, so I agreed. And now, I want to know the real reason why you’re refusing to fight.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Come on, Greyson—have you gone soft on me?” I asked impatiently. “Have you finally realized that I’m the better leader?”

Greyson wrinkled his nose, looking me up and down. “I doubt that.”

My patience was already running thin. “You think this is a goddamn joke?” I snarled, shoving him in the shoulder. “What the fuck aren’t you telling me?”

I was ready to have at it, even if we were in Cali’s room. I didn’t fucking care—I’d get her new furniture, because there was no way we wouldn’t fucking trash it.

That exact second, though, the door opened.

“What the hell is happening right now?” Cali said.

I stepped away from Greyson, turning to face her.

I got a grip quickly. She didn’t want us fighting, and I was ready to explode—I needed to chill.

“What are you two doing in my room?” Cali asked suspiciously.

“Nothing,” I said, after taking a deep calming breath. “Greyson was just leaving.”

The haughty bastard didn’t move a fucking inch.

Cali looked between us, scowling. “Whatever this is, I don’t like it.”

“It was only a misunderstanding, Cali,” Greyson said casually. “Xavier’s the one that was about to leave.”

The urge to punch Greyson returned tenfold. This asshole was really talented that way. I glared at him. “Listen, you—”

“No, you listen!”

“No, you—”

“Okay, *both* of you listen!” Cali barked, walking up to us and shoving us apart. “Stop it, right now—I’ve told you a million fucking times that it’s exhausting to see you two fight.”

“But, Cali—”

“No buts! I wouldn’t have brought up the co-Alpha idea if I thought things would stay the same. Do you two understand what I’m saying here?” she demanded, turning to me. “Is sharing the pack what you’re arguing about?”

Greyson and I exchanged a look.

“Don’t lie to her,” I said.

“I’m not lying to her,” Greyson declared. “I’m not lying to either of you.”

“I know you’re hiding something,” I said, glaring. “There’s got to be a reason why you don’t want a Lupo Finale.”

“You’re delusional,” he replied.

“Oh my god,” Cali muttered, flicking us both in the shoulder. “Stop fighting you two—I’m right here!” She peered at me. “I want the truth, Xavier. Is this because of what I suggested? The co-Alpha thing?”

I scowled. “No. We’re not fighting because of the co-Alpha thing.”

She turned to Greyson, arching an eyebrow. “Greyson?”

He nodded. “It’s true.”

“Then what the hell is this about?” she asked.

Before I could figure out how to tell Cali “I’m mad that my brother doesn’t want us to beat each other up in the name of werewolf honor”in a way that wouldn’t piss her off, Greyson spoke up.

“It’s just that Xavier was under the impression that you had agreed to spend the night with him,” he told Cali in the coolest way possible. This son of a bitch was really pushing his luck here, and he made things even worse when he added, “I was merely explaining to him that he was wrong, that was all.”

“It’s Greyson who’s mistaken,” I snapped, glaring at my brother, “since you’ll be spending the night with me, Cali—you made that clear.”

There was a heavy break of silence as Greyson and I locked eyes with our chests puffed out.

And then Cali started laughing.

Both Greyson and I flinched, turning to face her. It wasn’t a good kind of laughter—she looked annoyed and dubious at the same time, and like she’d start screaming at us if she didn’t laugh. But then, she did scream at us for real.

“I can’t believe you two! I never agreed to sleep with either of you—I literally never said that!”

I frowned, turning our conversation over in my mind. Okay, *maybe* she hadn’t *exactly* agreed to sleep with me, but she’d certainly made it obvious that she wanted to. She’d been all flustered, and I was one hundred percent certain that that was a good thing.

My brother was the fucking problem. Weirdly enough, though, Greyson hadn’t said a word. I had no idea what he was thinking, but I wasn’t about to wait and find out. I needed to take charge in a way that wouldn’t upset Cali, as much as I wanted to simply throw Greyson out and carry my mate back to my cave.

I needed to be smart about this.

Making sure to lower my voice, I reached out to take Cali’s hand. It felt so warm in mine. Right. Staring deep into her eyes, I said, “There’s been a mix-up, but we’re both here now, Cali. What do you want to do?”

**Episode 1929**

VIOLET

*Are you ready to do this?* Charlie mind linked.

He was hovering over me, his hand gentle on my cheek. My heart was pounding, my body felt alight, and yet, for some reason…

I took a moment to think.

I’d wanted to do this with Charlie from the moment I’d seen him. And we’d come close a few times, but one thing or another had interrupted us. Being with Charlie had always felt right, and I wanted him—I’d imagined this moment between us so many times, and there was no other person I’d want to have my first time with. My *any* time with. Charlie was it for me, and there was no doubt that my heart was ready for this, that my body was ready for this.

But my mind had other ideas.

I suddenly felt a nervous flutter in my stomach, a weird kind of anxiety that nipped at the edges of my consciousness. Was this nerves? Performance anxiety? I’d heard about brides who ran out on their weddings. But why would I feel stressed about this?

Charlie had never pressured me, had never made me feel unsafe, and that was how things should be for everyone in the position we were in right now. The nerves remained, though, a tangled ball in my stomach. I ignored them and focused on the most important thing, and that was Charlie.

I loved him.

I *ached* for him.

“I’m sure,” I whispered, pulling him close. I had barely brushed my lips over his when he spoke, moving his face back just a couple of inches so he could study my expression.

“You don’t *look* sure,” he said, as if making an observation.

“What do you mean?” I asked. He could read me so easily, and that made me ten times more nervous.

“We really don’t have to go all the way right now, Violet,” he murmured, brushing his thumb over my lower lip. “There’s no rush.”

He looked so breathtakingly gorgeous, his cheeks flushed, his pupils blown wide, all that care and desire in his gaze… He was incredible, and he was mine. I loved him, and silly things like performance anxiety had to be ignored.

There was no real reason why we *shouldn’t* be doing this.

Like, there was no way I’d be bad at it. Charlie and I were destined to be together, of course our bodies would fit perfectly. Of course everything would be fine.

I was certain about that.

*… Right?*

Oh my god, I was getting paranoid. I needed to stop myself from spiraling—I had to get a grip. I’d been building all of this up way too much in my head.

“I’m sure, and I’m sure I’m sure,” I said, stroking his soft cheek. I glanced down between us, biting my lip. I brought his hand to my chest, to my pounding heart, and whispered, “Can’t you feel it?”

He shuddered, breathless at the feel of me. “*Yes*,” he whispered. “But there’s a difference between being ready and, like, ready-ready…”

I swallowed roughly at his words. “You think so?”

“Of course,” he murmured, tucking my hair behind my ear. You should move at your own pace.”

He was so sweet. “I love you, Charlie.”

He gave me a devastating smile, taking my hand and kissing my palm. He was so tender, I just about melted. “I love you too, Sunshine. Of course I do. And I would never want you to pressure yourself—”

“No pressure,” I said, determined. “I want you, right now.”

“You can tell me if you need to stop at any time, though. Don’t hesitate, I’m—”

I didn’t let him finish. Enough talking. Grabbing the back of his neck, I pulled him down to me, my mouth one with his. I spread my legs wider, caging his bare body against mine before wrapping my legs around his waist. He groaned when we made contact, and I shivered. He slid his hand down my body, settling between my thighs, teasing me till I started to shake.

“That’s it,” he whispered in my ear, “I want you to feel good.”

I was feeling *so* good.

I kissed him again and again, everything between us so heated as our bare lower bodies brushed against each other. I couldn’t get enough of it. I ran my hands down his back, loving the way his muscles heaved, the friction between us making me whine into his mouth. This was the boy I adored, the boy who adored me, and I felt so safe and secure in his arms. I needed more. We were as close as we could get without him being inside me, and my hips were twitching upward like my body had a mind of its own.

We hadn’t taken that small yet kinda giant final step, but we were almost there, and the sensations were so magnified I was whimpering. I wondered if I could be pushed over the edge just from the feel of him down there, because it felt like it, tension building up. Our kiss didn’t break for a second, and I felt so intoxicated with want that my head was empty.

But then, just as I felt something climbing, coursing through me like electricity, Charlie broke the kiss, moving his hands away from my body. Panting as hard as I was, looking dazed, he reached for the condom on the nightstand.

He didn’t speak, just stared into my eyes, bringing his teeth to the packet, ready to tear it open. The excitement and need between us dimmed the second the friction was gone. My stomach clenched with anxiety, and my mouth opened before I could even think about it.

“Wait!” I rasped.

He froze, staring at me. “What? Are you okay?” He threw the condom away, and I felt terrible. My nerves had gotten the best of me, and suddenly I hated everything.

“I’m so sorry, I—”

“Please don’t apologize,” Charlie said quickly, shaking his head. “I told you, it’s okay—it’s totally cool if you’re not ready for that part of things.”

“I’m just…” I swallowed, my chest heaving. “I’m just really nervous,” I whispered.

“Do you want to stop?”

I opened my mouth. It was absurd that the answer was yes. Charlie was in front of me—gorgeous Charlie. I wanted him more than anything in this entire world. So why was I clamming up?

“Yes,” I said quickly. “Is that okay?”

He stroked my hair soothingly. “I promise you it’s okay. Come on now,” he murmured, rolling to the side and pulling me into his arms.

I felt horrible.

“I really want to, though,” I whispered, clinging to him. “But I just… I don’t know. I just feel… stressed? Like I have too many expectations about this that I can’t enjoy the moment? I don’t know how to describe it—”

“Violet,” Charlie breathed, brushing his hand over my shoulder. “I get it. Let’s take a breather.”

I sniffed. “A breather?”

He shrugged as if the sheet wasn’t still tenting over his lower body. *My god.*

“Yeah, like, maybe we can binge watch something and eat popcorn?” he asked.

He was such a pure soul that I just couldn’t bear it.

“We could do that…” I trailed off.

“Right? What do you wanna watch? Maybe something funny? Or a—”

“Or we could do some other stuff. Since we’re already naked and all,” I mumbled.

He raised an eyebrow. “What kind of stuff?”

I pressed my lips together. “Maybe things we’ve done before? You know…” I glanced down at the sheet and felt my cheeks flush. “We can still be intimate without going down that route. Like, it’s not just about the P in V situation. We’re sexually active either way.”

“I like the sound of that,” Charlie said, his expression cheeky. “The popcorn can definitely wait.”

I chuckled. He was beautiful, inside and out.

He kissed me again, made it softer, and all my worries melted away. I climbed over him, starting to kiss his neck, his sharp jawline, his toned chest, his broad shoulders. His firm skin felt so incredible under my mouth, and I got bolder and bolder. I brushed my lips down his navel, then even lower. It was so incredible to give him this kind of pleasure, to feel him tremble because of me. He was so stunning it made my heart hurt.

He flipped us over afterward, did the same thing to me, kissing down my body. And then he stayed there, his face between my legs. He made me feel so amazing that I was shaking non-stop.

He looked up at me, full of love and sweetness and mischief. “You want me to do that again?”

Still quivering, I nodded vividly. “Oh my god, *yes*.”

“Are you sure?”

I choked. “Charlie, *yes*!”

His eyes glinting, he laughed, his hand trailing down my skin, his happiness as big as mine. My heart was full of love and longing, so much so that I couldn’t believe it.

I couldn’t believe how lucky I was to have him.

I couldn’t believe how lucky I was to exist and share this beautiful moment with the boy I adored.

**Episode 1930**

For what felt like the millionth time, both my mates were staring at me, waiting for a decision.

*What the hell am I supposed to do?* I thought, annoyed. *Why does it always have to come down to me? Don’t they understand that this would be me making a choice!*

Okay, maybe it wouldn’t be about me choosing my one and only mate, but still. This was the worst for me, and I didn’t want to upset anyone or accidentally kill anyone, so both of them needed to back off.

“The two of you need to get out of my room.” I pointed at the door. “I’m not doing this.”

Xavier looked annoyed, but Greyson looked disappointed. *Sad*. He looked like some sort of Renaissance painting when he got sad—an angel with his wings cut off, or whatever romantic bullshit—and I just couldn’t take it.

I hated all of this.

It made me feel bad, like I’d done something wrong, and I resented the clusterfuck that was this whole situation. But sometimes the best option was to disappoint everyone. At least that way, both these annoying lovesick idiots would stay alive!

*Priorities, people!*

“Hold on now,” Xavier said, cutting me off. “Since I was with you last night—”

Oh my god, and now Greyson looked even sadder. This was horrendous. I just wanted to yell at him, *STOP BEING SAD, YOU BEAUTIFUL DIVINE GOD, I LOVE YOU!*

“Where are you going with this, Xavier?” I almost snapped at my other mate, glaring, and then Xavier did the unthinkable.

He said, “I was just thinking that it would only be fair if you and Greyson stay together tonight.”

Greyson stopped looking sad. Now, he was just stunned.

*Same, dude*, I thought.

“What?” I asked, blinking.

Xavier shrugged. “Fair is fair, right? And since we’re still sharing, it seems like the right thing to do.”

Greyson stared at Xavier like his brother was out of his mind. Xavier stared back, and I was fed up.

“Are you two mind linking or something?” I scoffed. “You know what—it doesn’t matter. This has gone too far.”

“But Cali,” Xavier started, “if we’re sharing—”

“Stop using the word ‘sharing’—it sounds horrible!” I snapped. “When we first started all of this, it made sense, but now it’s just grating to even hear. Do I look like a piece of land? That you *own*? You think that you and Greyson can just *decide* who I sleep with? Don’t I have a say in this?”

Xavier flinched, holding up his hands. “Whoa. That’s not what I meant. I was only trying to compromise, and I just said sharing, because that’s what—”

I glared at him. “You’re not sharing me. I’m the one who’s got both of you in this mess because I’m cursed. Have I made myself clear?”

“Cali,” Xavier started.

I pointed at the door. “What I want is for both of you to leave.”

Xavier shot a serious-looking Greyson a glance and shrugged. “Fine, then.” He headed toward the door, pausing by the exit. “By the way…” He stared at me, his gaze heated. “If you change your mind, I’ll be just down the hall.”

I gaped as he sauntered off, and then I groaned and buried my face in my hands. I hated how flustered he could get me, especially with poor, sad, beautiful Greyson in the room!

Greyson, who said, “I hope you understand that I had no intention of putting you in the middle like that.”

I looked up at him. There was a gentleness to his features that made me want to weep. “I know.”

“I really was looking forward to spending the night with you, but I understand,” he murmured, taking a step closer. He glanced at my mouth, and my heart went into overdrive. “Maybe some other time…” He trailed off, brushing my chin with his fingers before walking away.

I was left all alone in my room, surprised that they’d agreed so quickly, turned on, and really fucking frustrated with everything. These wouldn’t have been the right circumstances to stay with either of them, though.

Xavier had claimed he was trying to be fair, but that was BS—there had to be a catch there. As for Greyson, if he didn’t want to put me in the middle, why had he been in here wearing nothing but a freaking towel?

Thinking about all this stressed me out. Despite everything, I was still right back at square one—stuck in the middle with no easy answers. I paced in my room, feeling like an animal in a cage, trapped.

My heart was pounding. Xavier’s fingers on my hand and Greyson’s on my chin… Their touch lingered, reminding me how much I wanted and loved them both. I needed to calm the hell down now, or I’d never get to sleep!

*And I need my sleep, UGH!* I grumbled internally.

A thought popped into my head: I remembered seeing Tension Tamer tea in the cupboard. Maybe that would do the trick? I hesitated at the door—they’d better not be waiting for me in the hall like a couple of horndogs—I would not stand for it!

*At least not right now*, I added internally.

Thankfully, the hall was empty. I quickly headed downstairs, thinking it was late, so I wouldn’t run into anyone. But the moment I got in the living room, I saw Artemis and Rishika passionately making out up against the wall.

“Oh my god!” I blurted out, backing away. Ugh, I was happy for Artemis, but I did NOT need to see this from anyone right now, let alone my sister.

The two of them didn’t even register that I was there, so I marched to the kitchen, grumbling something about disrespectful Fae and werewolves. SERIOUSLY.

I was done with people for the day.

When I got to the kitchen, though, my mother was already there. At least she hadn’t done anything to annoy me lately, so I did want to be around her. She was sitting pensively at the table, cup of tea already in hand. When our eyes met, she smiled.

“Looks like we had the same idea,” I mumbled, picking up a packet to make my own tea.

“We did,” she said.

“Why are you still up?” I asked.

My mom broke eye contact, sighing. “I’m a little nervous about your father. Tomorrow’s the full moon, and he’s…” She shook her head like she could still barely believe it. “He’s going to become a wolf.”

I frowned, taking a seat across from her at the table. My mom had been super chill when we’d first learned about my dad, but now I had to wonder if all these battles and wars and whatever had changed her point of view.

“How do you feel about Dad turning, Mom?” I asked quietly. “And please don’t sugarcoat it.”

She took a deep breath. “I spent a good deal of my married life protecting Tom from the supernatural, and now…”

“Now what?”

“I wonder if I should have done a better job preparing him for it,” she admitted.

I brought my hand over hers on the table. “Dad was a little freaked out at first, but he’s done a pretty good job adjusting. Please don’t feel guilty.”

My mom gave an awkward chuckle. “I know that. I’m proud of how well Tom has been taking everything, but he’s a gentle, loving person. I’m not sure how he’s going to fit into this world of Silas and Letifer and revenants and now the Vanguard pack…” She took another sip of her tea.

My stomach fluttered with worry. My own cup of tea remained untouched. “I’m really sorry I dragged you into all this, Mom.”

“Don’t say that, ever,” she replied, her tone firm. “We, both of us, chose to come here. To help you. But Tom… I feel like returning to Minnesota and normalcy could help him.”

I swallowed roughly, nodding. “I get what you mean.”

“I once had similar fears for you, but I’ve come to realize that your mates will protect you with their lives,” my mom said. “I wish I could give you a normal life, but these men and this curse have tied you here—at least for now. And your mates love you, and you love them. That’s the upside.”

I took a moment to think about this—even though my two mates were driving me crazy with their fighting and bickering and Alpha posturing, I knew that my mom was right. Greyson and Xavier would put themselves through anything and everything if it meant keeping me safe. It was how I experienced our bond as well—there was no limit to what I’d do to for either of them, for their love and safety.

And I was certain that my parents felt the same way about each other…

*Right?*

I frowned. “Wait…”

“What?” my mom asked.

Suddenly nervous, I stared at my mother. What if the tie between my parents wasn’t as unshakeable as I thought it was?

“Mom…” I trailed off. “What if you aren’t Dad’s mate?”

**Episode 1931**

LOLA

I took a deep breath as the stabbing pain subsided.

What the *hell* was that?

Jay was panting as if he was the one who’d felt like he was dying.

“What the hell was that?” he said, repeating my thoughts. “I’m gonna go get Torin in here to heal you!” He made a move to run off, but I grabbed him by the elbow.

Still overwhelmed, I shook my head. “There’s nothing to heal—I’m just really achy and feeling weird.”

Jay stared at me, worried. “What do you mean?”

He stroked my back, and I fought to focus on my train of thought. What *was* this? Maybe that fresh deer blood didn’t agree with me? Could it be blood poisoning? Did vampires even *get* blood poisoning? I’d have to ask that annoying Jacqueline about it… But then again, maybe that wasn’t a good idea. I could just imagine Jacs making fun of me, the brat.

“Maybe you could try and explain to me what you feel?” Jay asked, gently insisting. “I might be able to help you somehow.”

I swallowed down a groan. “It’s similar to when I had a bad shift back from being a wolf and it didn’t totally go right.”

Jay winced, the memory not a fond one for either of us. “Yeah, that was fucking horrible. You were stuck—part human, part wolf.”

“This doesn’t have anything to do with what’s happening right now, though,” I noted. “I have no wolf, I’m a vampire.”

Jay paused, thoughtful. Then, he stared at me, his gaze full of hope. “Since Big Mac helped you once, maybe she can do it again?”

I freaked out at the thought. “No! That witch stole your eye—I don’t want to owe her anything!”

Jay snorted. “Lola, come on! She’s not that bad.”

I pressed my lips together. “Fine, that may be. But she was in such a good mood tonight for once, and I don’t want to be the one to bring her down. I can’t ask for her help right now.”

Jay’s expression darkened. “What’s your solution, then?”

I frowned. “I don’t like your tone, Jay.”

He groaned, frustrated. “Lola! I love you and you’re hurting and I don’t know what to do!”

I sniffled. “You love me?”

“Oh my god, dude, focus,” he told me, “We have to do something right now—someone needs to help you, so what about…” He paused, realizing. “What about Jacqueline?”

I rolled my eyes. That vampire had been my first thought as well, but that didn’t mean I liked it. Or her!

“Seriously, Jay?”

He seemed helpless, and it made my heart ache. “Do we have any other option? Please, Lola.” He stroked my arm again, and my heart fluttered.

Damn him.

“Fine,” I grumbled, and Jay nodded eagerly.

“I’m on it!” He hurried off out of the room, and I stayed back, taking a deep, long-suffering breath.

I wished that Emmett was still here—he was a creepy creeper, but at least he’d probably have some answers. I headed to the bathroom and splashed my face with water, feeling pins and needles all over my body, as if the pain was gone but had left something bad in its wake.

What in the hell was going on with me?

I’d been telling the truth when I’d told Jay that I felt weird. And it wasn’t something specific—just a feeling that something was off. I turned off the faucet and straightened up, my eyes falling on the mirror out of habit, when—

*OH MY GOD!*

I screamed, panting. My reflection was there—I wasn’t supposed to have a freaking reflection! What on earth? Aside from the fact that I looked like hell—and that was also a little terrifying—I was completely baffled. What did having a reflection mean? Was I no longer a vampire?

“This supernatural bullshit is out of control,” I said under my breath, huffing as I checked for my fangs in the mirror. Yep, still there, pointy as ever.

“Lola?” I heard Jay’s voice in the hallway and quickly stepped out of the bathroom. I didn’t want to spring the reflection thing on him yet—the random pain was enough, thanks.

“Why am I here again?” Jacqueline asked, looking between us like a bored, annoyed cat. Some things never changed. “I was sleeping, you know!”

Jay frowned. “Aren’t vampires supposed to love the night?”

Jacs ignored him, putting her hands on her hips as she turned to me. “Lola, what is so important that your mate literally had to drag me from my beauty sleep?”

I was about to explain, but Jay stepped in, breathlessly explaining to Jacs what had happened.

I thought about my hunt with Cali again, so I asked her, “Could this have anything to do with me feeding on deer blood?”

Jacs flipped her hair over her shoulder. “You had to feed, Lola. And typically an animal will do.”

I blinked, freaked out. “*Typically?*”

Jay cleared his throat. “Let’s not jump to conclusions. Lola is new to this, and she’s not getting Tottenville’s pancakes anymore—maybe her body has to adjust. Maybe the deer was rabid or something?”

“Oh my god!” I slapped my forehead. “A rabid deer? Can deer even go rabid, Jay?”

“I don’t know,” he said awkwardly, worriedly, and I just wanted to die.

“A rabid deer,” I said under my breath, raking my hands through my hair. “That would be just my luck! Am I going to start foaming at the mouth? What kind of outfit am I supposed to wear if I’m gonna be covered in rabies drool?”

“Okay, both of you, stop it,” Jacs said firmly, looking between us. She squeezed my shoulder. “I need you to calm down, Lola—”

“I am calm!” I shouted.

“A little calmer than that.” She scoffed. “Deer can get rabies, but I’ve never met a vampire who could, so you shouldn’t worry about that.”

I gulped. “For real?”

“Yes,” Jacs said.

“Then what’s going on?” I asked. Jay bit his lip, nervous.

“I might have a theory…” Jacs trailed off awkwardly, and I flicked her arm.

“Oh my god, out with it, woman!”

Jacs stared at me. “Tottenville is all about teaching vampires to live in a human world, be part of their society, instead of killing them. Right?”

My eyes narrowed. “Right…”

“But some vampires disagree with that philosophy,” Jacs went on.

“Oh, great,” Jay said wryly.

“What I’m trying to tell you here is that some vamps think that living among humans isn’t right. That a vampire has a primal need for human blood, and that’s the only way things should be,” Jacs explained.

What the fuck?!

I got queasy. “I refuse to hunt humans, Jacqueline.”

Jacs shrugged. “Well, maybe you don’t have to hunt—a werewolf can be quite nourishing, too…” Smirking, she gestured to Jay.

I glared at her. “I’m not going to feed from my mate!”

Jacs licked her lips, eyeing my mate up and down. “Well, I would. In my experience, werewolf blood is chicken soup for the soul.”

“My god, could you just *not*?” Jay gagged, and I couldn’t blame him.

I planted myself between Jacs and my mate, staring at her down. “Nobody but me is tapping into Jay. Stay the fuck away before I tear your head off. How about that?”

Jacqueline rolled her eyes. “Stop it with your dumb posturing! I’m just kidding. You two woke me up over some BS—I need to entertain myself somehow!”

“This isn’t a fucking sitcom, Jacs,” I said, huffing. “I don’t know what the hell I’m doing!”

“You can always just call Emmett,” she suggested. “Maybe he has a serum or something to help you.”

I could actually feel the unease rolling off Jay. I scowled at the thought.

“I’ll give you a minute to process that,” Jacqueline told me casually. “And if you change your mind and feel like doing some human hunting…” She smirked, resting a hand on my shoulder. “I’m just down the hall.” She gazed between Jay and me before sashaying out like the arrogant little shit she was.

“That girl is so annoying,” Jay grumbled.

I’d have agreed if I hadn’t been so worried about what the hell happened next. What was I supposed to do? I just wanted to feel normal, but there was no way I was going to kill humans.

“I can’t do what she’s asking, Jay,” I whispered, sniffling. “I can’t hurt people.”

“I get it, babe,” Jay said, wrapping his arms around me. “I’m so sorry about all this… Are you sure you don’t wanna try the other solution Jacs mentioned?”

I looked up at him, still sniffling. “What?”

He arched an eyebrow. “Why don’t you try a little of my blood? You’ve done it before, and it didn’t harm me. Who knows, maybe it’ll help you?” He tilted his neck back, and my eyes instantly zeroed in on his veins.

I stared at his artery, could actually feel the blood pumping. My fangs instantly extended.

“I trust you, baby. It’s gonna be okay,” Jay said in a sensual murmur, and I felt hypnotized by his heady scent, his hot touch. He pulled me toward him. I nuzzled across his neck, my head dizzy with the need to *take* and *feed* and then…

I bit down.

The rush of energy was electrifying as his delicious blood filled my mouth. It was divine, pristine, so much fucking better than the deer. I wanted more and more of it, so much more that—

I was hit by a terrifying thought.

*Oh my god, I can’t stop!*

**Episode 1932**

GREYSON

The house felt too small for me and all my feelings.

It would’ve been hilarious if it weren’t fucking true.

I was sad and mad, and I headed outside, taking a deep breath of cold evening air. Staying inside would’ve just served as a reminder of all the things that were still fucked up between Cali and me. And *us*. Cali, Xavier, and myself. My little brother was so infuriating that he made accepting his challenge to fight look very tempting.

The witches had been at least semi-clear about one thing, though: if I returned to my position as Alpha, Cali would die.

As for the co-Alpha thing… There’d been no mention of that in the witches’ fate mumbo jumbo, because who would even make that up? Cali would, of course. I loved how fast her mind was, but sometimes, with the three witches lurking and being vague, it just felt like things were an inch away from being shoved off a cliff.

Until I knew more about my destiny, it would be too risky to agree to being co-Alpha of the pack. I contemplated explaining all this to Cali, just to make her understand why I was being cagey about her suggestion.

I wouldn’t say anything to Xavier, though.

I didn’t trust the little shit, and I was certain that he would only use it as ammunition against me. He’d start rambling about me being weak, vulnerable to witches and spells. Which was bullshit. How was it *my* fault that witchcraft seemed to follow me around like a flea-ridden, soul-sucking puppy? It felt like I was constantly being fucked over by either some sort of witchy thing or my own little brother.

Couldn’t everybody other than Cali please *just leave me alone*?

Thanks.

Anyway, the best course of action would probably be to say nothing to Cali until I had things figured out, otherwise she’d most probably start worrying. We didn’t need any of that right now, especially because there were more immediate things to deal with.

The sudden appearance of the Vanguard pack was not something to take lightly.

They weren’t as big a threat as Letifer, but a rival pack was a rival pack, and they needed to back the fuck off. Pack wars had been fought over territory or just bad blood, and it didn’t take much to start them.

I personally was fed up with war, though. It seemed like the Redwoods felt the same way—more fighting wouldn’t be a good thing for anyone. We needed time to fully heal, to just be content for just one goddamn second.

Andrei was definitely bad news, though.

How weird was it that he’d just shown up almost immediately after Letifer’s defeat? It was as if he’d been biding his time, waiting for us to get rid of an ancient warlock that had been terrorizing people for centuries. Probably because he and his pack would never have managed to pull off that kind of feat.

Weird. Very, very weird.

Maybe I was getting paranoid, but when it came to the pack, I took no chances.

I scented the cool breeze and decided to shift and do a perimeter check. Just to be safe. As I ran out into the woods, I wondered who was on sentry duty right now. It couldn’t be Rishika—I’d seen her enthusiastically making out with Artemis on my way out, snuggling on the couch. Good for them. I fucking *wished* things could be so easy between Cali and me.

Feeling pretty achy, I shoved away those thoughts from my head and scented the air once more. I picked up the scents of Sage and Zainab and moved in that direction, realizing they were the ones on duty. I found them sniffing around a few bushes, and they turned to face me.

*Greyson!* Sage mind linked. *What’s up?*

*Just out for a run*, I replied. *All good?*

*Sure*, Zainab said. *Why are you asking?*

*Just checking if you guys have seen or sensed anything unusual*, I said.

*Nope, it’s all good*, Sage said. *Though Zainab just told me she likes raccoons, so that’s a little weird.*

*They’re fucking cute, okay?* Zainab said defensively.

Sage’s wolf huffed out a laugh, and I shook my head.

*Thank you both*, I said. *Keep up the good work. Watch out for raccoons. Or, you know, any real threats.*

Both wolfs yipped in laughter then, and I trotted away, feeling satisfied and relieved. I wasn’t surprised, though—as I’d suspected, Andrei’s unexpected appearance had been more of a warning shot. Pretty standard intimidation tactics.

I finished my run around the property, making sure his scent was nowhere to be found, and then I headed back to the house. I shifted back, wiped my feet on the welcome mat because I wasn’t a filthy animal, and then went inside. The warmth felt good after the cold night, and I felt refreshed.

Then, though, I heard Cali’s voice.

She was in the kitchen, quietly talking to Orla. I wondered what they were discussing, and I wished… I just fucking wished I could go to her, be part of a conversation with her mother, kiss her, bring her back to my room. But Cali had made it pretty clear that wasn’t going to happen, at least not tonight.

At least my brother wasn’t with her either.

It was a matter of honor at this point.

With a long-suffering sigh, I climbed the stairs and went straight to my room. After a quick shower, I fell onto the bed, exhausted. My eyes were droopy, whole body relaxed, when there was a soft knock at my door.

Before I could say come in, the door opened and closed.

And then I heard footsteps approaching.

It was the scent that told me all I needed to know.

When I turned, I saw Cali standing by my bed. I blinked slowly.

“Cali?” My voice was gruff. “What are you doing here? I thought you didn’t want to see me.”

She stared at me, biting her lip. “Well, you thought wrong.”

She took off her sweatpants and sweater, left with nothing but her underwear. I swallowed roughly when she slid into bed beside me, my heart racing.

“What are you doing?” I asked, glancing between her eyes and her mouth, then down her body. God, she was fucking gorgeous.

“I just…” She took a deep breath, snuggling closer to me. Her hand trailed down my arm, her gaze intense on mine. “I was thinking about what happened between us earlier tonight, and I decided I didn’t want to think about it alone.”

That was my cue.

“You missed me, love?” I asked, pulling her into my arms.

She looked up at me, full of longing and want, and my heart just exploded. “Always.”

I smiled at her, softly tracing her cheek with my palm, leaning down to brush my lips over hers. She opened her mouth instantly, her hands wrapping around me tight. Her hands moved from my hips to my bare ass, groping there like nobody’s business, dragging me closer. The kiss went from zero to one hundred in just seconds, and Cali hitched her leg over my hip and pulled me on top of her. I licked into her mouth, and she let me lead. Her hands ran through my hair, her hot, soft body spreading and opening under me, so ready to get fucked that I felt like I was in heaven already.

I took off her bra, tracing kisses down her neck, her collarbones, listening to her moans as she trailed her hands down my back.

“You always feel so good,” she whispered in my ear.

I was shaking, fingertips moving from her bellybutton and then lower, between her legs to caress over her underwear. She was wet already, and it drove me nuts.

“Say that again,” I whispered, nibbling at the spot where her neck met her shoulder, and she let out a sound that set me on fire.

“You always feel so good,” she said breathlessly, just like I asked, her hips arching to my touch as I cupped her. I teased her, feeling her getting needier and needier, perfect for me.

“You always feel amazing, you—you’ll always be my Alpha, Greyson…” Her voice cracked, and I liked the sound of that.

I *loved* the sound of that.

I faced her, about to kiss her again, about to tear her underwear off when suddenly…

*You’ll always be my Alpha.*

Cali’s words echoed in my head, and I felt a sharp pain in my heart.

My gasp was loud enough to startle her. I looked down, and under the moonlight, the skin of my chest changed and shifted, black veins spreading and writhing, creating tremors beneath my skin.

“Greyson!” Cali shouted, terrified.

I was shaking, the pain numbing while the veins multiplied, rolling through my flesh until they burst right through my skin…

And wrapped themselves around Cali as she screamed in horror.

**Episode 1933**

MARTA

I was in my room, feeling sorry for myself and more alone than ever.

I hated lying to Big Mac. She’d been a friend to me, someone I could always depend on. I’d told her that the reason I was wearing gloves was because I had cold hands, when the truth was that I was a cabbage murderer and potentially a people murderer.

I was pretty sure Big Mac didn’t buy my cold hands excuse, but thankfully we’d gotten interrupted and she’d been pulled away. I hadn’t been able to tell her the truth right then—it would’ve ruined her engagement party. Tomorrow, though, I was going to tell her what was really going on. First thing in the morning I’d walk up to her and blurt it out before I chickened out.

I stared at the empty space next to me on the bed, taking a deep breath. I wished Lilac was here—staying in this room just didn’t feel the same without him. Being tethered to him had felt unnatural until it became part of me. I’d gotten accustomed to him always being around, and now I missed it.

I missed the kind of connection we used to have.

It was gone now, replaced by something else I hadn’t yet defined. Something exciting but a little scary too. There had been a moment when I was trapped in Bert’s house when I’d thought that I would never have anyone in my life. That my entire human existence would be nothing more than the few experiences I’d lived before Bert had captured me.

And when I was finally freed, thanks to Charlie and Violet, I’d started falling for a ghost. Which was crazy, and I knew it. But now things had changed again. Lilac was corporeal, *I* was definitely corporeal, and I was beginning to have hope that I would be able to live so much more than I’d ever dreamed of. I had no idea if we were mates, or even how that worked for werewolves, but there was something between us.

I could feel it vibrating in the air.

With the thought of Lilac making me smile, I took a quick shower and brushed my teeth, getting ready to go to bed. A moment after I slid on my PJs, though, there was a knock on the door.

“Come in!” I called.

“Hello, it’s me. Exactly who you hoped it would be,” Lilac said, sauntering in. Although I was happy to see him, I instantly put on my gloves. Just in case.

He groaned, rolling his eyes. “Marta, can you just *not*? I thought we’d already established that your touch can’t harm me?”

I eyed him carefully. “We still don’t know that for sure.”

Looking annoyed but also cute, Lilac took a step closer to me. He smelled like cinnamon, and his T-shirt stretched over his broad shoulders, and that was pretty distracting for me. I was quickly reminded of why I felt so lonely without him. And his shoulders. And his face. And his cheeky jokes. And—

“Come on, try it,” he said, holding out his hand. His fingers were long and gorgeous, and I had definitely missed them too.

“I’m not doing this,” I said, even though I ached to touch him. To kiss and hold him and feel him hold me. I just wanted to grab and squeeze him and tell him to squeeze me as much as he wanted, because I felt like I would be into that if he was the one doing it.

As my inappropriate thoughts kept escalating, Lilac said, “I promise I’ll let you know the second I start dying again.”

He thought he was being funny, but I stiffened, suddenly full of dread. I was reminded of the dying plant, the cabbage massacre, and what could happen to Lilac if I wasn’t careful. “Don’t joke about this. I’m freaking out, okay?”

Lilac sighed, pressing his lips together. “I’m sorry. I don’t want to scare you. I’m being serious about this, though, come on—touch my hand.”

I was about to do so when Lilac added, “*Without* the glove.”

My hand dropped. “I don’t think I’m ready to risk that again.”

He frowned, confused. “Why not? Has something changed?” He arched an eyebrow. “Don’t you want to touch me?”

I could feel my cheeks turning bright red. There was nothing I wanted to do more. I wanted to touch him all over. Kiss him all over, too. *Feel* him all over.

“You’re so annoying,” I mumbled, but my expression must’ve said something else, because he stepped closer. There was a certainty to his face that made me gulp, and then he glanced at my hands.

“Don’t you think that gloves take safe sex a little too far?” he asked with a smirk.

I huffed, sputtering. “What? That’s—who said anything about *sex*?”

He arched both eyebrows. His tone was almost strict, and I wanted to start stomping my feet. “Marta. You want me. Say you want me.”

“I’m not saying it.”

“Marta. You want me. I want you. Say it.”

“Nope.”

“Marta, I want to hear it, and if I don’t—”

“Oh my goodness, fine!” I groaned. “I know we’ve almost slept together a few times, and I know you want me and I want you, and I want to have sex with you—” *Badly*, I thought—“but—”

“I want to show you something,” Lilac said.

I scoffed. “I bet you do.”

To my complete and utter shock, he didn’t laugh at me being a smartass. He remained serious and gestured at the door. “Follow me.”

Suspicious, my gloves still on, I followed him out of the room and halfway down the hallway before I realized what was happening. “Are you about to show me your bedroom?”

Lilac paused in front of his door and opened it. “No.” He nodded inside. “I want to show you my bed.”

We stepped in, he closed the door, and I crossed my arms over my chest. “Do you really think that’s how things work? That you’d just show me your bed and I’d forget that I’m a cabbage murderer and then we’d do the devil’s tango?”

Lilac shocked me once more when he didn’t comment on my joke. He neared me, his gaze intense on mine as he spoke, his voice deep but even. “I wanted to show you my bed because I want you to stay in it with me. Tonight.”

I laughed nervously. “Still doesn’t change the cabbage massacre, or the dead plant.”

He took my gloved hand in his, placing it over his chest, over his heart, and that was when my brain kind of turned into mush. His steady heartbeat made my entire body drum, the connection between us palpable.

“I’m ready for this,” he murmured. “And I think you are too. Correct me if I’m wrong.”

“I’m…” I swallowed. “Yeah. You’re not wrong.”

He stared deep into my eyes and led me to sit down on the bed with him. I’d had no idea he had so much game, but he definitely did. Because then he said, “When I was dead, I thought I was going to miss out on a lot of things… But now, seeing my sister, being part of the pack again, it all feels so good to have once more. It’s like I never knew the first time around how damn lucky I was to be around so many people who cared about me, and who I cared about. And now, what I have with you…”

He squeezed my hand, and I shivered.

“What we have feels really special. I want to experience everything with you, and not hold back. That includes certain…”

His cheeks were flushed, his lips parted and full, and it took all my power not to grab him and pull him close. This moment between us had me overwhelmed, and for once I didn’t protest when he started to pull the glove off my hand.

“I want you to be my first, Marta,” he whispered.

I had never been more flattered, flustered, and turned on in my entire goddamn life. I was so overcome, my mind and body vibrating with such intensity that I just let him take the glove off and weave his fingers through mine.

I jolted at the touch, but my fear departed as soon it arrived.

I stared at our intertwined fingers and took a deep calming breath.

Lilac was okay.

He wasn’t hurt. He was here, alive, looking at me like I was the only person he’d ever seen. No boy had ever made me feel this way. It felt like I was floating but grounded at the same time, his touch like a magnet that drew me to him and only made me want more.

Made me want everything.

He looked so gorgeous and sweet that I couldn’t waste another second.

“Yes,” I said, with full-blown enthusiasm, and when he beamed at me, I pushed him back onto the bed, kissing his smile with everything I had.

**Episode 1934**

XAVIER

I was out on a run, trying to find the wolves who were on patrol at the moment. I’d said that leaving Cali with Greyson was the right thing to do—given that I’d slept with her last night—but of course the moment the words had been out of my mouth, I’d regretted it.

Being fair was complete and utter horseshit.

I just felt worse and irked at the mere idea of it—of Cali being with Greyson, regardless of the context and what was right. I didn’t care about that. I just wanted Cali for my own, obviously, and I wondered if we were actually together now. Like, we were fucking, so that did mean we were together. I assumed.

This was so goddamn *frustrating*.

I was racing through the woods when I picked up Greyson’s scent. Was he out here? Was he trying to check the grounds and play Alpha in the middle of the night? Because that had been *my* idea, not his. He had no right to have any ideas, since he didn’t want to fight me, and he also didn’t want to be co-Alphas. And, worst of all, he just wouldn’t clearly explain what the fuck his agenda was at the moment.

“We want peace for the pack,” he’d said, but that was BS. He had a secret plan or something going on. I could feel it. But what could he be hiding after all this time? What could there even be *left* to hide at this point? Why was he such a cagey, annoying asshole?

And he asked why I couldn’t trust him—how could I ever trust him when he acted like he was Batman or something? What the fuck?

Irritated, I huffed, and was rushing forward when I caught Sage’s scent. I howled, and she returned it instantly. I came across her and Zainab a moment later in the nearest clearing. They were sniffing the air, and for them to be out in the open like this, there had to be no danger anywhere near.

*How’s the patrol been?* I asked through mind link.

Zainab spoke up. *Quiet, other than you and Greyson.*

Greyson. Of course. That was why I’d caught his scent. He was out here being a nuisance, as always.

*When was Greyson out here?* I asked.

*Not long ago*, Sage responded. *He was asking if we found anything weird. I think he’s got an eye out for the Vanguard pack.*

I frowned. *Had you smelled that guy Andrei before today?*

Both of them shook their heads.

*But it’s kind of difficult to be sure, given all the scents of the revenants and everything else that’s been going on*, Sage commented.

She was right.

*Thank you, that makes sense*, I said. *By the way, when your shift is done, I’ll switch out for you.*

*Thanks, Xavier! We’ll drop you a howl*, Sage replied, and Zainab rolled her eyes.

*That was not a good pun, babe*, she said.

*Was too!* Sage was indignant.

I left them shoving each other as I headed back around the woodsy area. Indeed, there were no fresh traces of Andrei’s scent. What was this guy’s goal, though? What did the Vanguard pack even want? It was odd how they’d just popped up the moment Letifer was out of the picture—it was as if they’d been biding their time. As for Andrei, I hadn’t met the man, so I didn’t have a read on him.

Greyson had been there to talk to him, and as much as that annoyed me, I told myself to get a grip. Who met the wolf first ultimately didn’t matter. I would be the one to deal with this potential threat, and Greyson would take a back seat. That was how things were supposed to be, anyway.

Just like I was *supposed* to be with Cali.

When I came back to the house, though, I noticed that her light was out. Was she asleep? Maybe I should go check on her—just to make sure she was okay. In general. But what if she wasn’t alone? There was a chance that Greyson had swept in and made eyes at her or whatever the hell and she’d fallen like a deck of cards. It wouldn’t be the first time, and I’d made everything worse by giving them my blessing.

I growled under my breath and shifted back to human before stepping onto the front porch. I was breathing in the cold air, just to calm myself the hell down, when I heard movement behind me. When I turned, I saw Ava.

Her wolf stretched before she shifted back to human, her bare body bathed in the moonlight, hair flowing in the wind. I instantly looked away, hating the way my stomach tightened at the sight.

“What are you doing out here?” I snapped.

“What does it look like?” she asked, coming to stand before me.

I kept my gaze firmly on her face. “Don’t act smart with me. There’s a patrol, and you’re not on it.”

She sighed. “I just felt like going on a run and checking the perimeter. I might as well help the pack out.”

Her lips looked so red out in the cold like this that the contrast with her pale skin was startling. I looked away again, shaking my head, hating this moment between us. Kira’s words popped into my head—there was a chance that the unmating spell was wearing off, especially since I could feel it.

*Fuck*. I didn’t need this—I had enough on my plate without worrying about Ava. The last thing I wanted was her in my head and any of the mate bond to return, *especially* while I was on the cusp of becoming the undisputed Alpha.

Okay, perhaps “on the cusp” was pushing it a little, but still. I had other stuff to deal with, and she was only trouble.

I was about to turn my back on her, get the fuck away, when she spoke up again.

“I actually wanted to talk to you about something.”

*Here we go again…*

“I can’t think of anything that would be worth discussing with you,” I said grimly.

She smiled. It was enigmatic and maddening. I couldn’t believe how unaffected she seemed by all the cruel things I kept telling her—*how* could she not take the hint when it was more of a constant statement? This was ridiculous.

“I think you’d like to hear about this,” she said in calm tone. “It’s about a very recent development that’s got to do with you saving my life the other day, so—”

I cut her off, annoyed. “No. That’s not what I did.”

She pressed her lips together, looking determined. “You know that’s not true, Xavier. If you hadn’t brought me back to the pack house so quickly, I probably would’ve died again—”

“That doesn’t mean—”

“You kissed me, Xavier,” she said.

Her voice was even enough to give me pause, despite the irritation building inside me.

“Your kiss and all your valiant efforts are why I’m here today,” she said, and she sounded grateful. Moved.

I hated it.

I felt like exploding, but I told myself not to. I shouldn’t waste my energy on her—shouldn’t give her that kind of satisfaction. She couldn’t know how much she could affect me, above all because I didn’t know how she would try to exploit it. Being around her required way too much energy, just trying to figure out what game she was playing each and every time.

“What I’m trying to say is…” She took a step closer, and I stood there, immobile, looking away from her. I would just let her say her piece, remain calm like she could never mean anything to me, and walk the fuck away.

“You saved me, but Ravi’s blood helped as well,” she admitted.

Why the fuck did I not like the sound of that? What was wrong with me?

“After what happened, the two of us have shared a very strong connection that’s been very… fun.”

Her words made my ears ring. I didn’t ask her what the fuck that was supposed to mean, because her arched eyebrows and little smirk gave me a pretty clear idea. I wanted to snarl, but I kept my shit together.

“So you two slept together, great, whatever, good for you. What does this have to do with me?”

The moment the words were out of my mouth, I just got angrier. Why hadn’t Ravi mentioned this to me? We were friends. Kinda. A little. But then again, why would be report back to me about who he was fucking at any given time?

This was a mess.

“It’s more than a physical connection, actually,” Ava went on. Her tone was more cautious.

My eyes narrowed. “What the fuck are you saying?”

“Ravi and I might be mates, Xavier.”

A jolt of fury ran through me at the sound of that sentence.

She smiled again. “I have that new connection with Ravi, and then there’s you, Xavier. I know you can feel what’s going on between us…” She reached out, placing a hand on my chest, and I went rigid. I would never admit it, but I could feel *exactly* what she was talking about, especially when she touched me like this.

Glancing at my mouth, she whispered, “It’s like the bond is repairing itself, Xavier… which means we could be another *due destini*.”

**Episode 1935**

LOLA

The rush of blood was like a live current running through my system. It tasted divine and made me feel invigorated even after a few seconds of drinking it. I knew I should stop, but it was so delicious, energizing, and amazing that it felt like a drug.

I craved it.

I couldn’t stop myself.

Werewolf blood tasted different than all the blood at Tottenville. The blood there had seemed fresh at the time, but compared to the real thing like this it was processed food. It was so good that it made me wonder how any vampire could think that werewolf blood was disgusting. It was like the best dessert out there, better than chocolate, better than cheesecake, better than anything I’d ever had.

*Just a little more…*

I gorged myself on it, and the ache in my bones was gone. It was replaced by pleasure and total adrenaline, the red substance making me feel incredible. This was my mate’s blood, and he was incredible, my Jay.

*Wait, Jay!*

Oh my god, I had to stop! If I didn’t, I would kill Jay, my mate, the man I loved!

*Oh my god!*

Tearing my teeth away from him with all the self-control I could muster, I shouted, “Stay away from me!”

Jay frowned, looking confused and sexy as fuck as he put his hand to his neck. He was talking, telling me something, but the ringing of my ears stopped me from listening. I could see the blood seeping through his fingers from the holes I’d made at his freaking neck, and I wanted to start screaming.

“Christ, I hurt you!” I rushed to the bathroom, grabbing some toilet paper. I ran back out and shoved it in his hands. “Press this against the wound, it won’t stop bleeding!”

Jay stared at me, taking the toilet paper from my hands. His gaze was steady on mine. “Lola—”

“You’re dying!” I exclaimed. “I killed you!”

“Lola, *stop*. Take a deep breath and try to calm down. Okay?”

There was such command and certainty in his voice and expression that I did what I was told. I watched as Jay wiped the blood from his neck, keeping eye contact the entire time. He revealed two puncture wounds, and I swallowed audibly. They were red and there was a little blood, but it wasn’t as bad as I’d originally thought.

*Well. That was a close call!*

“Are you okay?” I whispered.

He snorted, shaking his head. “I’m fine. How are you feeling? Better?”

I nodded, looking at him up and down. He really looked fine. In all ways possible. *Damn*. “Who would’ve thought that Jacqueline would give good advice?” I mumbled.

Jay laughed. “So you *are* feeling better, huh?”

I licked my lips. “Oh, yes. And you’re sure you’re okay?”

“Like I said, I’m fine.” He smirked. “A little better than fine, actually. It’s wild how good a vampire bite feels…”

I frowned, crossing my arms. “Why would you say that? I don’t want Jacqueline to ever hear anything like that come out of your mouth!”

Jay looked surprised and amused. “Okay, why?”

I glared at him. “Can’t you tell? She’s constantly hardcore flirting with you!”

Jay paused, looking thoughtful. “Oh. You really think so?”

I huffed, poking his abs and making him chuckle. “Stop pretending that you haven’t noticed!”

“I have noticed, but it doesn’t matter,” he said playfully.

“Why?” I asked, pouting.

He leaned closer, tilting his head to the side. “You know why.”

“No, I don’t, so you’d better explain that to me before I get super jealous!”

Jay grinned, taking my hand in his. “You know you have no reason to be jealous.”

I pouted. “Liar.”

He leaned in and kissed my cheek. He smelled *so* good. “Lola, come on. You know I don’t want Jacqueline. I could never want anyone other than you. I only want my mate. Always.”

I stared at him, biting my lip. “Always?”

“Always and forever.”

I smirked, appeased. “I like that answer. Tell me more.”

He slid closer to me, wrapping his arm around my waist, pulling me closer. He nuzzled my temple. “You’re the only thing on my mind constantly. I want to kiss you, touch you, put my hands on you, make you feel good. You’re the only one for me, Lola. Can’t you feel it?”

With Jay’s words, everything inside me eased. I couldn’t believe that I’d gone from feeling that horrible pain to feeling this good. Could it be the vampire heat? I wasn’t sure, but Jay was so close and he smelled so good that nothing else mattered. His blood tasted delicious, and he was delicious too—so much so that I immediately swore off deer blood altogether.

“Show me,” I murmured, facing him. “Show me all the things you want to do to me.”

His gaze glinted with desire, and he pushed me back onto the bed, getting on top.

He kissed me deeply, the taste of his mouth combined with his blood coursing through my system, setting me on fucking fire. He was everywhere, surrounding me—his hands tearing off any remains of clothing before he ran them all over me, slipping his fingers between my legs to part and tease and slide right in. I was so wet for him that both of us groaned at the contact.

He made me come like that twice before I rolled us over and climbed on top, looking down at him as he grinned up at me, his chest heaving. I sank down onto him, full and filled with desire, his body in mine as we locked together, fingers intertwined over his head as I rode and kissed him. His heart was pounding, blood singing through every vein, every sound he made making me feel invincible.

He flipped us over, then, and pinned me down, fucking me as hard as I asked, biting into my neck. His hips slammed against mine over and over, his every motion a wave of electricity running through me, the friction and pressure setting me off again.

“That’s it,” he whispered. “Let me feel it. I love you so much.”

I loved him so fucking much.

The scent of his skin, his sweat, the way he took and gave had me feeling delirious. He shuddered inside me, his orgasm a whole body shiver followed by a loud groan. Panting, he stared down at me, smiling blissfully.

I wrapped my arms around him even tighter. “Don’t stop, don’t stop, please don’t—”

He didn’t stop. He was spurred on, kissed me again, kept fucking me until he was fully hard again, looking down to where we were joined and then up at my face. He held me down and made me come, and then he came again, burying himself to the hilt while I saw stars.

“Oh my god…” I choked out as he rolled over on the bed.

He chuckled, pulling me close, kissing my sweaty forehead.

We lay on the bed, fighting to catch our breaths, snuggled into each other. The pleasure lingered under my skin, and I held my mate tight, staring at his gorgeous face.

“I love you so much,” I whispered.

“I love you too, babe. Always.” He kissed the top of my head, and I smiled.

When he began to doze off, my eyes dropped to the bite marks at his neck, and I could see that they were slowly healing.

I sighed to myself, stroking his chest when suddenly…

I started feeling that same ache in my bones again.

*Shit.*

What the *fuck* was going on with me?

Could it just be a side effect still of the deer blood? Maybe it wasn’t totally out of my system yet, and that was making me ache? Dammit! A little frustrated, I headed to the bathroom. I reminded myself that things were okay, though, because the pain wasn’t as bad as earlier, not by a mile.

I used the toilet, showered quickly, and then got out. I grabbed a glass and turned on the faucet to pour in some cold water when I caught my reflection in the mirror again. I paused. I hadn’t been seeing things earlier because of the pain, then.

Still, though, why could I suddenly see myself?

Part of me was relieved—like *wow*, drinking Jay’s blood had really done wonders. I was glowing, and my skin was clear, with no dark circles. *Hello beautiful self, so good to see you!*

I was intrigued by this development, but I didn’t understand it.

I hadn’t been able to see my reflection in months, and I was still a vampire. Obviously. Especially since I’d just drunk from Jay. What had changed? Could the pain and all the out of sorts feelings be because of my period or something?

Frowning to myself, I took a sip of the water and mulled it all over, when I realized…

I hadn’t had my period in a really long-ass time, now that I thought about it.

Startled, I looked down at my flat stomach.

*Oh my god… Could I be PREGNANT?*

**Episode 1936**

*If my mom isn’t my dad’s mate…*

I REALLY didn’t want to think about that. My stress levels instantly went through the roof, and worrying about them was the last thing either of them needed. My family had been through so much, and I hated the idea of them breaking apart because of something like that.

I did not want a step-mom from hell, or any other *Cinderella* bullshit—I had seen enough Disney movies to know that never turned out well for the beautiful innocent heroine, AKA me. I wanted my mom and dad together!

*Okay, perhaps I’m getting ahead of myself here?* I thought. *It’s not like they’re divorcing or anything, and I’ve already made up a whole saga in my head! But what if I was RIGHT to make up a saga? Oh my god!*

“Oh, sweetheart,” my mom said, laughing a little, as if she could see the madness going on in my head. “Your father and I love each other. I don’t know how to explain it, but I’m certain that Tom and I are in it for the long haul. We’re soulmates. I can feel it, I know it deep in my gut.”

That sounded nice and cute and all, but I was still frazzled. “But that was when Dad was human! Werewolf lore is tricky; werewolves need mates! It’s like a whole weird problematic thing! What if Dad shifts tomorrow and suddenly he no longer wants—or you no longer want—”

“Cali,” my mom said calmly, squeezing my hand again. “We won’t know until we know. There’s a huge chance that when your father turns tomorrow, he’ll see me and we’ll just know that we’re mates, too.”

I scoffed. “There’s also a chance that he’ll look at all of us and wonder who we are, so that doesn’t sound like a done deal to me.”

My mom shook her head. “Honey, please don’t you worry. This family isn’t going to be breaking up. We’re stronger together, and now that we’ve found your sister, I have no doubt that everything is going to be okay.”

I couldn’t help but feel my eyes get scratchy. We had been through so much, so many battles and problems and worries, that just sitting here and chatting with my mom started to feel like a gift. “You really think it’s all going to be fine?”

My mom stroked my cheek, sighing. “Of course, sweetie.”

I sat down next to her on the bench and hugged her tight. She embraced me, kissing the top of my head, and her familiar clean scent settled me down. I’d needed this little pep talk from my mother, just to feel more secure about all the upcoming changes. She and my dad had always been my constant, and the notion of that getting jeopardized made me freak out.

“Everything’s going to be okay,” I repeated, as if I wanted to hear the words myself.

She stroked my hair back from my forehead, staring at me. “I have no doubt about that. Love is the strongest power on earth. I’ve always known that, honey.” She kissed me on the forehead, stroking my cheek. “You should go get some rest now, okay?”

“Okay,” I said, exhaling shakily. I really needed to chill, jeez. “Big day tomorrow.”

She smiled. “We definitely have a lot of cooking to do in the morning if we’re going to help your father feed this entire pack.”

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After spending a bit of quality time with my mom, we said goodnight and went our separate ways. I peeked around the corner when I got to the living room, checking to see if Artemis and Rishika were still going at it like horny teenagers. Thankfully, the coast was clear.

*They probably moved to the bedroom*,I thought, snorting. *Insatiable!*

Good for them, though. They deserved all the happiness they could get. We all did, after the battles, and I was happy for them. Smiling a little, I was heading to my room when I noticed that there was a faint light pouring out from underneath Greyson’s door. Xavier’s room, on the other hand, was completely dark. I sort of regretted snapping at them earlier. I was glad that Xavier had gotten some sleep, though I was concerned about Greyson.

*He’s probably up pining over me.*

Well, that was a ridiculous, horrible, and quite realistic thought. Especially since that’s what I was doing. Ugh.

Since Greyson was awake, I knew I should at least try to apologize to him tonight before going to bed. I’d talk to Xavier ASAP in the morning. I hovered by Greyson’s door, contemplating—what if he was asleep and had just left the light on? Poor thing had to be tired, and I didn’t want to wake him up.

While I struggled just outside his door, though, I heard a groan coming from inside the room. Frowning, I put my ear against the wood.

“Cali…”

Greyson was saying my name, and it sounded like a distressed, hurt moan.

*Oh my god! Is he hurt?* I thought in a panic.

Freaking out, I rushed into the room without knocking and found Greyson lying in his bed. He was tangled up in his sheets, eyes shut tightly, a sheen of sweat on his body. I quickly looked him over. He didn’t seem to be injured at all, just…

Asleep.

He seemed to be… dreaming?

I swallowed. This wasn’t a good dream, that much I knew. This was him thrashing, groaning, looking like he was in pain. He gripped the sheet tightly, his brow furrowed as he grunted.

“Greyson,” I whispered, worried, reaching out to touch his arm.

He flinched, as if protecting himself from an imaginary threat.

*Okay, that’s enough!*

“Greyson!” I called, voice louder. “Greyson, *wake up*!”

He was still dreaming.

*Greyson!* I mind linked, but that didn’t seem to help either. He kept thrashing, and I took a deep, determined breath before I grabbed him by the shoulders with one hand, resting my hand on his chest with the other. “*Greyson!*”

I jumped back as he lurched awake, his arms raised, his chest heaving. When I looked at his hand, I realized that he’d shifted it to its wolf form, claws extended to attack. His eyes looked dark, unfocused. I was terrified for him. Had something evil gotten inside him, trying to take control?

*No, not again!*

The idea of him getting possessed *again* was fucking horrifying.

*WE’VE HAD ENOUGH DARK MAGIC POSSESSIONS TO LAST A LIFETIME, THANKS!*

“Greyson!” I shouted, breathing heavily. “It’s me, Cali! What’s happening? Wake up!”

His eyes suddenly focused on me.

The moment our gazes locked, I knew that the biggest danger was gone. His chest still heaving, he shifted his hand back to human. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse.

“Cali? Are you really here?” he asked.

I stood at the foot of the bed, six feet between us, but now I moved closer to his side. I nodded slowly. “Yes, it’s me, Greyson. You’re okay. What happened?”

He looked between me and his hand, his face twisting in disgust. “I didn’t… Did I hurt you in my sleep? If I fucking hurt you, I swear to god I’m gonna ask Xavier to—”

“Greyson, *no*. I’m okay. I know you’d never hurt me—I was just scared for you.” I wrapped my arms around my torso, breathing deeply to calm myself. He looked at me with such love and sorrow that his emotion hit me hard.

“This is a fucking nightmare,” he whispered, raking his hands through his hair. He seemed helpless.

“What happened?” I asked. “Was that one of your… dreams? Your visions?”

He looked up at me, looking lost. “It felt like just a nightmare, but it was so real. You were—” He cut himself off. He stared at me, his voice coming out broken, his eyes glistening. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry I’m like this. I hate being like this. You shouldn’t have to deal with my bullshit when you have so much other stuff to—”

“Greyson, no!” I didn’t waste another moment. I knelt on the bed next to him, pulling him into a tight hug. He wrapped his arms around my torso, and I stroked his hair, making him look up at me. “Please don’t think that. It was just a nightmare—I’m okay, you’re okay, we’re safe.”

“What if I hurt you, though?” he whispered. “Like in that field?”

“You didn’t,” I said, caressing his cheek. “You would never.”

Quiet, shaking, he rested his cheek against my chest and held me tightly, his skin warm against me. My heart was pounding, aching for him. I loved him so much that the thought of abandoning him like this made me want to cry. Something was torturing him, still, and I didn’t want to leave him alone. I couldn’t. I hated the idea, and the only thing that sat well with me was being here for him. *With* him.

After all I’d said earlier, I was in a tough place. *Should I… Should I spend the night with Greyson?*

**Episode 1937**

GREYSON

I clutched Cali to me, breathing in her scent to calm myself down.

She was here.

She was okay.

I hadn’t accidentally tried to fucking eat her.

This was a bad dream that wouldn’t end, and waking up to see Cali so afraid had made me sick to my stomach. Even though she told me that she trusted me, that she knew I’d never hurt her, sometimes it felt like the dark magic hadn’t let go of me.

Could Cali feel my heart pounding?

The nightmare had affected me so badly. It had felt so real—too real. I could feel goosebumps and cold sweat break out across my body, and I wondered if this whole thing would ever go away.

Could Big Mac or Kira do something to stop it?

But what was there, exactly, to stop? Was this leftover dark magic, the three witches’ nonsense, or a simple nightmare?

I hated not knowing.

I hated everything apart from my mate. She was the only thing that was starting to make me feel normal again. I took a deep breath and faced her, pulling her across to straddle my lap. When our eyes met, I could still see the fear in hers.

It was like a punch in the gut.

I never wanted to see her afraid. Especially not because of me.

“I have no idea what that nightmare was,” I said honestly. “I don’t know whether it was the witches or something else, but I can’t deal with seeing you so afraid, love.”

She shook her head then wrapped her arms around my neck, pressing her lips to my temple. “It’s okay. I’m okay now. I *promise*, Greyson. I love you so much.”

My heartbeat evened, the weight of her on me grounding. I breathed her scent in, settling myself down for real this time. I needed to get to the fucking bottom of this before I accidentally flung myself off a cliff just to avoid whatever horror awaited me in those visions. Or, even worse, before I accidentally hurt Cali.

If any of this had to do with the witches, I needed to talk to them about it. No doubt.

It was one thing when *I* had to deal with it, but it was clearly affecting my mate now, and I couldn’t risk putting her into harm’s way. I’d thought that everything would be over after Letifer was gone, but I’d clearly been mistaken, and a new line of action was demanded.

This was unacceptable.

Cali hummed, stroking my hair. My heartbeat evened out, and I held her gently against me, rubbing my hands up and down her sides. This felt so good, and the thought that I didn’t deserve it was a heavy, toxic one.

“This is horrible,” I whispered, facing her. “I can’t apologize enough for—”

“Please don’t feel guilty. I know you can’t control your dreams—your *nightmares*,” she said earnestly. “You don’t have to apologize.”

“I do.” I pressed my forehead against hers, staring deep into her eyes.

*I’m sorry, love*, I mind linked. *I love you so much.*

She sniffled a little, stroking my cheek. *I love you too. So much.*

She glanced at my mouth, and I couldn’t stop myself—I kissed her passionately, taking her breath away, adoring the way she held onto me and moaned into my mouth. She was whimpering, trembling on top of me, and this was real. All her love and desire was real, and this kind of comfort was exactly what I needed after that horrible nightmare.

I couldn’t stop myself from wanting more.

I couldn’t stop myself from needing to take in every real, beautiful thing I could make her feel. I wanted her to feel safe, to feel good, to feel like I could be there for her and offer everything she could ever need.

We lay back on the bed, and I hovered over her, kissing down her neck, whispering, “Stay with me. Please stay with me?”

“Of course,” she said, sniffling, and I brushed my lips against the corners of her eyes.

“I want to make you feel good, I want to touch you… Can I?”

She nodded, quivering. “Y-Yes.”

Her voice cracked, and she looked at me like she’d thought about this moment as much as I had today. She was stroking my arms, my chest, anywhere she could reach. I slid off her sweater and then her skirt, moving my mouth over her bra and keeping it there. I sucked and licked over the fabric and she arched up to me, her breathing wild. Her eyes were fixed on me as I made my way down—from her full breasts to her soft stomach, her hipbones, and then between her legs.

“*Greyson*,” she rasped, looking down at me, gripping her pillow. She looked dazed, needy out of her mind, and I hadn’t even taken her underwear off yet. Her scent was so amazing that I took a moment to cherish it, to kiss and nibble at the inside of her thighs, gazing up at her the entire time.

This was real.

She was real—not just a fantasy that would tell me all the things I wanted to hear. She was real, and that made me feel happy, safe. Right now, I was safe with her, and she with me. I was so pleased at the sight of her pleasure that my whole body ached for it, just to see her feel good because of me.

Just because of me.

No fear, just love and desire.

I traced my mouth over her underwear before sliding it down her legs. She spread them wide, her whole body shaking with anticipation. I stared between her face and down, right before me, where she was so wet and beautiful that it took my breath away.

“Does this feel good?” I asked against her hot skin, kissing at the apex of her thighs. She keened, her hands flying to my hair as I kept going, licking and gently sucking just like I knew she liked.

She said my name again and again, her hips arching, and I knew that yes, this felt nice. This felt good. This felt…

“*Amazing*,” she choked out, pushing my hair back from my forehead.

I held her thighs spread, my palms flat against her flesh, holding firmly, her hips spasming as she flew off the mattress with every swipe of my tongue. When she came, it was with me between her legs, and I loved the moment as much as I loved her.

I brushed my lips and chin against her lower thigh as she stared at me in wonder, her eyes wide, her bare body still quivering. I crawled up the bed and pulled her close. I held her against my chest, kissing her nose, her cheek, then her mouth. She sighed softly, her eyelids getting droopy as she snuggled into me, the contentment rolling off her making me feel woozy.

She slid her hand down my chest, moving lower and lower as she whispered, “Your turn…”

“It’s okay,” I said, shaking my head. “I just want you to stay here with me. Sleep.”

She stared into my eyes, holding her breath. There had to be something in my gaze that made her realize that I was being serious. That this was what I needed most right now.

Just to hold her.

Just to be reassured of her existence.

“Okay,” she said, caressing my cheek with the back of her hand. “Whatever you want.” She kissed my neck and cuddled me close, her head resting on my chest, her arm wrapping around me. I felt surrounded by her, by her body and her scent, and it settled me down.

I stroked her back as she dozed off. Her eyes were closed as she murmured, “I’ll try to ward off any bad dreams.”

I let out a low chuckle, kissing the top of her head. “My personal dream catcher.”

She shifted, facing me again. Her eyes were red with tiredness, but she still whispered, “Do you want to tell me what you saw?”

I swallowed audibly. A flash of the dark veins killing her flew right before my eyes, and I instantly shook my head. “No. I don’t want to think about it right now.”

She yawned but still peered at me. Her determination was impressive. “Okay. But this won’t be the last time I ask you about this.”

I nodded, swallowing thickly. “I know. I’ll tell you in time, but for now you should rest, love.”

She nodded and brushed her lips over my chest, where my heart was finally beating steadily. I felt a million times better with her here, being close to her. It was incredible what love could do. What care could do.

I was going to take care of Cali if it was the last thing I did.

Her eyes were closed now, her breathing even in sleep, and I vowed to do everything in my power to keep her safe from everything. Including myself. Whatever the future held, I would protect her.

I needed to get to the bottom of this—no more stalling or excuses.

This had to stop.

If the witches were the ones who’d caused that nightmare, I had to talk to them and put an end to all this. I finally had to take care of what those three had put into motion, before it was too late.

**Episode 1938**

MARTA

We ended up on the bed—a tangle of arms and legs and hands and lips. Lilac grabbed at the bottom of my sweater and tugged. He was trying to pull it over my head, but as I pulled my arm through, I got stuck.

Lilac pulled away from the kiss and looked down, frowning at my sweater. My arm was twisted in the sleeve, and I wanted to pull myself free, but he was still tugging, trying to get it off, and I let him try for a moment. He wasn’t getting anywhere, so I pulled too, but subtly. I didn’t want to embarrass him by doing everything myself. His face was flushing, and I had to remind myself that this was his first time, which was why he was so eager—and so fumbling.

Lilac gave another huge tug on my sweater, but his hand slipped on the fabric and he hit himself in the eye. Hard.

I felt bad, but when he dropped his head back with a moan, I took the opportunity to pull the sweater over my head. Then I turned my attention to the buttons on his shirt.

I guess I was pretty eager, too.

Lilac must have recovered, because his hands had gone to my bra. He seemed a little unsure of how the mechanics worked—his fingers were gliding over the white fabric like he was looking for a release switch.

I left his buttons alone for a moment and reached around for the clasps.

“I can do it,” he breathed.

“Okay,” I agreed, eager to let him try. But when he started pulling on the shoulder straps, I started to have my doubts. “There’s a clasp. In the back,” I murmured. “You have to unhook it.”

His eyebrows furrowed. “I know… in theory. But where’s the hook?”

The shoulder strap slipped from his finger and snapped hard against my skin.

“OW!” I gasped, flinching as the elastic stung my skin.

Lilac’s eyes went wide, and he grew still. “Sorry.”

I reached around and unclasped my bra, then slipped it off. It took maybe half a second.

Lilac’s eyes traveled slowly over my bare skin. “How’d you do that so fast?”

I smiled, though I felt shaky under his gaze. “I’ve had a little more practice than you. Don’t worry about it,” I murmured, and pressed myself to him as I kissed him again. My fingers fumbled at his buttons and I tugged his shirt off.

With a moan, he rolled over the top of me and his hand went to my shoulder. He caressed my skin, murmuring my name. It was nice, if a bit confusing. After a moment I realized he’d slightly missed the mark, and I caught his hand, guiding it to my breast.

He sucked in a surprised breath as his hand cupped around me. “Oh.”

I grinned against his lips. “Yeah.”

He pressed his lips to mine, hungry now. One hand still cupping me, his other hand moved down, fumbling with the button of my pants, but he couldn’t seem to quite get his fingers around it.

I had been locked in Bert’s house for a long, *long* time. I had spent almost all my existence waiting for something to happen, and I was growing a little impatient. I wasn’t looking for this to take another 50 years.

I pulled away from his kiss and stood up on my knees. “Let me give you a hand.”

I flipped open the button of my jeans and pulled them off—along with my underwear—and threw them off the bed.

Lilac stared up at me, his eyes wide, like a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming big rig.

He looked so shocked, I started to feel strange and self-conscious. I glanced around nervously, suddenly wishing it was a helluva lot darker in this room. “Sorry—I just—”

“You’re beautiful,” he breathed, almost reverently. He reached up and let his finger trail from my neck down the center of my chest to my stomach. His touch was so light it made me shiver.

I cleared my throat, blood rushing into my cheeks. “You should take those off,” I said, pointing at his jeans. Then I slipped under the sheets.

Lilac jumped to his feet, fumbling with the buttons of his jeans like they’d been lit on fire. He yanked them down but struggled to get his feet free. He hopped on one foot for a moment, then—losing his balance—fell over, landing with a crash.

“Lilac! Are you okay?” I asked, sitting up.

He jumped up, blushing. “Totally fine!”

I bit down hard on my lip to keep from laughing. He looked so embarrassed, and I didn’t want to make it worse, but I was starting to feel a little hysterical. I’d been waiting such a long time for this, and I felt like I was going to burst into a million pieces if I had to *keep* waiting.

Lilac struggled out of his pants and pulled off his boxers, then stepped over to the bed.

“Wait,” I said, holding out a hand to stop him. My gaze ranged over him, taking in the perfect bone structure of his face, the curves of his shoulders, the definition of muscles in is chest and abdomen. He was just so… *wow*. I still wasn’t used to seeing him so alive, and I was overwhelmed by the sight of him—*all* of him.

“Marta? What’s wrong? Did I do something wrong?”

I shook my head. “No, no. I was just…” My face flushed. “I was just enjoying the view.” I held up the covers. “Come on in.”

I didn’t have to ask twice. He dove in next to me and pressed himself against me, giving me a kiss that was full of heat and hunger.

“Hang on,” he gasped out, pulling away. “I have to get something.” He reached over the side of the bed and grabbed his jeans. He pulled a handful of condoms out of one of the back pockets and held one up with a grin. “Jay gave them to me.”

*Jay?*

He’d talked to Jay about us? That threw me for a moment. Who else had he told? Were the others going to know about this? Were they going to look at us funny when we came downstairs tomorrow? Would there be gossip? Or maybe they wouldn’t care? I wasn’t completely sure how the pack felt about sex, but from what I’d seen, they didn’t seem *too* uptight about things.

Lilac started kissing me again—but he was still holding the condom, and the corner of the pack was poking me painfully in the side.

“Lilac,” I murmured, my lips pressed to his. “Could you put the condom down for a second? I promise I’ll let you know when we need it.”

“Yeah, sorry,” he said, giving me a rueful smile. He slid the foil square under the pillow and went back to kissing me. He moved his kisses down to my jaw, and then over to my ear, where he bit my earlobe a little.

“Do you like that?” he asked when I sucked in a breath.

I nodded. “Yeah,” I breathed. And I did. I liked it a lot. Lilac might not have been experienced, but he had good instincts. And just feeling his weight on top of me—feeling him touching me—made up for any lack of technique.

By this point, he was pushing his tongue hard into my ear, so I gave his chest a little push.

“Less like you’re at a car wash, okay?”

He slowed, and his movements immediately became softer and more languorous.

“Like this?” he whispered, making me shiver as he tugged at my earlobe.

I nodded. “Yeah.”

He moved his hands lightly along my ribs. He was clearly taking my instructions to heart, but I could feel his hands shaking. They were moving downward, and I could tell he was getting nervous.

“Is this all right?” he asked tightly, his hands stopping at my hipbones.

I nodded and looked into his dark eyes. “More than all right.” He nodded, but he still looked nervous, so I pressed a kiss to his lips. “You know, we don’t even have to do anything tonight.”

This caught Lilac off-guard, and he shifted off me and onto the mattress. “But… I really wanted tonight to be special.”

I turned to face him. “*This* is what I want.” I looked into the depths of his dark eyes, drinking in the sight. “And I’m not going anywhere.”

“I know, I just…” Lilac dropped back onto the pillows with a gusty sigh.

I bit my lip. “What if I took the lead for a bit?”

Lilac looked up, surprised. “Okay.”

I ran my finger along the curve of his jaw, then down his neck and to his chest. His skin was warm and, as I touched him, I felt electricity coursing through me.

He dropped his head back again and breathed out, closing his eyes as he bit down hard on his bottom lip. As my hand went even lower, he sucked in a breath, but he didn’t open his eyes.

It was hard to go so slowly when what I really wanted to do was devour him, but I held myself back, watching his face as sensation after sensation crashed over him like waves. It was hard as hell to be so patient as we fumbled with the condom, but when I slid myself on top of him, I knew it was all worth it. Lilac was relaxed, and we moved together in perfect rhythm. During all those wasted, waiting years, I hadn’t known that anyone as sweet as this was waiting for me. I couldn’t have known.

Happy tears pricked at the corners of my eyes as Lilac murmured my name. I was so glad I was here, with Lilac, where I finally felt like I belonged.

**Episode 1939**

When I opened my eyes into the grey light of morning, I found myself in Greyson’s bed, wrapped up in his arms. I stretched my toes and yawned and considered closing my eyes again. I felt so languid, lying there, so warm and safe. I turned my head slightly to look at Greyson. He was still out, and in sleep his beautiful face was still and peaceful. But looking at him, I felt a knot of anxiety bubble up in my stomach, because last night he’d been anything *but* peaceful. He’d been so distraught.

And even before that, he’d just been acting so strange lately. With me, with Xavier, with the pack. I was glad to be here with him this morning—though it was both heartening and kind of worrisome that he’d admitted that he needed me to stay with him last night. And—frustratingly—he’d refused to tell me anything about his nightmare.

I smoothed a lock of his fair hair away from his face. What could he have been dreaming about that had terrified him so much? Greyson, who was afraid of nothing. And that partial shift—what could have been going through his head to make him feel so threatened? What had he thought was happening?

I bit my lip as he shifted around in his sleep, frowning a little as he pulled me closer to him. I loved the feel of his arms around me, but for the first time, a terrible thought arced across my mind: *Should I be worried about my own safety?*

No. Of course not. That was crazy. I gave my head a little shake. Greyson would never hurt me. I knew that. I was safer with him than anywhere else. Whatever had gripped him last night, he hadn’t been controlled by it—not like before. He’d been able to break free.

“Cali?”

My heart stuttered as I looked up. Greyson was awake, and I realized he’d been watching me as I was lost in thought. “Hey.”

He pressed a sleepy kiss to my lips. “Good morning, love,” he murmured, his eyes ranging over my face.

“Good morning.” I hesitated. “How are you feeling?”

He stretched and sat up, leaning back against the headboard as he rolled his neck to loosen it. “A lot better, actually.” He looked over at me. “I’m sorry if I scared you last night.”

“Yeah, about that…” I sat up and took a deep breath. “I almost hate to bring it up, but… I was wondering if you’d tell me a little more about that nightmare you were having.”

Greyson’s expression darkened for a moment. “I knew you would, love. But don’t worry, it was nothing,” he finally said, though he didn’t meet my eyes. “It was just a nightmare.”

“You weren’t acting like it was just a nightmare, Greyson. You were really freaked out.” I frowned when he clenched his jaw. I’d known him long enough to recognize when he was digging in. “You know, I can’t help you if you don’t open up.”

“Cali, it was nothing—”

“Tell me the *truth*, Greyson,” I said firmly. He looked away, his eyes going distant, like he’d left the room completely. My heart gave a worried pulse, and I reached for his hand. “I can handle it. Please,” I said quietly.

He looked back at me, his grey eyes intent on mine. “It really was just a nightmare.” He gave a rueful smile when I raised my eyebrows in disbelief. “Okay, a really disturbing nightmare.”

“Are you sure it wasn’t a vision?” I asked tentatively. “Like the other ones you’ve been having?”

Greyson sighed and leaned back against the headboard. “Honestly, I’m not sure about anything right now.” He shrugged. “But nothing happened, right? We’re here now.” His smile grew more genuine. “And it’s Thanksgiving.”

“Greyson—”

“Cali,” he said, playfully matching my tone. Then, as if to show me how well he was, he sprang out of bed and, leaning down, pressed a kiss to my lips. “I’m ready to start the day. I’m going to get dressed.”

I watched him as he disappeared into the bathroom. Was he really okay? Or was he just masking? Could he be suffering some kind of emotional aftershock after everything that had happened? Even before the battle with Letifer and the revenants, he’d been carrying so much responsibility and pressure on his shoulders—maybe he didn’t even know how much it was affecting him.

And I didn’t want him to think he had to keep me protected. I wanted him to tell me what was bothering him—I just hoped he’d open up about it. The whole idea to co-Alpha was intended to help ease some of the burden of responsibility I knew he felt.

I pulled the sheet closer around myself. Maybe this wasn’t the best time for it, but the longer the Alpha situation remained unresolved, the more precarious it felt.

When Greyson came out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around his waist, I took a steadying breath. “Hey, I was thinking—how great would it be to announce to the pack tonight, at Thanksgiving, that you and Xavier are going to be working together as co-Alphas? Wouldn’t that be the perfect time to tell everyone?” I asked, smiling encouragingly.

“I haven’t decided anything yet, love,” Greyson reminded me, pulling a clean T-shirt over his head.

I chewed my lip. I just kept thinking about Andrei’s vague threat and the way he’d leered at me. “I know, but maybe we’ll be better able to handle the Vanguards if you and Xavier aren’t fighting about this.”

Greyson gave me an even stare as he pulled on his jeans. “You just let me worry about that, okay?”

There was something final in his voice that told me he wanted to drop the subject. But I was still so worried. I opened my mouth to argue further when I heard a shout from downstairs.

“Cali?! *Caliana?*”

Greyson smiled and walked over to the bed. He dropped a kiss on the top of my head. “I think your dad wants you, Caliana.”

I scowled at Greyson but got to my feet and flounced into the bathroom for a shower. When I got out, Greyson was gone, so I went and got dressed in jeans and a warm sweater and headed downstairs.

When I walked in, the kitchen was a whirlwind of activity. My dad and Torin were both racing around in aprons, flour sprinkled on them like they’d gotten into a baking fight, and shouting directions at the pack members who’d been roped into helping.

“No, Sage, the escarole has to be ripped! Not chopped! *Ripped!*” my dad yelled.

“Unless it’s supposed to be a joke, Ravi, don’t even *think* about showing me that pie crust,” Torin growled. “Keep rolling! It’s got to be half that thickness or it’s never going to crisp up!”

My dad went to the stove, where every burner was covered with a steaming pot. He stirred one slowly, then tasted it. He added a pinch of salt and moved on to the next pot. He was so wrapped up in his work, he hadn’t even noticed me coming into the room.

“I think he’s more anxious about tonight than he’s letting on.”

I looked over, to where my mom had just stepped next to me. “Tonight? Thanksgiving?”

She gave a sad smile as she watched my dad race around the kitchen. “The full moon, sweetheart. Shifting into a werewolf for the first time.”

“Oh, right. Of course.” I watched as my dad emptied a bowl of pasta into a strainer in the sink. “Yeah, he seems pretty tightly wound. But what can I do to help him?”

My mom shook her head. “I don’t know that there’s anything we *can* do, except just be there for him and support him.” She watched him for a moment longer. “At least he has this to occupy his thoughts,” she said, gesturing at the chaotic kitchen.

My dad finally noticed me and ran over. “There you are! Where have you been? Cranberries?”

I frowned, confused. “What about cranberries? What are you talking about, Dad?”

“We don’t have any!”

“You didn’t get cranberries?” my mom asked.

“Don’t rub it in,” my dad said, looking worried. “With all the planning that went into this, I still managed to forget one of the most essential Thanksgiving ingredients.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. “So what do you want me to do?”

“Thanks for volunteering, pumpkin. Will you run to the store and grab a bag?” he asked.

I grinned. “Of course. Is that it?”

“Yep.”

“You don’t need anything else?” I pressed.

He shook his head. “No, that’s it. Just the cranberries.”

“Okay,” I laughed. “I’ll go right now.”

I grabbed my coat from the closet next to the kitchen and headed toward the front door. But as I got there and reached for the doorknob, Xavier stepped in front of me, blocking my path.

“Oh, you’re not going anywhere.”

**Episode 1940**

XAVIER

I watched Cali’s face, waiting for the flash of anger I knew was coming. And—just like clockwork—her eyes flashed and her cheeks flushed pink.

“I’m not a prisoner here, Xavier,” she snapped. “Not that I have to explain myself to you, but my dad asked me to go to the grocery store, and I am going!”

I chuckled. “I’m not telling you that you can’t go, Cali. You just can’t go by yourself.”

“And why not?” she snapped. “I’m more than able—”

“I want to go with you,” I said.

This stopped her. She looked at me in surprise, then frowned. “Are you worried that I’m going to get lost? Because if you are, I’ll have you know that I am perfectly capable of driving the three miles to the grocery store and back.”

“I know that. I just thought you might want me to go with you.” I shrugged. “Just for fun.”

She still looked wary. “For fun?”  
 “Just the two of us. I know it’s not exactly a trip to the mall, but it could still be fun. Besides, you know that old expression?” I tipped my head back toward the kitchen. “Too many cooks…”

Cali’s frown cracked, and she smiled, her face lighting up like a ray of sunlight. “God, Xavier, you could have just said you wanted to come with me in the first place. Did that not occur to you?”

“Sure it occurred to me. But that wouldn’t have been any fun.” I leaned in to whisper close to her ear. “I like teasing you.”

She shivered, and when she looked up at me, her eyes were still flashing, but this time not from anger.

I smiled and took her hand, leading her out the door and into the cold November air.

“At least *this* car hasn’t been destroyed,” I said as we approached my cherry red Mustang. “Yet,” I added with a sideways glance.

Cali laughed. “It won’t be me,” she said, putting her hands up.

I opened her door, and she slid in, then I walked around to my side. I opened my door, but before I got in, I glanced up to the house. Ava was standing on the porch, watching us. Her expression was hard to read, but she didn’t look away as I caught her eye.

*Dammit.*

I got into the car and was immediately relieved that Cali was still chatting normally. She hadn’t seen Ava. That was fine with me. I started the car and pulled away quickly, before she could glance back.

She laughed. “Hey! Let me put my seat belt on.”

But I didn’t slow down. I wanted to put as much distance as I could between Ava and me. Seeing her—hell, even *thinking* about her—made me feel really unnerved. And pissed off. But what else was new? Except that her ridiculous suggestion that she, Ravi, and I were part of another *due destini* was weighing on me. It was absurd. It would’ve been downright laughable, if it wasn’t so goddamn disturbing.

But no. It was impossible. This was just another one of Ava’s attempt to stir the pot and insert herself back into my life. There was no actual evidence to support that insane claim. Yeah, okay, we used to be mates. And yeah, maybe the unmating spell was wearing off. I wasn’t going to pretend that there might not be some unwelcome feelings lingering between us—but it was nothing compared to how I felt about Cali.

I loved Cali. It drove me crazy to be apart from her. I fucking *yearned* for her. And I despised Ava. That wasn’t going to change. There was too much history there—too many toxic memories.

“Hey, Xavier. What’s the hurry?”

I looked over at Cali, who was looking at me curiously. I had been lost in thought, and I was speeding down the small access road at breakneck speed. I guess it shouldn’t have surprised me that I was taking my feelings about Ava out on the car.

“I want to get to the store before it gets too crowded,” I said.

“Oh, yeah. That makes sense.” She settled back in her seat, satisfied with my answer. “So, what time do you want to go to the mall tomorrow?

“What?” I frowned at her. “What are you talking about?”  
 She rolled her eyes. “Tomorrow? The day after Thanksgiving? It’s Black Friday. Everyone’s excited about it. I told Lola, Violet, Jay, Torin, and my mom that you’d take us.” She paused for a moment. “So, what time should we plan for?”

I gripped the wheel tightly but didn’t answer. I was *not* happy about this development.

“Don’t you need jeans? They’ll be on sale.” She grinned. “Maybe you can put on another fashion show for me.”

I felt my grip on the wheel loosening and glanced sideways at her. “If you want me to strip, you really don’t need this elaborate scheme.” I winked. “All you have to do is ask.”

She laughed, blushing. “It was really fun spending that day with you.”

I thought back to our day out. It had been more than fun—it had felt amazing to have Cali to myself like that. Just the two of us. I reached for her hand and gave it a squeeze. “We should do this more often.”

She nodded and angled herself toward me. “I think so, too. It’s nice to get away.” She kissed the back of my hand. “And I didn’t tell all those people that you were going to take them shopping. I’m kidding about Black Friday.” She grinned. “Sort of.”

I groaned. “I’ll go if you really want to—but I’m really hoping you don’t.”

She laughed as I pulled into the parking lot. The place was packed with last-minute Thanksgiving shoppers. I pulled my Mustang into a spot at the back of the lot, far away from the other cars and the runaway shopping carts. Considering the fate of my other cars, I didn’t want to take any risks with this one.

“I hope they still have some cranberries,” Cali said as we hurried through the wind and into the warmth of the store. “My dad’s going to be devastated if he can’t make cranberry sauce, and I want to keep his spirits up. He’s so worried about everything.”

I put my hand out to stop her as she reached for a basket. “You know I’m going to do whatever I can to help your dad though this, right?”

She gave me a long look, then nodded. “I know. Thank you.”

There was something so endearing about the way she was looking at me, and I couldn’t help it. I leaned down to kiss her.

But she stiffened in my arms. “Oh my god, Xavier. Look.” She was staring at something over my shoulder, and I turned around to see what had freaked her out so much.

There was a bulletin board with community announcements and lost pet signs, and right in the middle of it was a flyer with a blurry photo of what looked like Marta and Lilac. Beneath the photo it read, *BANNED FROM THIS STORE!* in bold, angry text.

I stared at the sign, baffled. “How the hell did those two manage that? I’ve been kicked out of plenty of bars, but what the fuck do you have to do to get yourself banned from a grocery store?” I laughed. “The Bonnie and Clyde of the spirit world.” I thought back to the sex talk I’d had with Lilac and smiled. I was proud of the guy—and I hoped our little conversation had paid off.

Cali rolled her eyes with a laugh. “Don’t let them hear you say that. Come on. Let’s go get those cranberries before they run out.”

She tugged my arm, and I resisted just a little—just enough to frustrate her.

We headed toward the produce section, but I stopped her at the bakery for a kiss, and again just before we hit the bananas.

“Xavier,” she giggled, blushing. “Come on,” she said, tugging my hand. Then she pointed. “Look! Only one bag left!”

She reached for it, but another hand reached for it an instant later.

Cali looked up at the tiny, gray-haired man who was trying to tug the bag from her hands. “Excuse me. I think I got these first.”

“Oh no you didn’t,” he wheezed, pulling hard on the bag.

She frowned stubbornly and pulled the bag back. “I certainly did. Now give them back!”

As they continued their tug-of-war over the cranberries, I stepped behind Cali so she couldn’t see me and concentrated until I partially shifted, turning just my face into a wolf’s face.

I cleared my throat, and the man looked up. When he saw me, the blood drained from his lined face. He dropped the cranberries and stumbled back in shock. He put his hand to his heart and hurried away.

I shifted back just as Cali turned around, baffled. “That was weird. Why’d he look so scared?”

I shrugged. “No idea. You ready?”

Cali nodded, and we headed toward the registers.

I was chuckling to myself, feeling pretty pleased, when a familiar scent reached my nose. Senses on alert, I whirled around to see a guy in a leather jacket swaggering toward us.

His eyes were on Cali, looking her up and down in a proprietary way that made my blood turn to fire. He smirked knowingly at her. “See? I told you I’d see you again, neighbor.”

**Episode 1941**

Andrei’s eyes ranged lazily over me as I gaped soundlessly back at him.

“Excuse me?” I finally managed to splutter.

Andrei didn’t repeat himself but shifted his gaze to Xavier. He looked at him for a long moment, clearly sizing him up.

“And what the fuck do you think you’re doing, *neighbor*?” Xavier asked, his voice dripping with menace.

I shifted uncomfortably. I could have guessed this was how Xavier would react, but the last thing I wanted was a pack war erupting in the checkout line of the grocery store. I could just picture Xavier’s and my mugshots posted on the bulletin board next to Lilac and Marta’s: *BANNED FROM THIS STORE!*

*This is the Vanguard werewolf from yesterday*, I mind linked to Xavier.

*I know. I can smell it on him*, Xavier said.

Andrei looked back at me. “So, little one, does your Alpha know you’re out and about?” This made me splutter again, and he shot a quick glance at Xavier. “And aren’t you going to introduce me to your, uh… friend?”

“Look, I don’t know who you think you are or what you think you’re—” I started, my face flushing hot with anger, but Xavier cut me off before I could get going.

“Andrei, was it?” he asked, taking a defensive step in front of me. “From the Vanguard pack?”

Andrei nodded, his gaze swinging back to me. “Yeah, that’s right. But my pack isn’t nearly as interesting as hers.” His eyes took in Xavier’s hand resting protectively on my hip, and he smirked. “She really gets around, doesn’t she?”

My stomach lurched. I was so angry and so embarrassed and scared all at once, I hardly knew which to feel first. So I just swallowed hard and clenched my fists.

Xavier leaned in, close to Andrei, and said something to him in a voice so quiet I couldn’t catch anything but the low murmur.

But whatever he’d said, it was enough to make Andrei take a step back. His smirk ratcheted up, but he held up his hands in mock surrender. “Hey man, we can be cool. No need to get heated. I’m just here doing a little Thanksgiving shopping for my pack.” He glanced lazily at me, his eyes resting on my chest. “And I’ll see *you* later, little one.”

I watched as he sauntered away, disappearing into the frozen food aisle. Then I turned to Xavier, who was glowering after him. “What did you say to him?”

Xavier’s blue eyes raged like winter storms. “I just gave him a little Thanksgiving greeting: I told him to fuck off.” He glanced down at the cranberries clutched in my hand. “Let’s just get the hell out of here.”

Xavier paid for the cranberries and the pack of gum I threw into the bag and hurried me out of the store. All the way back to the car, I kept glancing over my shoulder, making sure we weren’t being followed. It definitely felt strange that Andrei had been there. It could have been a coincidence, but I just couldn’t shake the feeling that he’d followed us there.

When we got to the car, Xavier opened my door and all but lifted me into my seat. He reached over and pulled the seat belt across my body.

“Um, thank you?” I said, laughing nervously. “You know, this might surprise you, Xavier, but I do actually know how to get into a car by myself.”

Xavier gave a low growl and slammed the door. He walked around the front of the car and wrenched open his own door. Once he’d slid into his own seat, he locked the doors.

I gave him a sideways glance. “Everything okay?”

“Yep.”

“So I shouldn’t be worried?”

He gave me a long look. “Not as long as you’re with me.”

I rolled my eyes but smiled, feeling my nervousness break a little. I did always feel safe with Xavier. “Okay.”

“Was he like that last night, too?” he asked gruffly, looking into the rearview mirror.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Just what I said—was he that much of a cocky asshole last night when he came by the party?”

I thought about the question for a moment. “Yeah, I guess. He was about the same.”

“Trying to flirt with you? Looking at you like that?”

“Looking at me like what?” I asked.

“Like he was fucking undressing you with his eyes,” Xavier snapped.

I shrugged. “Yeah, basically.” Xavier’s jaw flexed, and he cracked his knuckles threateningly. “He was pretty cocky. Not completely unusual werewolf behavior, that I’ve noticed.”

I was trying to make him laugh, but it didn’t work.

Xavier gave me another sideways glance. “I don’t like it, Cali.”

“Don’t like what?”

“Any of it,” he said shortly.

I leaned back on the headrest. “I don’t either,” I admitted, “but he’s just being an asshole. Nothing’s happened. What can we really do about it?”

Xavier gave a hollow laugh and turned on the engine. “There’s plenty we can do about it.”

“Hey,” I snapped, poking him hard in the ribs. “I meant what can we do about it that doesn’t result in any more battles for an already exhausted pack!”

He rolled his eyes. “Yeah, yeah,” he muttered, and pulled out of the parking lot.

We drove in silence for a while, then, as we neared home, Xavier pulled the car to the side of the road.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Nothing.”

“Xavier. Why are you pulling over? I have to get these cranberries back to my dad. I fought long and hard for them—”

“The cranberries can wait,” he said, pulling the car to a stop. He shifted into park and turned to me, his eyes blazing. Then he pulled me close, wrapping his arms tightly around me.

I was surprised, but after a moment I let myself melt into his embrace. I wrapped my arms around his neck and hugged him back. “*Mmm*. That feels good.”

He pulled back just enough to see me, then pressed a kiss to my lips.

For a moment I kissed him back, losing myself in the feel of his tongue sliding along mine, but then I pulled back, frowning. “Hang on. Is this why you pulled over?” I felt a flash of irritation. “Xavier, my father is creating a literal feast right now, and all he asked for was these cranberries,” I said, shaking the bag in his face. “We have to get back.”

Xavier smiled and ran his fingers down my cheek. “I wish that was why I pulled over,” he said softly.

My heart gave a worried thump. “Then what is it?”

“I didn’t want to drive so pissed off like this,” he said. “It’s taking everything I have not to drive back there and rip his throat out and then some for just looking at you the way he did.” “Xavier,” I started. “It’s okay, let’s just go home.”

He shook his head. “Andrei is clearly trying to intimidate us. Showing up at the house yesterday and now following us to the grocery store?” he said. “There’s something going on.”

A ripple of fear passed through me, shivering all the way down my spine. I’d known it—I’d known it the first time I laid eyes on Andrei—but hearing Xavier say it out loud made it more real. I hadn’t wanted to admit it, but I couldn’t run from it now.

I must have looked worried, because Xavier took my hand in both of his. “I don’t know what his angle is, Cali, or what the Vanguard pack has planned, but if there comes a time when I’m not around and that asswipe approaches you, you know what you have to do, right?’

“I do?” I squeaked.

He nodded. “You have to use your magic.”

I stared at him in surprise. Xavier had never said anything like this to me before. He’d never encouraged me to use my Fae powers. From Xavier, it was usually all *stay out of the fight, stay safe, get inside*, et cetera. I was surprised as hell to hear this from *him*, of all people. And it made the danger seem even more real.

He looked into my eyes, his own blue eyes radiating intensity. “Listen to me, Cali. If that does happen—if you do see him—don’t hesitate. I don’t trust that guy, or that pack. We don’t know a damn thing about them, and until we do, it’s better to be prepared for anything. Okay?”

I nodded. “Okay.”

“Don’t hesitate.”

I shook my head. “I won’t. I promise.”

We both looked up. There was a rumble in the distance. We looked at each other, confused, then out the window. The sound was loud, but low. It vibrated through my body and into my bones—into my teeth. I could feel the rumble pulsing next to my heart.

“What the hell is that?” Xavier muttered, twisting around to look out the window down the road.

The rumble was growing louder and stronger. It was making the inside of my brain vibrate, and the car was starting to shake. I gripped the sides of my seat with fear.

“There.”

I turned as Xavier spoke and saw what he saw. There, in the distance, was a huge group of motorcycles—ten across and who knows how many behind them—coming up the road, heading straight for us.

**Episode 1942**

LOLA

I pulled the hood of my sweatshirt up and walked briskly down the road. I figured if I walked fast enough, I’d stop shivering in the bitter November wind that was blowing down the back of my neck. The pharmacy was just a few miles from the pack house, and I could make it back with plenty of time to get ready for dinner. I’d told Jay I was going out for a run, but that was the furthest thing from the truth. I just couldn’t get the thought out of my head:

*Could I be pregnant?*

When I’d woken up this morning, I hadn’t felt morning sickness. At least, I didn’t *think* I had. It was hard to tell. What did morning sickness *feel* like? I had been kind of nauseous when I’d first woken up, but that could’ve just been anxiety. I often felt sick to my stomach when I was anxious—and I was anxious as hell right now.

But what if my morning sickness wasn’t particularly strong because I was a vampire? Maybe that had some kind of effect on that process. How the hell was I supposed to know?

Maybe a run *would* be good. It might help clear my head. I picked up my pace to a jog, running the last few hundred yards down the access road to the service road. The service road was mostly downhill, and I coasted along, trying to take deep breaths and clear my thoughts.

It kind of worked, and I was almost surprised when the pharmacy came into view. I slowed to a walk again and shook out my hands, feeling nerves racing back through me. I thought about how I would get through the line at the pharmacy.

*Yes, I would like these spicy cheese puffs, this bar of chocolate, a water, and oh yes, throw in a pregnancy test while you’re at it thankyougoodbye!*

I clenched my hands into fists as I hit the parking lot. Maybe if I was really lucky, this place would have self-checkout, but I couldn’t remember from the last time I’d gone in. That time *had* just been for the spicy cheese puffs and the chocolate, so self-checkout had seemed much less important.

Maybe I was making a mistake. Maybe I should have told Jay about this so he could have come with me. Maybe I needed that kind of support.

Then again, the way I was *already* freaking out, I didn’t know how I’d handle this if he was here.

The doors of the pharmacy whooshed open, and the ding announcing my presence made me jump in surprise. I took a breath to gather myself, then headed into the store, scanning the aisles. Where the hell did they keep pregnancy tests? Near the pads and tampons? In the candy aisle? Somewhere else?

I had no idea.

Unwilling to ask anyone for help, I headed down every aisle, trying desperately to act casual, though I was so nervous and sweaty I probably looked like I was about to shoplift everything in the store. But I didn’t need any free lipsticks or cigarettes. Just a pregnancy test, please. Or five.

I stumbled across the family planning section right next to the condoms—which was *not* cute—and immediately panicked. I couldn’t do this. Wild-eyed, I shot straight past it and headed for the chip section. I grabbed a bag of spicy cheese puffs and took a deep breath.

In moments when I was willing to be rational—which were admittedly few—I had to admit that Jay would probably be a great baby daddy. He was the most thoughtful, kindest, most wonderful person in the world, and he would love a baby. Maybe even more than I could.

The thought of Jay holding a baby of his own made me smile, and my heartbeat slowed to a more manageable rate. But then I thought of my own fathers, and their likely reactions to this kind of news, and my heart started pounding again.

Jay might’ve been great dad material, but my own dads were *definitely* not ready to become grandfathers. They’d probably freak out me. This was *not* the path I was supposed to be on. I was *supposed* to be finishing up my last semester of college—and having a baby was essentially the complete opposite of finishing up your last semester of college.

Clutching my spicy chips, I circled back to the family planning section and eyed the tests. There were a lot of them, but I couldn’t see what the difference was supposed to be. I tried to concentrate, but I couldn’t focus. Would our baby be a vampire? A wolf? Was that kind of crossbreeding even possible? Could I even have kids as a vampire? Would Jay end up having to rip the baby out of my stomach like in *Twilight*?

I realized that I wasn’t breathing, and I sucked in a breath, feeling dizzy. I wasn’t getting anywhere with this, so I closed my eyes and just reached for a test—any test.

But my hand hit hard plastic.

The tests were behind a locked shield.

Shit.

*Press Here for Help with Family Planning Products.*

I stared for a long time at the button that would summon an employee. Then, gathering up all my nerve, I pressed it.

The bell sounded loud over the quiet music, and I flinched. But nothing happened. I waited for what felt like an eternity and was just about to ring it again when I heard the jangle of keys and looked up to see a kid in a store polo shirt walking toward me.

A kid. A literal kid. The gangly teenager smiled awkwardly at me as he approached.

Holy shit. How as I supposed to do this? This guy was practically a baby himself. He looked no older than eleven. Twelve, *tops*.

“What can I do for you, ma’am?”

“I just need one of these,” I muttered, jabbing my thumb at the case and not meeting his eyes.

“Sure thing. Which one do you want?”

I was starting to feel increasingly desperate. “I don’t know. It doesn’t matter. That one!” I said, pointing at random at pink box labeled “Baby B Sure!”

“No problem,” he said brightly. He pulled the keys from his belt loop and started going through them one at a time. “Nope, not that one. Not that one either. Neither of these,” he murmured. After what felt like a solid year, he frowned. “I don’t think I have the right key for this.”

“Oh, that’s okay—” I started, fully prepared to just bail on the whole thing.

But the kid pulled a walkie-talkie from his belt and flipped it on. “Hey, I need the key for the pregnancy test case. Does anyone have it?”

The walkie-talkie system must have been patched into the store’s PA system, because his question was broadcast over the music throughout the entire store.

If it were possible, I would have melted into a puddle and sunk through the floor on the spot.  
 “It’s really fine—” I started.

“It’s not a big deal—”

“No, I don’t want to put anyone to any trouble—”

“It’s no trouble,” the kid said, shaking his head. “My manager will be right over. She’s got the key.”

“I think I’m just going to…” I pointed toward the exit and took a step back.

“Who needs a pregnancy test?” a voice boomed.

We looked over as the manager came down the aisle, another—larger—key ring in her hand.

“This lady,” the kid in the polo said, pointing to me. “Baby B Sure.”

“Good choice, good choice,” the woman said, unlocking the case with her key and handing me the small pink box.

“Thanks,” I muttered, not meeting anyone’s eyes. I grabbed the box and headed toward the front of the store and the blessed single self-checkout lane. But when I got closer, I saw that there was a tiny sign on the screen: “Out of Order.”

I turned around, and the gangly kid in the store polo was waiting at the register. He smiled at me and waved me over.

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I was almost back at the pack house, clutching the box to my chest. I had considered taking the test before I got home, but I just hadn’t been able to talk myself into finding out if I was pregnant at a disgusting roadside pharmacy bathroom. I approached the house slowly, watching through the front window. When I was certain the coast was clear, I pulled open the door and sprinted up the stairs. I had just rounded the corner to my room when I smacked hard into someone, the collision sending both of us flying backward. Jacqueline barely kept her balance, but I lost my footing and fell on my ass.

“OW!” Jacqueline snapped. “Watch where you’re going, Lola. What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Sorry,” I said breathlessly, getting to my feet. I looked around for my bag but stopped in horror as Jacqueline bent to pick it up.

The small pink box had fallen out of the bag, and Jacqueline looked it over, then looked curiously up at me.

She tipped her head, dangling the box out in front of her. “Is this for you?”

**Episode 1943**

CHARLIE

It wasn’t an accident that I brushed Violet’s arm with my own as I reached for another potato. I could feel her eyes on me as I grinned and began to peel it. It could have been my twentieth potato. It could have been my fiftieth. Maybe I was born here in this kitchen and peeling potatoes was the only life I’d ever known. I was reaching the point where my hands were becoming potato shaped, and I couldn’t remember anymore.

“*Potatoes!*” Torin shrieked from across the kitchen. “I need more potatoes! I’m making mashed, roasted, and au gratin, and I need potatoes for all of them! *Peelers!* What’s taking so long?”

Violet gave me a rueful smile as she dropped a peeled potato into the bowl between us and reached for another from the bag at our feet. “That’s us, right? No names, just ‘peelers.’”

“I guess,” I sighed. She and I had become “employees”—as Torin had called us—of Team Thanksgiving for the Redwood pack. Which had sounded okay when he’d first pitched the idea, but now that he was running around the kitchen shouting at everyone and waving a ladle around like a lunatic king with a scepter, I realized that we’d just allowed ourselves to be recruited to peel potatoes until our peeling hands were crippled. Or until we died. And it was clear that Torin did not care which of those two things came first.

“Hey!”

I jumped and looked around, looking for the source of the voice over my shoulder.

Torin was standing behind me, holding a freshly peeled potato under my nose. “You missed a spot! I can’t have spotty potatoes in my gratin, Charlie!” he said, his eyes wild. He had a streak of gravy on his cheek.

“Sorry, man,” I said, taking the potato from his hands. “I’ll be more careful.”

“I should hope so,” Torin snapped.

“Torin!” Sage yelled from the other side of the kitchen. She was pointing down at one of the pots on the stove, which had started to boil over.

Torin gasped and sprinted away.

Violet laughed, and I closed my eyes for a moment, savoring the sound of it. It was like music to my ears. She was barely a foot away from me, but it felt like a mile. I wanted to touch her, so I nudged her in the ribs.

She grinned at me and nudged me back. “Hey. Don’t distract me.”

“From what?” I asked. “Does peeling take that much of your concentration?”

She smirked. “Don’t try to distract me from winning the potato peeling race.”

“We’re in a race?” I asked, surprised.

“Of course we are.” She laughed, peeling even faster.

I tried to keep up, but I knew it was no good. I was clumsy with the peeler—hence the spotty potatoes—but I was just too busy staring at Violet to be any real competition. The night before had been… pretty much everything I’d been wanting, and I hadn’t stopped thinking about it since I’d woken up. I mean—I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a *little* bummed out that we hadn’t ended up sleeping together. But we did do our fair share of *other* things, and I could feel my body heating up as I thought back on them.

*Why are you so beautiful?*

She glanced over as she heard my voice in her head, her face flushing pink, and gave her head a little shake.

This shook a lock of her hair loose, and I reached over and brushed it back behind her ear.

“WASH YOUR HANDS!”

I looked up and found Torin glowering at me, aiming a wooden spoon at me like a sword. “Sorry, Torin.”

“We must keep this kitchen clean! I won’t have anyone getting food poisoning! Not on my watch! Go wash! And scrub for at least a minute!”

I rolled my eyes but dropped my potato and peeler onto the counter.

“I’ll be right back,” I muttered to Violet.

She nodded, barely containing her laughter.

In the bathroom, I scrubbed for Torin’s required minute, then dried my hands carefully. I had just reached for the doorknob when I stopped. A thought had just occurred to me, and I pulled open the medicine cabinet above the sink. I carefully poked through the bottles of ibuprofen, aspirin, rubbing alcohol, and about six boxes of bandages. I was looking for condoms, and I figured if there were any spares floating around the house, they might be in a bathroom somewhere. But not the medicine cabinet.

In the cabinets under the sink, I found spare toilet paper, a bottle of glass cleaner, and a first aid kit—but no condoms. I shut the cabinet door with a sigh. I figured it wouldn’t hurt to be extra prepared next time Violet and I wanted to have some fun, but it looked like I was going to have to get my own protection. Which was fine. I mean, as long as Lilac didn’t come along, I’d be good to go.

I opened the door and was just headed back to the kitchen when it occurred to me just how many bathrooms the pack house had. *A lot*. And there might be condoms in one of them, even if there just didn’t happen to be any in this one.

I wavered for a moment. Maybe it would be weird to just poke around every bathroom medicine cabinet in the house. But the pharmacy would probably close early tonight—it was Thanksgiving, after all. It was probably best just to see what resources were available here at the house first.

Convinced, I turned away from the kitchen and headed for the stairs. I had just rounded the corner when I passed Greyson walking in the opposite direction. I felt myself getting nervous. Greyson was just an intimidating guy, so I swallowed hard.

“Hey, man,” I said, but it came out in a weird, small voice.

He gave me a strange look and didn’t respond, and the minute I got past him I closed my eyes, wishing I could just go back in time. *Hey, man?* That was really the best I could do? And what the hell was wrong with my voice? I thought I’d already gone through the indignity of puberty.

“Hey, Charlie?”

I spun around. Greyson had stopped and was looking at me. “Yeah?”

“We have to talk.” He jerked his head toward a small room. “Come with me.”

“Okay,” I managed, and followed him into the room. My palms were getting sweaty. What was this about? Had Greyson somehow figured out what I was looking for? Was he going to murder me and shove me into one of these closets because I’d been looking for condoms? I’d thought Xavier was Violet’s older brother figure, not Greyson, but maybe I was wrong?

Greyson shut the door behind us and turned to me, crossing his arms over his massive chest.

“What’s up?” I asked, trying not to squeak.

Greyson gave me a long look. “Tell me about hunter camp.”

This was not what I’d been expecting, and I stared back at him. “Sure. What do you want to know?” I asked warily. I remembered that Greyson hadn’t been exactly thrilled when he’d found out I was a hunter. He’d wanted to kick me out of the house, without even giving me a chance to prove my loyalty to the pack.

“I want to know what you did, and who you did it with.”

*And who you did it with?*

My thoughts flashed back to last night with Violet, and I felt my face growing hot, but I was almost positive that *that* wasn’t what Greyson was asking about.

I swallowed hard. “Um, not much, really. It was just a bunch of kids born into hunter families. We were all just training. Running drills and learning fighting techniques. That kind of stuff.” I was on the verge of asking him why he wanted to know when it hit me: what Greyson was asking was basically what Romilly was asking me to do for the werewolves. I felt a little dirty about it, but I wasn’t going to lie to Greyson. But I also wasn’t sure if I should bring up what had happened with the revenants. I decided to just keep it vague. “We had to deal with a few Letifer-related incidents, but thanks to Violet and me, it was all resolved.”

Greyson nodded. “Glad to hear that. And I’m glad you and Violet are okay. It’s good to have you both back.”

I grinned. “It’s good to be back—”

Greyson took a step forward, and I broke off, nervous again.

“Given the unexpected visit from Andrei last night,” he said, “I’m looking to secure any loose ends.”

I swallowed audibly. “Like what, exactly?”

Greyson looked me dead in the eye. “Like you.”

Oh shit. What was this about? Did he somehow hear my thoughts? Did it work that way? I was still such a new werewolf, I didn’t know.

Greyson continued. “Do you want to officially join the Redwood pack?”

**Episode 1944**

MARTA

Even after last night, I still couldn’t get enough of Lilac. And as I lay tangled in his arms and the twisted sheets of my bed, I started to wonder if I ever would. I knew we must have fallen asleep at some point last night, but as soon as I’d opened my eyes into the morning light, I’d felt heat flaring in me again. And when he’d looked at me, I’d immediately known that the fire between us hadn’t died down in the slightest.

So now we were kissing and pressing and entwining and it just felt *so* amazing. It was incredible to be alive, and for Lilac to be alive, and for us to be here together.

He ran his fingers down my spine, making me shiver. He certainly was a fast learner last night. We’d eventually found our rhythm together. It hadn’t been perfect by any means—and it wasn’t like I had a wealth of experience—but it’d been good. So good.

We’d pulled on a few clothes in the night—the bare minimum—but they were in the process of being tugged off when there was a loud banging on the door.

I yelped like a dog whose tail had just been stepped on, and Lilac snapped his head away from me so fast he smacked the back of it on the headboard. He closed his eyes with a groan of pain.

“Are you okay?” I whispered.

“Lilac!” came a yelling voice before he had a chance to answer. “Get your ass out here. We’re all being forced to peel a mountain of vegetables downstairs, and you are majorly slacking off. You did not come back from the dead just to sleep like you’re still one of them!”

Lilac stifled a laugh. “It’s Violet,” he whispered to me. Then, louder, “Um, I’m a little busy at the moment,” he called, and dove back toward me, trailing a line of soft kisses down my neck toward my shoulder.

The feeling of his warm breath on my neck made my heart race, but I tried to focus. “Maybe you should head downstairs. She sounds pretty determined.” I sucked in a breath as Lilac did something that made my toes curls. “And it’s not like we can do anything with her right outside, can we?” I asked, trying to sound reasonable.

Lilac shrugged. “I’m not worried. She’ll get bored and go away eventually.” He grinned wickedly at me. “It’s fine, Marta. You just need to *relax*—”

But he was cut off by the door slamming open and Violet bursting into the room. “Lilac! *Wake up!*”

There was a suspended moment where the three of us stared at each other in complete silence. I watched as Violet’s eyes went from Lilac, to me, and then to the tangled clothes thrown on the floor around the bed. I could see the wheels turning behind her eyes as she put all the pieces together.

Then—at once—we all screamed in shock.

I clawed at the sheets, trying desperately to pull them up to cover myself, Violet was covering her eyes like they’d just been doused with acid, and Lilac was yelling and gesturing toward the door.

“Get *out*, Violet! *Out of here!* What the hell is wrong with you?”

“What’s wrong with *me*?” Violet screamed, her eyes still covered. “Get a *lock*!”

“As if that’d stop you!” Lilac shot back. “*Get out!*”

“*Kitchen!*” Violet yelled, turning around and stumbling blindly toward the door. “Five minutes! And wear some *clothes*!”

When the door slammed shut, I pulled the duvet up over my head with a humiliated groan. “This is a nightmare.”

“What?” Lilac said, not at all convincingly. “It’s fine.”

I buried my head in a pillow. I had no idea how much Violet had seen, but whatever it was, it was too much. “All I know is that if I had a sibling, I wouldn’t want to see *any* of what Violet just saw.” I groaned as a fresh wave of embarrassment washed over me, thinking of what Violet might be saying down in the kitchen right now. “I hope we haven’t just ruined Thanksgiving. This was going to be my first one in about fifty years, and I really wanted it to be a good one.”

Lilac sighed. He hesitated, like he was about to say something, but when he didn’t, I pulled the blanket off my head and looked at him. His face was beet-red.

“Lilac?” I asked.

Apparently unable to hold it in a moment longer, he burst out laughing.

“Oh my god,” I said rolling my eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he said, gasping for air, “but you should have seen your face—”

I sat up and pushed with all my might. Lilac rolled off the side of the bed, still laughing. “It’s not funny!”

“You’re right, you’re right,” he said, barely able to speak. “It’s not funny—it’s *hilarious*.”

I picked up a pillow and hurled it down at him. He caught it easily and, getting to his feet, threw himself back onto the bed, smiling up at me.

“I’m sorry you were embarrassed, Marta, but I can’t say it wasn’t worth it.”

His smile was boyish, but at the same time so suggestive it made me blush. I could feel myself getting hot again, and I looked away.

I cleared my throat, trying to order my thoughts. “We should get dressed and head downstairs. We have to hurry. Violet is only giving us five minutes.”

I started to get up, but Lilac caught my wrist, holding me in place.

“Deal, but first you have to give me another kiss.”

I shook my head, but his grin made me laugh, so I leaned back down to press my lips to his. Laughing again, he gave my wrist a gentle tug and pulled me back down onto the bed.

*Fifteen* minutes later, I finally headed downstairs. We decided that it might be less conspicuous if we didn’t show up together, and I stopped to readjust my sweater before I walked into the kitchen.

Violet looked up from the carrot she was peeling as I walked in. Beyond her, Torin and Tom were standing at the stove, stirring pots as big as cauldrons. The kitchen smelled like bread baking, sugar caramelizing, and root vegetables roasting, all at once. It smelled amazing.

“Is there anything I can help with?” I asked in a small voice.

Tom looked over. “Oh, Marta, yeah. I need someone to chop a few onions for the stuffing.”

“Fine,” I said, walking to the counter.

He got out a cutting board, a knife, and two giant onions, and piled it all into my arms. Then he smiled cheerily. “Get chopping!”

“No problem,” I said with a small smile.

“Okay, Torin,” Tom said, spinning away from me. “How’s that soup? We need to be ready to blast that turkey in ten minutes out back.”

Torin nodded. “Almost there.”

I carried my cutting board to the kitchen island, where Violet was standing with her carrots. “Um, do you mind if I chop next to you?”

“Nope,” Violet said, her eyes on her carrots as she chopped.

Not exactly a warm welcome, but I’d take what I could get. I settled the cutting board and started to peel the onion, but my hands fumbled as I worked. I frowned and picked up my knife. “Violet… I wanted to tell you that I’m really sorry about earlier.”

Violet sniffed. The onion fumes were making her eyes water. “It’s fine.”

I wiped my eyes on the shoulder of my sweater. “No, I didn’t mean for you to… walk in on anything.”

“I know,” Violet said, wiping her eyes with the back of her hands and still not looking at me. “It’s okay. I was just surprised, that’s all.”

Tears were running down my cheeks now. Stupid onions. They tasted good, but at what cost? “I was, too—by everything, really. And I definitely didn’t intend for you to see anything, or find out this way—”

Violet finally looked up at me, tears streaming from her eyes. “I know you didn’t. But I don’t want you to worry. I’m really happy for you two,” she said with a sniff.

“Really?” I said, my heart pounding. “I just—”

I stopped speaking, because Violet’s eyes had gone to my chopping board, and the blood had drained from her face.

With a terrible, familiar, sinking feeling, I followed her gaze and found that the onion in my hand had turned black and was starting to rot. I had forgotten. I had completely forgotten about my hands. *How* could I have forgotten?

My heart pounded as I thought of the light of crazed cooking mania in Tom’s and Torin’s eyes. I had to do something—fast. I had to hide this mess before Tom saw it. I had to—

“Marta?”

I looked up into Torin’s confused face. He was looking down at the onions, but as I waited, he moved his gaze up to me. “Marta! What did you do?”

**Episode 1945**

The entire car was vibrating from the sound reverb of the motorcycles, setting my already frayed nerves completely on edge.

Xavier whipped around and threw the car into first gear. “Hang on,” he growled. He let out the clutch and gunned the engine, which roared almost as loud as the motorcycles.

The Mustang peeled out, and when I looked out the back window, I could see fresh black tire tracks on the road. I could also see the motorcycles coming up steadily behind us.

I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself down. It was completely possible that it was just a random motorcycle club. I remembered Alex’s uncle had belonged to one. He’d shown up with them one time when I was over at Alex’s house, a huge group of bearded guys with their leather jacket-wearing girlfriends. Most of them were retired accountants and dentists—all of them in their fifties and sixties—and they’d gear up and ride around on their Harleys on Sundays. The bikes had been loud, but the guys were hardly threatening.

But the guys behind us… I had to admit they didn’t look *quite* the same. They were going a hell of a lot faster, for one. And even from a distance, I could tell they looked a lot rougher than some aging boomer biker gang.

“Maybe they’re just riding,” I said in a small voice. “They might not be coming after us.” But even I didn’t really believe it.

Xavier shot me a sideways look. “I’m not taking any chances,” he muttered, and threw the car into second gear. But as fast as he was going—and he was going *fast*—the motorcycles easily kept up with us.

I kept whipping my head back and forth—looking nervously at the bikers behind us, then at the speedometer on the dash. I knew Xavier was trying to keep me safe, but he was going so fast, I was starting to get worried that he was going to crash. But I didn’t tell him to slow down. Actually, I wished he would go faster. Because as the bikers got closer and closer—and I could more clearly see their faces—I was getting more and more nervous.

“Who *are* these guys?” I asked, squinting back at them.

Xavier glanced quickly into the rearview mirror. “I don’t know for sure, but they’re sure as hell not trying to deliver cookies.” He shifted into third gear, but when he still couldn’t shake the bikers, he threw his arm across my chest, pinning me back against my seat. “Hold on!”

I didn’t even have time to respond before he yanked the wheel sharply sideways. I gasped as we careened along the slick shoulder of the road for a moment, but then Xavier pulled the steering wheel a millimeter more and we made a hairpin turn onto a side road.

When I could breathe again, I twisted around to look out the back window and felt my stomach tighten painfully. “Shit.”

“What?” Xavier asked.

“They’re following us,” I said with a sinking feeling.

Xavier looked into the rearview mirror, then shot a look at me. “Remember what I told you about using your Fae magic?”

I nodded, swallowing nervously.

He shook his head grimly. “I don’t know what the fuck these guys are up to, but I want you to start getting yourself prepared. I want you to be ready, just in case.”

“In case of what?” I asked quietly.

“I’m going to try to get away, Cali, but the engines on those bikes are huge, and I don’t want to risk crashing the car,” Xavier said.

I stared at him, finally understanding what he was saying to me. We might have to defend ourselves against the bikers. I looked back anxiously, feeling my palms staring to sweat. But I nodded, resolved. I had used my magic in high-stress situations before, and I knew I’d be able to do it again.

“I’m ready to do whatever you need me to do, Xavier,” I told him firmly.

He slid his hand down and gave my arm a squeeze. “I love you, Cali. I’m glad you’re here with me.” He looked back at the road. “I don’t want you to be afraid. I’m going to protect you—”

But as he spoke, the roar of the motorcycles grew even louder. The vibrations of their exhaust reverberated through my whole body. I looked around, my heart pounding. The bikes were swarming all around the car. And as one drew level with my window, my eyes went wide. For the first time, I could see the riders clearly. They were all wearing black leather jackets, and emblazoned on the back was a massive “V.”

“Shit. It’s the Vanguard pack,” I murmured, looking all around. “God, there are so many of them.”

The Redwood pack had its fair share of wolves—actually, I wasn’t even sure if I knew everyone’s name… I should probably quiz myself sometime—but this pack was *massive*. As a group and individually. They were all just giant, with broad chests and arms that strained the seams of their worn jackets.

My pulse racing, I slid down in my seat, trying to hide myself as the bikes began to fly by my window. The guys on the bikes looked inside, hollering and whooping as they went. But the noises didn’t seem to be specifically directed at me, so maybe this was just normal biker gang behavior? It wasn’t like I had any frame of reference for this, so I was just kind of hoping for the best.

But all that hope flew out the window when I heard Xavier draw in a sharp breath. I looked over at him, then following his eyes, looked out through the windshield.

Right in front of the car was a familiar figure. The hair, the jacket, the shoulders—I knew it was Andrei before he even turned around to look at us. He was riding without a helmet—typical—so I saw his eyes light up with malicious humor when he saw us. Taking one hand off the bike, he waved, then—looking straight at me—blew a kiss.

Frozen with fear, I watched as the rest of the motorcycles sped past us. Xavier’s hands gripped the steering wheel so hard his knuckles were white, and his jaw was clamped tight.

When they were past us and the sound of the bikes was starting to fade, I reached for him, putting my hand on his arm. “It’s okay, Xavier. They were just being assholes. They’re moving on.”

He didn’t respond.

When we reached a turn-off, Xavier steered the car back toward the highway. We were silent as we drove in the direction of the pack house again. The angle of Xavier’s jaw was sharp as cut glass, and he didn’t speak.

It wasn’t until we pulled in and parked in the driveway at the house that he finally looked over at me. “Cali, I’m sorry.”

I looked at him, frankly surprised. “For what?”

He shook his head, his face angry. “This was supposed to be a fun little errand for you and me. Something—” He took a breath. “Something *normal*. And then it went to shit.”

I smiled and reached for him, taking his hand. “I’m glad you came with me, Xavier. I’m really glad you were there.” He looked up into my eyes. “I know I can always count on you to protect me.”

The corners of his lips quirked, like he was about to smile, and he leaned forward, pressing his lips to mine, his kiss tender. I inhaled him for the moment, letting my hand slide up to cup his cheek. He broke the kiss, my heart fluttering.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his mouth close to mine.

I nodded. “You know I am. I’m always safe with you.”

Now he did smile. “Good. I don’t want anything to ruin our first Thanksgiving together.”

My heart beat fast again, but this time it wasn’t out of fear. I was overwhelmed that spending Thanksgiving together felt important to him. I reached for the door. “Then we’d better get these cranberries inside before there’s a chutney mutiny.”

“Hang on,” he said, leaning across the gearshift and opening my door for me.

I rolled my eyes. “I can do that myself, you know?”

He frowned. “Can you?”

I laughed and gave him a playful shove.

“Anyway, it’s an excuse to get one of these,” he said, leaning close again for another kiss. He let this one linger.

“Cranberries!” I called, pulling myself back and getting out of the car before I got too carried away.

Xavier groaned but climbed out of the car as well. He’d just grabbed my hand as we headed to the house when we heard a sound that made us both freeze. It was a vibrating rumble. Distant, but growing louder.

We both turned, and I stepped closer to Xavier, my heart pounding. “Xavier, did they follow us?”

**Episode 1946**

LOLA

I stared at the pink pregnancy test in Jacqueline’s pale hands. Then I lunged, making a grab for it. “Don’t worry about it. It’s nothing.”

Jacqueline pulled the box out of my reach. “Well it’s not nothing, Lola. I have got eyes, you know. It’s a pregnancy test.”

“Big congrats, Jacs, you can read. I know it’s a pregnancy test,” I said waspishly. “I can read, too.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Well that’s good to hear. Because based on your grades at Tottenville, I wasn’t so sure.”

I blew a stray piece of hair out of my eyes and glared at her. “Oh, I’m sorry. I guess I’m at a slight disadvantage, not having repeated vampire tenth grade a *dozen times* like you.” Jacqueline held up the box and gave it an annoying little shake. “And it’s not mine! It’s for a friend!”

I didn’t really think Jacs was going to buy that. I mean—*for a friend*? Come on, I’d have been disappointed in her if she *did* believe me. But I didn’t need her to believe me, I just needed her to give me the freaking box so I could hide it before Jay saw it. I glanced nervously over my shoulder. He could come up the stairs anytime. Hell, he could already be up here.

Jacqueline gave me a suspicious look. “For a friend, Lola? Come on. Whenever anyone says something is for a friend, it’s always for themselves. It’s the oldest trick in the book—if we’re going to start using clichés.”

I huffed and put my hands on my hips. “It’s not mine, Jacqueline. I swear. It’s for a friend, and she’s waiting for it. Now can you please give it back?” I demanded, holding my hand out. “I’m sure we both have better things to do than argue about this.”   
 “For a friend, huh?” Jacqueline looked curiously down at the box. “So it’s for Cali, then?”

The blood drained from my face. Shit. “*No!* It’s not for Cali!” I said quickly. Cali would absolutely murder me if she found out I was starting rumors about her being pregnant. “Why would you think it was for Cali?”

Jacqueline raised a single eyebrow—*ugh*, how could she even do that? “Um, because Cali is literally your only friend? Kind of sad, honestly.”  
 Irritation flashed through me like white fire. “It’s for a friend—who is *not* Cali and also not me—and I will take that, *thankyouverymuch*.” I snatched the box from Jacqueline’s hand and headed quickly down the hall.

If I’d thought I was in the clear, I’d thought wrong: Jacqueline stepped up next to me, easily matching my speed.

She tapped her chin, as if thinking hard. “You know, the more you protest, the more certain I am that the test really is for Cali.”

“It’s not,” I said hotly.

“She has what—two mates?” Jacqueline asked, cutting me off. “Xander and Mason, right?”

“Xavier and Greyson,” I growled, frustration growing hotter in my chest.

“Right, right, whatever.” She shrugged airily. “Well, if she’s not being very safe with either of them—or both, or whatever—then a pregnancy scare is likely.” She chuckled. “Oh, to be human.”

“She’s half Fae!” I protested, glaring.

Jacqueline rolled her eyes. “Whatever. *Not* a vampire.” She walked next to me for another moment, then bumped her shoulder into mine. “You know I was just giving you shit about it being yours, right?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I mean, I know it can’t be your test.”

I stopped and turned to her, looking at her for the first time. “Why not?”

She laughed. “Because we’re vampires.”

I waited. “*And?*” I asked when she didn’t go on.

She looked at me like I was an idiot. “And vampires can’t get pregnant. Thank god.”

My stomach tightened painfully. “Really?”

Jacqueline shook her head. “God, you really don’t know anything, do you? Nope, we can’t get pregnant. I mean, born vampires are *super* rare, and you and your werewolf hunk probably have even less of a chance because you’re natural enemies.”

I took this in. She already thought I was an idiot, so I didn’t want to admit that I hadn’t even known born vampires were a thing. I thought for a moment, trying to remember everything I’d learned about my condition. Emmett had told me that I wasn’t undead, and that could make things different for me. But he’d never said what things, or how they would be different.

I turned toward my door. “This is my room. I’ll see you later, Jacs.”

She reached out and put her hand on my arm. “Hey. One more thing.”

I looked back at her. “What?”

She smirked. “Like I said, born vampires are really rare, and if there was going to be one, I doubt it would be yours.”

God, she was the worst. “Thanks so much, *Jacqueline*,” I said sweetly, then pushed through my door and slammed it shut. Behind me, I heard Jacqueline laughing as she walked away.

I stood for a moment, savoring the quiet of my bedroom, then dropped the drugstore bag on my desk and headed for the bathroom with my little box. I looked at the directions on the back. It was going to take five minutes to process after I peed on the test stick, and a little pink plus in the window would mean that there was a “baby for sure,” and a blue minus sign would mean “no baby for sure.”

Frowning, I read the directions again. Wait, did that make sense? Did the blue minus mean that there was no baby, or that it couldn’t be sure if there *was* a baby?

I scanned the box. There was a number to call if I had questions, but I knew I couldn’t handle waiting on hold to find out the answers. I had to know *now*. Whatever my confusion was, I knew I had to see that little plus or minus sign, or I was going to go crazy. If I was still confused after this test, I’d get another. Hell, I’d get another *ten* tests if I had to. I just wanted to get to the bottom of this.

I unwrapped the stick and followed the instructions, then set the timer on my phone for five minutes.

Then I started to pace. I circumnavigated my bedroom, always coming back into the bathroom to check the test on the counter, then starting my route again.

Jacqueline was trying to get under my skin—what else was new?—but I couldn’t stop thinking about what she’d said. What if I *was* going to give birth to a born vampire? My thoughts spun at that possibility. I thought about what I knew about werewolf pregnancies. Would a half-vampire, half-werewolf pregnancy take the same amount of time? A werewolf pregnancy was only four months. Four months was too short! I would need more time to prepare! To nest!

If I was going to have a baby, I’d need diapers and those little pails people put diapers in. I would need those little sucker things people stuck in babies mouths to shut them up. I would need one of those mobile things people put over cribs. I would need baby clothes. I would need a house!

There was no way four months would be enough time.

But maybe it wouldn’t be like a werewolf pregnancy. I was a vampire, after all. So how long would it take? And what would the baby turn out to be?

My thoughts felt completely jumbled, like a ball of tangled Christmas lights. I glanced at my phone on the bathroom counter. Maybe I should call Emmett. He might know the answers to these questions—or at least have some idea about them. But I didn’t want to tell him what was going on. I didn’t want anyone to know.

And I sure as hell wasn’t going to ask Jacqueline about any of it either.

I made it back to the bathroom and looked at the timer.

Thirty seconds.

Holy shit.

My heart pounded in my chest, and it felt like I’d forgotten how to breathe properly. I stood still, watching the timer countdown. The test was lying six inches away from my phone, but I couldn’t bring myself to shift my gaze to look at it.

“Lola?” There was a knock on the door of my bedroom and then the sound of the door opening. Jay stuck his head in. “Lola, are you in here?”

I turned around, mute with shock.

“Lola? Where are you?”

Before I could say anything—or even decide if I was going to speak at all—the timer alarm rang out, making me jump in surprise. No no no!

“There you are.” Jay walked into the room and came to stand at the doorway of the bathroom. Frowning, he looked at me, then at my ringing phone, then—slowly—his gaze shifted over to the pregnancy test on the counter.

**Episode 1947**

GREYSON

I looked at Charlie, waiting for him to answer to my question about him joining the pack. But before he could say anything, we heard a loud, deep rumble. We both looked over at the door, then back at each other.

“We’ll revisit this later,” I said, then headed for the door. Charlie followed at my heels.

When I pulled open the back door and looked out, I saw Rishika at the woodpile, revving the chainsaw. It kept dying on her, so she was having to start it repeatedly. Artemis was nearby, sitting on a stump of wood she’d propped up, looking on. And Tom stood by as well, holding what looked like a giant tin can, though what he was doing with it I couldn’t tell. He didn’t seem to be paying anyone any attention.

“What are you doing?” I called to Rishika over the noise.

Rishika looked up at me, then gestured around. “We need more wood if we want to have a bonfire tonight!” she called back, shaking her dark hair out of her eyes.

“Oh, right.” I’d forgotten about that. Werewolves couldn’t let a holiday go by without a bonfire. “Just be careful with that thing.”

Rishika saluted cheekily. “You got it, Captain!”

Rolling my eyes, I turned back to Charlie and slapped him on the back. “We’ll talk about this later. You can head back inside. Someone’s probably looking for you.”

Charlie opened his mouth to respond, but Rishika got the chainsaw going right at that moment, drowning him out. So Charlie just grinned and nodded, then turned to go inside.

Rishika had finally managed to get the chainsaw going for more than a few seconds, and when she cut through the log suspended over a couple of sawhorses, Artemis threw her hands in the air and cheered.

Rishika grinned. “You want to try?” she asked Artemis. Artemis nodded, and Rishika was just handing off the chainsaw to her when Xavier came storming around the corner of the house, looking furious. Cali hurried behind him, her expression terrified.

Xavier glared at the chainsaw, then Rishika. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing with that thing?” he bellowed, the anger in his voice audible even over the roar of the saw.

I stared at the two of them, taking in their freaked-out expressions. “What the hell is going on?” I asked, baffled.

“That’s what I’d like to know,” Xavier snarled, still glowering at Rishika, who looked totally mystified. She cut the power to the saw.

“Why are you in such a bad mood?” I asked, looking from Xavier to Cali. “Did they not have any cranberries?”

“Fuck the cranberries!” Xavier snapped, taking a step toward Rishika.

Seeing an unnecessary confrontation coming, I stepped off the porch and put a hand on Xavier’s chest, stopping him. “She’s cutting wood, man. We’re having a bonfire later. It’s fine. What’s your problem?”

But now that I was closer to him, I could see Xavier more clearly, and I recognized the look in his eyes. He was alarmed. I looked past him to Cali, whose eyes were still wide with fear, but she looked relieved, too.

My confusion grew, along with my unease. “What the hell were you two expecting to see?” I asked.

Xavier shoved my hand away. He glanced back at Cali, then at Rishika and Artemis, who were listening closely. “Not here,” he growled.

Tom looked up—for the first time—and saw Cali. “Cali! Did you get the cranberries?”

Cali nodded and held up the grocery bag in her hand. “Yeah, I got them, Dad.”

“Thank god. Well, come inside,” Tom said, heading toward the back door. “Torin’s been waiting for them. He’s already got the simple syrup ready to go.”

Cali followed him up the steps. She shot me a worried look over her shoulder, then disappeared into the house. Rishika put the saw down on one of the uncut logs, and she and Artemis followed them into the house.

When the door shut behind them, I turned to Xavier, determined to get some answers. “What the fuck happened to you two while you were gone?”

Xavier rubbed his jaw. He looked as angry as I’d ever seen him, and I’d seen him look angry plenty of times. “We ran into that guy Andrei, from the Vanguard pack.”

“At the *grocery store*?” I asked, surprised.

Xavier nodded. “Yeah. Then again on the road back home. The whole damn pack surrounded the car.”

Fury flamed up in my chest. “What happened?”

He shook his head. “Nothing. They didn’t try anything, but the message was clear as day. It was an intimidation tactic.” He shrugged. “Hell, I’ve used it myself. They want to make themselves known to us. Make sure we know they’re here.”

I ground my teeth. “Well maybe it’s time we pay them a little visit and start a real conversation. Let them know we’re here, too.”

He snorted derisively. “More like we nip this shit in the bud before it gets out of hand.”

We looked at each other as the bitter November wind whistled around us. I could tell we were thinking the same thing, and the unspoken words hung heavy in the silence between us.

“The only question is,” Xavier said, breaking the silence, “who’s going to do it?”

“Yeah,” I said slowly. “I guess that is the question.”

Xavier’s eyes darkened. “This would be a job for the Alpha, but there’s no official Alpha right now. Thanks to you.”

“Well, the Vanguard pack thinks it’s me,” I said, fighting to keep the anger out of my voice.

Xavier’s eyes seared into me. “And why the fuck would they think that?’

“Don’t start,” I warned. “You know why. There had to be a show of authority last night or else who the hell knows what would have happened. Andrei came looking for the Alpha, and you weren’t here.”

“You’re not the Alpha,” Xavier pressed, fury radiating from him.

“Neither are you,” I shot back.

Xavier closed his eyes for a moment and pressed his finger to his temple, like he had a sudden headache. “You cannot be fucking serious right now, Greyson.” He looked at me. “First you don’t want to be Alpha, then you’re telling a new—potential enemy—pack that you *are* the Alpha?” He shook his head. “I can’t get a read on what you want, man.”

“Then maybe you should stop trying,” I snapped, anger coursing through me.

Xavier narrowed his eyes. “You’re hiding something. I know you are. So what the fuck is it?”

Dammit. He was right about that—apparently he could read me. But I wasn’t about to open up to Xavier of all people about the dream I’d had, or my fear that if I was Alpha, Cali would die.

Xavier was still looking at me expectantly, so I shook my head.

“I’m not hiding anything, and I don’t have to explain myself to you.”

“Are you being serious?” he snapped. “How are we supposed to deal with the Vanguard pack *and* lead our pack with this fucking attitude of yours?” He shook his head. “You think *I* like this? You think this is *my* first choice? I don’t want to work with you, man, but we’ve got a problem here.”

“Xavier—” I started, holding up a hand, signaling for him to shut up.

But he didn’t. He took a step toward me and lowered his voice. “We need to solve this, man. We have to. Here. Now. Or hell, maybe we’re going to have to give Cali’s co-Alpha idea a try—”

“I’m not—”

“Well we have to stop stringing the pack along like this,” Xavier said, growling. “It’s not fucking fair to them. It’s putting them all at risk. Today it’s the Vanguard pack, but tomorrow it’ll be something else. It’s always something else.”

A muscle in my jaw twitched. I knew what Xavier was saying was true—that was what made me so mad. This competition between us wasn’t fair to the pack, and it was putting them at greater risk. And keeping this secret of mine… That wasn’t fair either. Not to Cali, or to Xavier. But what could I do? I didn’t want to put them in danger, and until I knew what I was facing, I was going to do everything I could to protect them. Both of them.

Once I could figure out what the hell was going on, that was when I’d start making some decisions. Until then, I just had to focus on protecting the pack.

“Fine,” I said, turning to Xavier.

“What?” he said, looking startled.

“You’re right. We have to do something. I agree with you.”

“You *do*?” Xavier couldn’t hide his surprise. “I guess there’s a first time for everything,” he added slowly, searching my face, like he was looking for a trap.

I rolled my eyes. “I think we should go pay the Vanguard pack a visit.”

Xavier frowned. “*We?* You mean together?”

“Yeah,” I nodded. “Together. Both of us acting as Alpha.” I raised my eyebrows. “What do you say?”

**Episode 1948**

XAVIER

My brows rose at Greyson’s suggestion, but I didn’t hesitate. Sharing Alpha with Greyson—especially in a public capacity, when talking to another pack—wasn’t exactly ideal. But after the Vanguard pack had tried to intimidate me, and Andrei had openly checked out Cali in front of me, I wasn’t about to let Greyson claim all the glory.

Besides, I was pretty sure the Vanguard pack wasn’t just flexing its muscles. They were up to something. I just wished I knew what.

“I’ll join you, and we’ll introduce ourselves as joint Alphas,” I agreed. “When do you want to go?”

My brother looked over to the Thanksgiving setup before turning back to me. “How about we wait until after the festivities are over? I don’t think Tom or Torin would forgive us for blowing off Thanksgiving dinner.”

“So, tomorrow night, then?” I pressed.

“We could wait until then…” He grimaced, and then shook his head. “But I didn’t like the way Andrei crashed the engagement party—he was so close to ruining the whole thing, and I really didn’t like the way he looked at Cali.”

I growled. He’d done the same thing at the store. This fucker was just asking to get his ass handed to him. And it didn’t comfort me even a little bit that he’d showed just as much disrespect to Greyson as he had to me. Not when it was because our mate was caught in this asshole’s crosshairs.

“I barely even know this guy,” I hissed, “but settling things with him is working its way up to priority fucking one.”

“I agree,” Greyson said, his eyes narrowed in distaste. For once, that look wasn’t leveled at me.

*Look at us—agreeing with each other twice in as many minutes. We’re both directing our murder vibes at someone else. This must be what progress feels like.*

“We don’t want to wait too long to respond,” Greyson continued. “The more time we give the Vanguard pack to get comfortable, the more even the playing field will become. And if they have anything more up their sleeves than just being neighborly, we want to put a pin in that. Fast.” His eyes focused on mine, cold and determined. “I want to go tonight, after everyone is settled. What do you think?”

Well, shit. I’d been secretly hoping I could spend the night with Cali, savor that turkey hangover and all that. I’d really enjoyed taking her to the store and spending time with her in that mundane setting we really never got enough of. It had almost been like being on vacation together.

I could still feel the ghost of her kiss on my lips—and I wanted more. Hence my well-laid plans for tonight (or was that “plans to get well-laid”?).

But, of course, I wasn’t going to tell Greyson any of that. Even if we didn’t share a mate, our relationship had never been cozy enough to share personal details. Hell, even asking him how his day was going seemed too far.

I cleared my throat and nodded. “After midnight, then.”

Maybe I could sneak into Cali’s room when we got back.

Greyson smirked and clapped me on the shoulder, just this side of too hard. “See? It’s not so hard to agree, is it?”

I shook off his hand. “Don’t get ahead of yourself. Whatever we tell the Vanguard pack, at the end of the day, the issue of Alpha is far from settled.”

My brother’s eyes narrowed, but before he could launch us into yet another argument, the sputtering of a chainsaw cut him off. We glanced over to see that Rishika and Artemis were working together to get it restarted. It didn’t seem to be going well.

“Do you guys want some help with that?” Greyson called.

“Your electric sword is too unwieldy,” Artemis replied, crossing her arms.

“Um, it’s called a chainsaw.” Rishika smiled. “And yes, we’d love the help.”

Greyson nodded, but before he headed over, he turned back to me. “Let’s keep this Vanguard thing to ourselves, okay?”

I knew what he was getting at, and I could see where he was coming from. If we were heading over to pay an uninvited visit to the Vanguard pack, Cali would want to come too. Still, I didn’t like the idea of leaving her out of the loop. “I’m not going to lie to Cali. Are you?”

He smiled. “That’s not my style.”

I snorted. If that was truly what he thought, then he was lying to himself as well. Hell, he might even be lying to all of us, for all I knew. It was impossible to figure out what the hell was going on in my brother’s head, but between the way he’d turned down my Alpha challenge and his hesitancy earlier regarding us becoming co-Alphas, something was up.

Not that he was telling anyone about it. Whatever was going on, Greyson was keeping it close to his chest.

Which, in a way, was a form of lying. But that wasn’t my business.

I shrugged. “Whatever, but if Cali asks, I’m going to tell her.”

For a moment, Greyson looked like he was going to argue, but then Artemis cleared her throat.

“Are you going to help or not?” she called.

Instead of digging his heels in, Greyson nodded at me and then jogged over to help Rishika and Artemis. I let out a sigh of relief as I watched him go. Sure, him jumping in to help with the chainsaw made him look good, but the truth was, I didn’t know anything about how to use a chainsaw. Even if I had offered to help, I probably couldn’t have fixed the problem. That was exactly why I hired people like Phil.

I watched from afar as Greyson fiddled with the motor, and soon the chainsaw was roaring to life.

*He might be a better mechanic than he is an Alpha. Guess there’s hope for him yet.*

I smiled at the thought as I caught up with Cali, who was coming out after taking the cranberries inside.

“Hey,” she said with a smile. “What’s got you in such a good mood?”

“Hey, yourself. Just thinking about Greyson.”

Her brows rose. “Really? I watched you two talking through the kitchen window. I was expecting another argument, but you two seem to be getting along. I’m glad. What were you talking about?”

I shrugged. “Just some pack business.”

The words felt like a lie, even though they technically were true. I tried to ignore the tightening in my stomach as I imagined all my moral high ground disappearing. It wasn’t like I was trying to hide the truth from Cali, it was just that if I flat-out told her our plan, she’d worry. And right now, I just wanted to kiss her and enjoy the holiday. To keep things upbeat.

Was that truly so selfish?

Besides, if she pressed me for details, I’d tell her the truth—I didn’t want to risk Greyson coming clean about our plan before I even got the chance.

The crashing of pans echoed from the kitchen, followed by Tom’s booming voice. “Who dropped the gravy?”

Cali sighed. “Dad is really stressing out over this dinner. And I can tell he’s working through some pain right now. It can’t be easy to put on something like this for a big crowd while he’s feeling so low.”

I wrapped my arms around her and kissed her forehead. “It’s probably because of the shift. The full moon is tonight, after all. It’s only going to get worse.”

“I’m really worried about what’s going to happen to him,” she admitted. “I know he’s trying to do everything right now, probably to distract himself, but he’s getting really frazzled. I mean, he’s already snapped at Torin twice—who in their right mind snaps at Torin? Especially when they know that Torin’s grief is still so fresh after losing Astrid.”

“I’ve snapped at him a few times,” I reminded her.

“And it wasn’t a good look on you. Face it, Torin’s the nicest guy in the world. In both worlds, really.”

“Did you really have to spill the gravy?” Tom cried from the kitchen. “We’ll have to make a whole new batch!”

Cali’s face tightened, and I lifted her chin. “The pack and I will do everything we can to make Tom’s shift go as smoothly as possible. I promise. But please keep in mind that it’s hard to predict how someone will react—it’s different for everyone.”

“That’s not comforting.”

I sighed. I wasn’t trying to comfort her—I was trying to prepare her. “Your dad is a strong person, just like you. I can see where you get it from.”

She smiled, then stiffened and pulled back. “What time is the full moon tonight?”

“Um… I don’t know. It’s not like werewolves pay that much attention. The moon comes out, and… Well, we know it when it happens.”

“Very helpful.” She rolled her eyes and whipped out her phone. Then her eyes went wide. “The full moon is at five p.m.! My dad’s going to become a werewolf in less than six hours!”

**Episode 1949**

MARTA

I was frozen, staring down at the blackened onion in my hand. I’d done it again—killed a living thing simply by touching it. I’d forgotten to put my gloves on before coming downstairs and facing a room full of people, putting literally everyone here in mortal danger—except for Lilac, with his weird immunity.

I dropped the onion on the counter and tugged down my long sleeves over my hands before curling my fingers into tight fists.

How could I have been so stupid? So forgetful? I really could have hurt someone!

I thought back to my morning, and realization set in along with a hefty dose of embarrassment. I’d been so caught up in Lilac—and really, who could blame me?—and then his sister had walked in on us, and I’d been so flustered after that that I’d forgotten to put my gloves on.

*Shit!*

Torin walked over. With how high-strung he was today, I half-expected him to yell at me, or maybe to cast some kind of Fae curse on me for necromancing an onion intended for his perfect Thanksgiving meal.

Instead, he just looked confused. “It’s… It’s completely rotten. How did this happen? I picked it out myself. It was one of the most perfect root vegetables I’ve ever laid eyes on.”

“It’s not a root vegetable!” Tom snapped. “Technically, it’s a bulb.”

My eyes widened. *Okay…* That seemed like a weird battle to pick, considering all the other crazy shit happening right now, but who I was to judge?

Torin winced. “I’m sorry. I’ll go find another.” He cast a wounded glance my way. “I still don’t understand, though… What did you do to it?”

My mouth went dry. How could I even begin to explain what I’d done? Everyone in the room would treat me like some kind of monster before I could even explain that I hadn’t done it on purpose. I didn’t know how or why this was happening to me. Just like I didn’t know how to stop it.

*Maybe that’s worse, though. If I can’t control it, that means everyone around me is at risk.*

“It’s, uh… I…” I stammered, racking my brain to come up with an explanation that didn’t make me sound like the Grim Reaper.

“I’ve seen this before!” Violet piped up. “Marta didn’t do anything. This is just one of those rotten-on-the-inside vegetables.”

Torin frowned. “Rotten on the inside?”

“Yeah.” Violet nodded, cool as a cucumber. “It looks fine on the outside, but then it’s totally rotten on the inside. It’s more common than you’d think.” She tapped the countertop next to the blackened onion. “This one was probably just bad to begin with.”

Violet glanced at me, giving me a quick smile.

*Thank you*, I mouthed.

“Huh,” Torin mused. “This world never ceases to surprise me.”

He continued muttering to himself about vegetables as he headed toward the pantry to fetch another onion. The moment had passed, and everyone seemed placated. I hadn’t been caught. But the dread weighing down my stomach hadn’t eased a single bit.

“Rotten on the inside,” I whispered to myself. “Like me.”

Emotion closed my throat, and the telltale burn of incoming tears pricked my eyes.

“Excuse me,” I blurted out, and headed toward the staircase. I needed to get my gloves on before I hurt someone.

I raced up the stairs, just as Lilac was coming down.

He grinned. “Back so soon? Should I just head back to bed?” He waggled his eyebrows.

I was *not* in the mood for his hammy behavior anymore.

“Not now,” I said, holding up my hands. “I forgot my gloves.”

Then I hurried past him, heading toward my own bedroom.

“Marta, wait!” he called. “What’s wrong?”

Emotion filling my throat, I turned. “Why are you still hanging around? Didn’t you already get what you want? Just leave me alone!”

His jaw dropped. “Marta…”

His wounded tone gutted me, but I couldn’t stick around and talk. I spun around and raced into my room, slamming the door behind me.

I only just made it to my bed before I collapsed in a heap and let my tears flow freely. I hadn’t felt so trapped since I was Bert’s captive. I had these powers, these terrifying, devastating powers, and I couldn’t turn them off. I couldn’t stop them from hurting the people I cared about.

“What the hell am I going to d-do?” I whispered brokenly, my chest hitching on a sob.

I never should have gone to the kitchen without my gloves. It had been so, so stupid. What if I’d accidentally touched Torin, or Violet? It was an inexcusable mistake, and I knew that if my forgetfulness had resulted in someone getting hurt—or worse—I would never forgive myself.

Lilac was immune to my abilities, as far as we knew, but we had no idea what my touch could do to someone else. And I wasn’t willing to risk finding an answer.

*Lilac*…

God, I’d been so cruel to him. Why had I said that stuff to him? He was so sweet—and he had never once given me reason to believe he didn’t truly care about me. He didn’t deserve any of that.

I needed to talk to him, to explain what happened. I sat up and looked around my bedroom with swollen, red-rimmed eyes. Where were my gloves?

*Crap. I left them in Lilac’s room.*

I wiped my eyes and then headed out into the hallway. It was time to eat crow.

“Marta.”

I turned to see Big Mac approaching, and I quickly pasted on a smile as I slipped my hands behind my back. “Good morning!

The witch got even closer, near enough to reach out and touch me. Too close. I subtly inched back as Big Mac eyed me.

“Did you have a good time at the party last night?” she asked. “I’m sorry we didn’t have much time to talk.”

She reached out, and I lunged backward. “Don’t touch me!”

The very last thing I wanted was to infect Big Mac with whatever had killed Torin’s perfect onion. The witch was one of my closest allies here in the pack house—it would kill me if I accidentally hurt her.

She frowned. “Is something wrong?”

“No! Nothing’s wrong!” I blurted out, then forced a laugh. “Why would you even think that?”

“Because you’re acting strange. Is it because of the summons?”

“I mean, that’s part of it,” I admitted, even though my horror over what had happened in the kitchen had actually pushed the summons out of my mind entirely.

The witch looked up and down the hallway before lowering her voice. “Is it boy trouble?”

Heat rushed into my cheeks as I thought of Lilac—and everything I’d said to him. *Yeah*, *boy trouble’s not far off the mark, either.*

Before I could respond, Big Mac added, “Because that’s not really my area of expertise, but I can try.” She gestured toward the stairwell. “Why don’t we go somewhere we can talk?”

She reached for me, probably wanting to act as a reassuring guide to our destination, but I flinched back again. She studied me for a moment, and I swallowed roughly. Could she tell what was wrong? Could she see that strange magic inside me?

Finally, she held up her hands. “Let’s talk in my room.”

She turned and headed down the hallway, inviting me to follow her without touching me. Soon enough, we entered her room. Well, Big Mac entered her room. I hovered by the doorway, too afraid to step into the space and accidentally touch something.

“All right, it’s just you and me. What’s going on?”

I hesitated. Did I really want to share this with anyone else? Lilac knew, of course, but he was different. Big Mac was a powerful witch, and maybe getting her involved in this wasn’t the best idea.

“Marta,” she pressed gently. “I can’t help you if you don’t tell me what’s going on.”

I *did* need to talk to someone. Badly. And Big Mac was going out of her way to be friendly to me, which, based on what I’d heard, was something the witch never, ever did. For anyone.

But could I trust her? Ever since that plant had died at my fingertips, I hadn’t been able to shake my terror. I was afraid of my powers, afraid of myself, afraid of what could happen if I screwed up again.

I really, *really* needed help.

I held up my hands. “Don’t touch me. Just let me explain.”

I explained what had happened, starting with the plant and ending with the onion incident. By the time I finished, my heart was racing, and I could barely speak around the panic squeezing my chest. Big Mac seemed to process this for a moment, and her lack of response was maddening.

Was Big Mac going to banish me? Or cast some sort of protective spell on everyone else?

Finally, she broke the silence. “What you described could be your magic defining itself.”

*What on earth does that mean?*

“Or,” she added, “it could be that the spirit world is punishing you for using necromancy. I’m not sure. I’m going to have to look into it.”

I nodded, hopeful despite the lack of resolution. At least Big Mac wasn’t turning against me.

Suddenly, a strange clanking noise echoed around us—and a pair of ancient-looking bronze bracelets clasped around my wrists. A letter floated down from above, landing in my hands. My name was written on it in old-fashioned calligraphy.

I looked at Big Mac with wide eyes. “What’s happening? What is this thing?”

**Episode 1950**

LOLA

I died a little inside as Jay looked back and forth between me and the pregnancy test sitting on the counter. His throat worked for a moment. “Is that what I think it is?”

“N-No!” I spluttered. “It’s not what it looks like!”

His brows rose, but he was surprisingly calm when he said, “It looks like a pregnancy test. Are we pregnant?”

Never let it be said that my mate was bad at communication. *Wow, this is a life-changing deal, and he’s just taking the whole thing in stride.*

Still, I wasn’t so emotionally well-balanced that I didn’t want to hide the stick from him, then hide myself. Pretend this conversation had never happened if he ever brought it up in the future. But I couldn’t lie to him. He was my mate. Mates didn’t lie to each other.

Besides, he deserved so much better than that.

“I might be,” I admitted. His gaze softened, and I added, “I took the test, but I’m too afraid to look.”

Jay stepped closer and entwined our fingers. “Then let’s look at it together.”

“A-Are you sure?” I wasn’t even sure what I was asking, necessarily. Whether this was about looking at a test, or being calm and collected in the face of something as big and scary as having a baby.

My throat tightened with emotion, and he pulled me into a hug. “I’m sure. Whatever the test tells us, I’ll be by your side through it. Always.” His lips gently brushed over mine. “I love you.”

All that fear and anxiety and the terrifying what-ifs disappeared, and I relaxed into my mate’s arms for the first time in what felt like ages. I was the luckiest vampire in the world to have Jay as my mate. No matter what happened, he never failed to show up for me, to support me, to love me.

He lifted my chin. “Should we do this? Are you ready?”

I nodded, and Jay gingerly reached out to pick up the test.

My eyes slammed shut. I couldn’t look.

“Lola, open your eyes. We’re doing this together, remember?”

Slowly, I opened one eye and then the other. He flipped the test over, and we read the result at the exact same time.

A blue minus sign. *No baby for sure.*

I let out a sigh of relief. “Oh, thank god.”

Next to me, Jay exhaled too, and his posture loosened. I hadn’t even realized he was feeling tense.

He looked at me, his gaze still soft. “Is this the result you wanted, then?” I nodded, and he smiled. “It’s what I was hoping for, too.”

Overwhelmed by the last three minutes, I kissed him deeply. His lips firmed against mine, showing me without words just how much he loved me. When we broke apart, breathless, I smiled. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For just being you. I didn’t know how you’d react.”

He nodded. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you how I felt right away. For what it’s worth, I meant everything I said. If we were pregnant, I’d be all in. But I’d always hoped that having children would be something we’d discuss and plan for. Not something that happened all on its own.”

“I understand completely.”

“Not that I don’t want to have children with you,” he added. “I do. Just… not yet. We’re too young.”

I plucked the test out of his hand. “Well, luckily, we don’t have to worry about that yet.” I tossed it in the garbage bin.

We lingered in the bathroom for a moment, staring at the test. I wondered if the next time I took a test, I’d be hoping for a pink plus sign.

Jay squeezed my hand. “Someday we’ll have another moment just like this, and everything will be different. We’ll be married, and we’ll be ready for this. And when it happens for us, everything is going to be perfect.”

My insides went all warm and fuzzy as he painted this beautiful picture of our perfect future together. It was everything I wanted with him and more. Then I remembered what Jacqueline had said—that vampires couldn’t have children. Well, most of them.

*Maybe she was right. Maybe I’ll never be pregnant because I’m a vampire now—more or less.*

I couldn’t tell Jay this, though—not when he’d just waxed poetic about our future children. He’d be crushed. Besides, Jacqueline was hardly an expert on the subject. As Emmett had said, I was unique. Who knew if I could get pregnant?

I needed to do some research. And if I found out something definitive, *then* I’d tell Jay whatever I’d discovered.

But for now, we’d just enjoy this huge relief, and the fact that this strange situation had brought us even closer together. I did have to wonder though… If I wasn’t pregnant, then why was I feeling so off? Why could I see my reflection? Maybe I had to call Emmett later…

“We should probably head back downstairs,” Jay murmured. “Everyone’s helping out, and if we don’t, people are bound to start spreading all sorts of rumors.”

“You’re right. Oh.” I realized something. “Wait, I should probably text my dads and find a good time to talk, shouldn’t I? After all, it’s Thanksgiving.”

“That’s a good idea. But the conversation will probably go a lot more smoothly if I’m not part of it.” He gave me a good-natured smile. “Come join me downstairs when you’re done.”

How had I ended up with such a perfectly accepting and understanding mate? “I will.”

He kissed my forehead and headed downstairs.

I turned and faced myself in the mirror. I was the luckiest vampire in the world, hands down. And all because of Jay. It was a shame my dads couldn’t see that. They saw Jay as the strange guy who’d whisked their daughter away from her college ambitions and moved her across the country. They still probably thought that being with him was the biggest mistake I’d ever made.

But they couldn’t have been more wrong. Jay was my mate—and beyond that, he was unendingly supportive. No matter what happened to me, he was always there to help me through it.

And if my dads could ever bring themselves to give Jay a real chance, I knew they’d have a change of heart.

*Maybe someday.*

I pulled out my phone and quickly composed a text. *Happy T-Day! When’s a good time to talk?*

Pops responded immediately. *How about now?*

Within seconds, he was FaceTiming me. *Wow, Pops, can you give a girl a little warning first?*

While my phone rang, I shoved the “Baby Be Sure!” box into the trash can and then rushed out of the bathroom before accepting the call.

“Happy Thanksgiving!” They greeted me in unison, wearing matching smiles, and I felt my own lips curling up in response.

“Happy Thanksgiving to you too! How’s your day going so far?”

“It’s good,” Pops said, “but it doesn’t feel quite the same without you.”

“We miss you something fierce, honey,” Dad said.

My chest tightened. “I miss you too.” And I really did. I knew living in Oregon to be part of a pack was truly the best thing for me, it was where I belonged, but sometimes I wished I could keep both halves of my life in the same place.

My dads’ eyes zeroed in on me through the screen. “You look pale. Have you been sick?”

*Does becoming a vampire count as being sick?*

I waved off their concern. “Oh, it’s just the bad lighting in here. I’m fine.”

“Are you eating okay?” Pops asked.

The question, innocent as it was, felt like a landmine. I forced a smile. “I am! I actually just tried venison for the first time!”

My dads both grimaced.

“How’s your search for a college in Oregon coming?” Dad asked. “You haven’t given us any updates lately.”

“Oh… I’m narrowing it down,” I said vaguely. “I’ll send you something soon.”

An awkward silence settled between us for a moment before Pops asked, “So… how is Jay?”

I knew an olive branch when I saw it, but I could tell my dads weren’t thrilled to even be having this conversation. I briefly considered what would happen if I told them the truth: *We just had a pregnancy scare, but we’re doing better than ever!*

But there was no need to send either of them to the hospital with a heart attack.

Before I could come up with a harmless response, a timer went off in the background of their call.

“Oh, shoot! The marshmallows on top of the sweet potatoes are burning!” Pops rushed out of the frame while Dad smiled.

“I’d better go help him before our dinner’s ruined. We’ll catch up soon. We love you, sweetheart.”

“I love you too.”

The call ended, and I stowed my phone in my pocket before leaving the bedroom to head downstairs. Jay had been right: If we weren’t both seen helping, it wouldn’t bode well for our enjoyment of dinner tonight.

I made it about three steps before Sage came bounding down the hallway.

“Is it really true?” she asked. “Is Cali pregnant?”

**Episode 1951**

I lunged toward the kitchen, making it about three steps before Xavier grabbed me and pulled me back. “What are you doing?”

Honestly, I had no idea. It was like something had hooked itself beneath my ribcage and was yanking me toward my father. Maybe—faced with all this terrifying uncertainty, this change he was about to go through—I just wanted to spend time with my dad before whatever happened, happened.

“I just… I can’t believe this is real,” I admitted. “All this time we’ve been talking about my dad shifting like it was way off in the future—if it happened at all. But now the future is just a few hours away.” I grimaced. “I kind of feel like Jasmine trapped in the hourglass, you know?”

Xavier’s grip on my arms softened, but he didn’t fully let go. “Cali, look at me. It’s going to be okay.”

I gulped down the panic crawling its way up my throat. “How do you know that?”

Xavier looked at me with nothing but complete confidence—in my dad, in the pack. He truly believed everything would be just fine, even when we were faced with something as scary and life-changing as this.

I wished I could feel the same way.

Xavier crushed me against him in a tight hug. “Take a deep breath,” he whispered in my ear. “It’s going to be okay.” His chest rose and pressed against mine as he pulled in a deep breath. “Breathe with me.”

I sucked down air, trying to match the rise and fall of his chest pressing against mine. At first, it was too much, and that panic made my breaths stutter, but gradually I was able to breathe with Xavier, just as slow and deep as he intended.

A sense of calm washed over me, breaking those claws’ grip on my lungs. My heart.

“There you go,” he murmured. “Just try to keep breathing, okay? I know this is scary, but this is going to be the longest six hours of your life if you can’t get a handle on this.”

Xavier had a knack for tough love, even when it came to me. But rather than hurt my feelings, his dose of reality offered perspective. Helped calm me even more.

“You’re right,” I whispered, still locked in his embrace. “I don’t want to ruin Thanksgiving for anyone.”

“I’d hate for *your* Thanksgiving to be ruined. I hate seeing you like this at all.”

My heart swelled. “Thank you.”

His eyes searched mine. “Is there anything else I can do to help?”

I bit my lip, thinking about the biggest stress of today: not just my dad, but my dad’s stress over cooking a gorgeous, delicious Thanksgiving meal for the entire pack, all while experiencing the early stages of his very first shift. Torin was a big help, of course, and they’d enlisted a few other people to help, but Dad was still cooking three turkeys all by himself.

“Can you cook a turkey?” I asked.

His brow rose. “Sorry, I don’t think I heard you right. Did you just say you want me to cook a *turkey*?”

“I think it would really help ease some of my dad’s stress,” I blurted out. “He’s got a lot on his plate right now, you know? Maybe having one less turkey to worry about would help make today easier for him.”

There was a beat where I was sure Xavier would refuse, but then he shrugged. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Sure. I said I’d do whatever you wanted me to do. Whatever helps you have an easier day. So count me in.”

Relief tugged my lips up into a wide grin. “Great! Thank you so much! Have you ever cooked a turkey?”

“How hard could it be? It’s just like cooking a really big chicken, right?”

I paused. Oh. Well, that didn’t bode well. My dad was a perfectionist when it came to cooking. If Xavier, however well-meaning he was, accidentally screwed things up, I didn’t see Dad’s day getting any easier. We could even end up with a werewolf fight on our hands.

“You know what? How about instead of cooking a turkey all by yourself, you can just sort of hang around my dad? Be his sous chef for the day?

His eyes narrowed. “You want me to take orders from your dad?”

I tipped my head up and kissed his jaw. “You said you’d do anything…”

To my relief, Xavier cracked a small smile. “Fine. Tom can be the kitchen Alpha. For *one* night.”

“Thank you. But I have to tell you, my dad isn’t going to take any crap from you. So prepare yourself.”

He hummed and dropped a kiss on my forehead. “Guess the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, huh?”

I laughed. “Maybe not.”

I moved to step out of his embrace, but he pulled me closer.

“What about me?” Xavier asked.

I frowned. “What about you?”

His grin turned feral, and I knew he meant trouble. “If I help Tom, what do I get in return?”

My brows rose, but I smirked. He was cheeky, wasn’t he? “Oh, I’m sorry. Isn’t my appreciation enough for you?”

His strong, broad hands ran up and down my back, sending pleasurable shivers down my spine as he leaned in. “I’m sure we can think of something.”

Heat pooled low in my belly at his tone. Standing here with him looking at me like that, I couldn’t help but think of our morning together. How his kisses had left me wanting more. Maybe we finally had time for more…

“Not the sourdough stuffing!” Dad bellowed from the kitchen, breaking us out of our little bubble of lust.

Now was definitely not the time. I pushed him back. “Later.”

Xavier laughed. “I’ll think of something. Should we go see how Chef Tom is doing?”

As he headed inside, Xavier started tugging his shirt over his head. What the heck was he doing? Hadn’t I just told him we wouldn’t be getting up to any funny business until things with my dad had settled down?

I raced after him. “Xavier!” My voice dropped to whisper-yell as we stepped into the house. “What the hell are you doing?

He looked at me like *I* was the crazy one. “There’s no way I’m going to cook with one of my good shirts on.”

Then he turned, which meant I got an eyeful of his bare chest. My mouth went dry, and that simmering heat in my belly threatened to reach a boiling point. There was no way in *hell* I was going to let him go into the kitchen like that. My dad already had plenty of reservations about my two mates. There was no reason to add “Xavier playing half-naked sous chef” to the mix.

“Put your shirt back on. Now. I’m sure Torin can spare an apron.”

He shrugged. “Whatever makes my mate happy.”

Wow. That was easy—except for the part where his low voice and exposed chest still had me tingling in all the right places.

I gulped, my heart pounding. With trembling hands, I shoved Xavier’s shirt back into his hands. “Put it on.”

Then I stumbled toward the kitchen, trying to hide how affected I was.

When I arrived at Thanksgiving Ground Zero, all those lovely lusty thoughts dried up. My dad was almost manic as he raced around the kitchen, barking orders. His face was red, and his words were coming so sharp and fast he sounded more like a drill sergeant than my loving father.

“That pepper needs to be freshly ground! Do you hear me?” Dad snapped.

Torin winced, but—good little soldier that he was—he followed my dad’s orders without complaint.

*Yeesh. This isn’t looking good.*

“Hey, Dad,” I called to him in my gentlest voice. “Are there too many cooks in the kitchen yet? Because Xavier’s here to help.”

Dad paused, a relieved smile spreading over his sweat-shiny, red face. “Great! We could definitely use a few more cooks. There just aren’t enough hands here to get everything ready in time.”

“Torin, do you have an apron Xavier can use?” I asked.

The Fae man looked absolutely gleeful. “I have the perfect one!”

He dove into the pantry, and I heard rustling and muttering from inside before Torin emerged with a large black apron with bold red lettering.

“‘Not the only good-looking piece of meat’?” Xavier read aloud, his brows raised. “Seriously?”

“Well, it’s not lying.” I laughed as I helped tie the apron on before stepping back to take in the sight of my strong Alpha wearing an apron. “You look, dare I say, cute?”

“Couldn’t agree more,” Torin piped up.

“I don’t see why you’re surprised,” Xavier said. “I’d look good in a brown paper bag.”

My dad laughed, and I playfully smacked Xavier’s arm. Dad seemed in a better mood already. Our plan was working, and Xavier hadn’t even stepped in to help yet.

Dad pointed to a pot full of steaming, boiled potatoes. “Mash those potatoes,” he said to Xavier. Then he turned to Torin. “We need to get another batch boiling.”

Dad lifted a huge pot of water to hand off to Torin, and a loud popping sound echoed through the room.

My dad screamed, and both he and the pot crashed to the floor at my feet as he doubled over in pain.

**Episode 1952**

GREYSON

Volunteering to help Rishika and Artemis with the chainsaw might have scored me some points in my ongoing feud with Xavier, but holy shit was that chainsaw greasy—it was in a horrible state of disrepair, which made me think that Xavier had never used it. And if that was the case, I’d missed an opportunity to let Xavier make a fool of himself.

It almost made me regret volunteering at all.

After finishing up, I headed inside to try to scrub the grease off my hands before dinner. This was going to be my first proper Thanksgiving, and I’d be damned if I got chainsaw grease on my turkey.

As I passed by the kitchen, I heard a loud clanking sound, followed by a cry of pain. From my spot in the doorway, I saw Tom hit the floor, a pot full of water spilling out across the tile.

*Shit!* I rushed in as Xavier picked up the giant pot and Cali dropped to her knees at her father’s side.

“Dad, what’s wrong?” Her beautiful face was pinched with worry.

Tom’s cheeks were bright red as he shook his head. “Oh, I’m all right. It’s probably just these old bones acting up.” He laughed, but it sounded forced.

“Here.” I held out a hand. “Let me help you up. We can’t have our master chef out of commission.”

It wouldn’t matter to me if Tom had to step down from cooking Thanksgiving dinner. I’d never had a proper one before, so it wasn’t like I had anything to miss. But after being cursed by Letifer, and struggling with the dark magic wreaking havoc on my body, I knew how frightening and humiliating it was to lose control of yourself. And to have other people treating you like you were some kind of invalid because of it.

He accepted my hand, and I pulled him up to stand. Tom brushed himself off and forced a smile.

“One day, when you get old like me, you’ll understand what it feels like.” His smile dimmed as he caught sight of the pool of water on the kitchen floor. “Better get that cleaned up before someone slips…”

He took a step toward the counter, no doubt to grab some paper towels, but then he froze and grimaced, in obvious pain.

“Maybe you should lie down?” Cali suggested hesitantly.

Tom scoffed. “I’ve experienced this before. I just need to work through it, and everything will be fine.”

“Cali’s right,” I said.

“I’m not giving up on this dinner,” Tom declared with some heat in his voice.

I nodded. “I would never dream of asking you to. But why don’t you take a seat at the island? You can still make this dinner happen—by directing others to lift, chop, and stir. Whatever you need. We’re at your disposal here.”

Tom winced and pressed his palm against his back. “Okay. Maybe for a minute.”

I reached out to take his arm and guide him to one of the chairs at the island. We made it a couple of hobbled steps before Tom suddenly straightened.

“What is it?” Cali asked.

Tom moved his shoulders back and forth, and then his hips, and then he twisted his back to and fro, as if testing his limbs. “That’s strange…” His brow furrowed. “The pain’s stopped.”

Cali sighed. “Dad, you don’t have to lie to us, okay? Nobody will think less of you if you’re hurt and need to take a rest.”

“No, that’s not it. I’m really not in pain anymore. At all. It’s like whatever was hurting just… healed itself.”

Torin and Orla walked into the kitchen, careful to side-step the puddle of water on the floor, and everyone turned to look at them.

Torin frowned. “Why is everyone staring at me?”

“You somehow healed my dad, didn’t you?” Cali asked.

“I didn’t.” He shook his head. “All I did was run to get Orla.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Cali mused. “It looked like he threw his back out or something. And now it’s all better?

“Maybe when he fell, it knocked everything back into alignment?” Torin suggested.

“That’s not how it works,” Orla said. “There’s got to be something else going on.”

I watched as Tom walked normally over to the counter and grabbed the paper towels he’d originally been after. He certainly didn’t seem to be in any pain now, and I was sure I knew why.

“It’s the shift,” I said, interrupting the others. “He might have genuinely hurt himself, yes. But werewolves heal significantly faster than humans, remember?”

Cali eyes widened, almost like she was hurt or scared. But what did she have to be afraid of? This was good news. Her father was well on his way to becoming practically indestructible.

*She must still be coming to terms with the change*, I realized. It was probably a lot to accept—that the human father you’d known and loved your entire life was about to turn into a werewolf. And that he’d likely stay that way for the rest of his life.

Xavier set the now empty pot on the counter. “Tom, if you’re feeling up to it, I’d be happy to show you some stretches that might help with the pain the shift can bring.”

“Like yoga?” Tom asked.

Xavier almost looked offended. “No, not like yoga.” He bent in half in what I was pretty sure was an actual yoga pose. “Deep stretches that engage your muscles and will help prepare them for the change.”

“That’s called *uttanasana*,” Orla said. “It’s a yoga pose.”

While Xavier and Cali’s parents debated stretching semantics , I gently took Cali’s elbow and pulled her aside. “Are you okay, love?”

She glanced over at Tom and Xavier. “Not really.”

“Come with me.” I led her out of the kitchen and into the den. Once we were alone, I turned to face her and pulled her into my arms. “I promise I’ll do everything I can for your father. I already promised your dad I would, and I’m reassuring you now that I won’t let anything happen to him. And I know Xavier and the rest of the pack are ready to support him too. He’s in good hands.” I stroked her cheek. “Chin up—things are good right now.”

With a relieved sigh, she hugged me tightly. “I know. I know all of this. It’s just so hard to see my dad go through something so painful—and I can’t do anything to help.”

“I understand, but you do know that being a wolf isn’t the end for your dad, right? It’s the beginning of something amazing. Maybe he didn’t plan on this happening—few humans ever do—but ultimately your father will overcome this initial first step, and with some guidance, will probably be father of the year.”

She laughed, and my chest swelled with joy.

“I know you’re afraid that this means you’re losing your father, but he’ll still be your dad. And I, for one, have never regretted being a wolf.”

Her expression turned pensive, and she looked down at my chest. “I wish I could be one,” she admitted.

I wrapped her in a hug. “One day at a time, love.”

I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t enticed by the idea of her becoming a werewolf, and this was certainly not the first time Cali undergoing the change had come up. Obviously, the biggest question was whether or not she even *could* be changed, since she was half Fae. I also worried about her safety if we ever tried to add being a werewolf to the mix.

Fenrir’s mother was Fae, and his father was a werewolf. That alone seemed to be irrefutable proof that it was possible for a person to mix those bloodlines. Whether that was a combination that one had to be born with, or if it was possible for someone like Cali to experience the change and survive, I had no idea.

Plus, the mere idea of biting Cali, of intentionally hurting her, was too much for me. I didn’t want to hurt her. I didn’t want to put her life at risk. I wasn’t ready to pursue any of those avenues right now.

I loved Cali exactly the way she was. As far as I was concerned, there was no need for her to change anything about herself—except maybe that damn curse, so she could finally choose me like she was meant to.

She pulled away. “I need to go check on Dad. Thank you… for being you.”

I brushed a kiss against her mouth. “Who else would I be?”

She headed back toward the kitchen, and I heard her greeting Sabine in the hallway. Sabine, who stepped into the den and quietly closed the door behind her.

*Huh. I guess she has something to say to me?*

For a moment, she just watched me, like she was trying to read something in my expression.

I frowned. “Um, hi?”

“I just heard the news,” she said gravely. “How are you taking it?”

“Oh, Tom will be fine. There’s nothing to worry about.”

Her expression didn’t change. “Was it you?”

What on earth was she talking about? “Was what me?”

“It’s okay,” she said quickly. “You don’t have to pretend with me. I’m your mother.”

Suddenly, her expression shifted from that grave worry to wide-eyed alarm.

Warning bells started going off in my head. “What’s going on?”

Sabine just shook her head. “She hasn’t told you yet?”

**Episode 1953**

LOLA

I stared at Sage, my brows raised. “I beg your *what*?”

“Cali!” she pressed, then looked around the hallway to make sure we weren’t going to be overhead before she lowered her voice. “She’s pregnant, right?”

I blinked.

Once.

Twice.

“Again, *what*?”

A crease appeared between her brows. “You should know, right? You’re her best friend!”

I was just barely coming down from the shock and anxiety and complex bundle of emotions from my own pregnancy scare. So Sage, of all people, standing in front of me with that expectant (hah!), excited expression and asking me about my best friend being in the family way was just incomprehensible.

Cali… wasn’t pregnant. Or at least if she was, it was news to me. But I was certain my best friend was smart enough not to let me find out this news through anyone but her. After all, Cali didn’t have a death wish.

Beyond that, I was pretty sure she didn’t have a bun in the oven. But my stomach sank as I realized where Sage must have gotten this very fake news.

“Umm…” I shook my head, not even sure where to begin. “Where did you… hear about this?”

All the anxiety I’d shed in the bathroom was threatening to return. Clearly, there was a vicious rumor going around, and there was only one place it could have started: Jacqueline.

*I’m going to find a wooden stake and shank her.*

How could she have even spread this rumor so fast? I’d run into Jacqueline *maybe* twenty minutes ago.

*Leave it to a rumor-mongering vampire and a bunch of gossipy werewolves to accomplish the impossible*.

Sage bit her lip. “Um, you know, I actually don’t even remember who told me. It’s pretty common knowledge.” Then she seemed to realize what she was implying and backtracked. “Except, clearly it’s not! I’m so sorry! I thought you knew—and that you could, you know, verify it.”

I sighed. “I can tell you with one hundred percent certainty that it’s just a rumor. It’s not true. Cali isn’t pregnant, and instead of spreading the other rumor, why don’t you go around and tell everyone that Cali’s *not* expecting?”

She frowned. “But… I heard that she was pregnant with Xavier’s baby. Is it Greyson’s, then?” Before I could reassert the emptiness of Cali’s uterus, Sage gasped, and added, “Oh my god. Is it twins? Is one Xavier’s baby, and the other Greyson’s? I heard about that happening once on, like, *20/20* or something.”

“No! There is *no* baby! The baby is no one’s because it doesn’t exist!” I snapped. How was this so difficult to understand?

She seemed to contemplate this for a moment, and I swear to god I saw an old, tired hamster wheel spinning slowly in her mind. Then her eyes went wide. “Oh, no! How horrible! God, I feel like such an asshole…”

“Good lord.” I groaned, pressing my fingers against my temples. “No. You’re not getting it. Cali’s not pregnant. There is no baby. There never was a baby. This is all just a huge misunderstanding, and you’re only making things worse for everyone!”

Sage stared at me, speechless.

I blew out a breath. “Just… tell everyone it was just a rumor that’s clearly gotten out of control, okay? You can start now.”

Wordlessly, she backed away before turning tail and running off down the stairs. I hadn’t wanted to hurt her feelings, but—in my opinion, at least—it was more important for the truth to get out than for a gossipy werewolf to feel good about spreading lies. Hopefully this wouldn’t bite me in the ass later.

Speaking of biting… I had a bone to pick with Jacqueline. And for her sake, there had better not be any wood lying around nearby when I found her.

It didn’t take long to find the Redwood pack’s most prolific gossipy guest. Jacqueline was in the dining room, straining under the weight of a set of porcelain dishes. I frowned. She was a vampire—since when was a stack of dishes too heavy for her to lift?

“Ugh,” she groaned. “Jay, will you help me? These are *so* heavy!

Ah. That explained it.

I stomped toward them and smacked Jay’s hand out of the way when he reached out to relieve Jacqueline of her “burden.”

“Don’t you dare!” I snapped.

He looked at me with surprise. “What’s wrong?”

I pointed to the door. “I need to talk to Little Miss Vampire in private.”

When Jay only looked even more confused, I mind linked with him. *I’ll explain later.*

He raised a brow, shrugged, and headed back into the kitchen.

Once he was out of the room, Jacqueline set down the stack of dishes on the dining room table with ease. Then she had the audacity to *smile* at me.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

I stepped close, my eyes narrowing. “*You’re* wrong. You should go back to Tottenville. You clearly don’t belong here.”

She blinked, and her brow furrowed into an expression of hurt. “Wow. What did I do now?”

How could she even ask that? She knew exactly what she’d done, and playing innocent wasn’t going to save her.

I took a deep breath. I needed to keep my anger in check here, not go off on this vampire mean girl. That would only play into her game even more, give her the ammunition to be even more of a martyr.

“Why did you start spreading rumors about Cali being pregnant?” I asked.

She scoffed. “What are you talking about?”

“You *know* what I’m talking about! You were the only one who knew about the test—who else could have started that rumor? I’m not stupid, so don’t waste our time trying to pretend.”

She rolled her eyes and snorted. “Fine. But I figured, hey, this is a pack. Everybody’s living on top of each other. There can’t be secrets, so I thought it wouldn’t be a big deal.”

“You thought it wouldn’t be a big deal? In what universe does that even make sense?”

“I genuinely thought she was pregnant!”

“You’re unbelievable.” I shook my head. “First of all, no. You don’t go spreading lies like that. And second, I told you the test wasn’t Cali’s.”

“Okay, fine. Then whose was it?”

I crossed my arms. “That’s not important.”

Her eyes narrowed, and her mouth formed a little “O.”

“Oh my god. The test was yours, wasn’t it?” She eyed my stomach critically. “Are you showing already? I think you are.”

*God, why does she always have to be such an asshole?*

I grabbed her by the collar and yanked her close.

“The test was for me,” I gritted out. “It was *negative.* I am not pregnant. Nobody’s pregnant. Got it?”

Again, she shifted from bitchy to hurt in a split second. She nodded. “I’m sorry. I just thought a little juicy gossip would help me fit in, you know? Be part of the pack, or whatever.”

“Since when do you have any desire *at all* to fit in here?”

“I didn’t at first,” she admitted, “but after seeing that you have so many friends here, I don’t know… I guess I got jealous.”

I frowned, slowly releasing her from my grip. “I thought you had friends back at Tottenville?”

She scoffed. “Friends? You mean those backstabbing bloodsuckers? I tried, but I realized I had to be careful or they’d eat me alive. None of them cared about me.”

I remembered Jacqueline and her two “friends” back at school. They’d made one hell of a nasty trio. I’d always wondered if there was any genuine kindness between them—because they definitely didn’t have any to share with their peers.

It was sad, almost, to think that they were the closest things Jacqueline had to real friends. Almost.

“You don’t understand what it’s like,” Jacqueline continued. “I was turned when I was in my early twenties—but that was over sixty years ago! Look at me! Does this body look like it belongs to a sixty-year-old? But everyone thinks I’m just a clueless kid, and after a while I started to believe it.”

My eyes widened. “I guess I never really thought about it.”

She snorted. “And you never bothered to ask, either.”

I recognized the discomfort tugging at my gut: guilt. It was the last thing I wanted to feel for my fanged nemesis.

“So, what’s the real reason you came to the pack house, then?” I asked. “To steal my friends?”

She shook her head sadly. “That’s not it. I just… I thought I might get a chance to show people who I really am. Can you give me that chance?”

I watched her face carefully. If she was faking it, then she was putting on a hell of a performance. But… maybe she was being honest for once in her long, long life?

And then realization hit—there was something much more important than Jacqueline’s feelings that needed my attention.

“Oh my god! I have to tell Cali about the pregnancy thing before she hears it from someone else!”

**Episode 1954**

XAVIER

“Okay, move into a plank, then, put one hand on the floor, you twist your body and lift the other hand really high in the air,” I said, illustrating the movement for Tom’s benefit. If someone would’ve told me earlier today that I would be playing yoga teacher, I would’ve thought they were lying. I was doing my best, but none of this was exactly my strong suit.

But anything for Cali.

Tom was hesitant at first, but he quickly adapted and followed my guidance as we moved through a few gentle stretches. He was a hell of a lot more limber than I’d been expecting.

*Must be the werewolf shift working its magic*.

He lifted his arm skyward, still in that twisted plank. “Are you sure this isn’t yoga? Orla took me to a couple classes after I injured myself a few years back, and this seems awfully similar.”

“Yes, I’m sure,” I said shortly. “It’s just stretching. Werewolf stretching.”

I was a former contract killer, an Alpha werewolf not to be screwed around with, and incense and leggings and being zen were about as foreign to me as turning into a werewolf had to be for Tom.

I glanced over at the hallway Cali had disappeared down with Greyson. Was she going to come back soon? I genuinely wanted to help Tom, but if she came back while we were still stretching and got a look at what a good guy I was being, then that was two birds with one stone.

Trust Greyson to just sweep her out of here when I was the one who’d agreed to help Tom—twice now. First with cooking dinner, and now with the stretching. My brother was nothing if not a shameless opportunist.

But there was no fixing that, I supposed.

At least if I helped Tom—just like I’d promised—it could only enhance my image in his eyes. And the trickle-down effect of that would benefit me too. Cali respected her father’s opinion. It couldn’t hurt to place myself as mate number one in Tom’s eyes.

Not that I didn’t want to help Tom. I did. And I’d liked him from the first time I’d met him, when he’d brought his chicken stir fry. I also had reason to believe the feeling was mutual. Sure, Tom and Greyson got along, but there was a distance there that Tom and I didn’t have. And I wanted to keep things that way—for me *and* for Cali.

Plus, I’d promised Cali that I’d help her father through his first shift. I was determined not to disappoint her. I would be genuinely sad if anything bad happened to him, but Cali would be absolutely devastated, and there was no way in hell I was going to let that happen.

I was pretty sure Tom would be able to handle the shift. He wasn’t the youngest or the fittest guy ever, but he should be okay.

A few minutes later, Cali returned from wherever Greyson had whisked her away to and watched Tom lift himself out of our last stretch.

He pointed to his chest. “See? I’m more flexible now than I was as a teen.”

“That’s great, Dad.” Her voice sounded a little less than enthusiastic. “But there’s only a few hours before the full moon. Shouldn’t we be doing something other than stretching?”

Tom frowned. “Like what? A last will and testament?”

Orla glared from across the kitchen, where she and Torin were throwing away the soaked paper towels. “Not funny, Mr. Hart.”

“Tom is going to be just fine,” I assured everyone. “How about instead of worrying about it, we just focus on the food? Tom wants this to be the best Thanksgiving ever, and if the pack works together, we can make that happen.”

Orla walked over to Cali and took her hand. “How about helping me with the mashed potatoes?”

Cali smiled. “Sure, Mom.”

“I’d be happy to help too,” I offered.

Orla smiled and shook her head. “My daughter and I can handle it.”

When Cali saw the gigantic pot of potatoes ready for mashing, her eyes went wide. “There must be forty pounds of mashing to do!”

I chuckled. “I guess this really is your first werewolf Thanksgiving, huh?”

Behind me, Rishika and Artemis shuffled in.

“Who wants a drink?” Rishika asked. “What’s turkey without some beer?”

“Well, the turkey’s not ready yet,” Tom began.

Rishika grinned. “So beer now, turkey later.”

Artemis wrinkled her nose. “I don’t like beer. It tastes like rotten bread water.”

My brows rose, and Cali giggled. “You’re not far off the mark.”

While Rishika passed a few cans around to those who were interested in a beer, Artemis busied herself with several bottles of alcohol and mixers over by the sink. A few minutes later, she made a lap around the room with a tray of amber-colored drinks and began handing them out.

“What are these?” Zainab asked.

“It’s a secret drink mix from the Fae world,” Artemis said.

“Oh, wow!”

Rishika laughed. “No, it’s not. It’s called a Dark and Stormy, and it’s mostly rum.”

Artemis held out a cup to me. “Would you like one?”

I shrugged and took the cup. “Why not?” It was a holiday, after all.

My cup was the last one on Artemis’s tray. She looked over at Cali, who had neither beer nor a Dark and Stormy. “Do you want me to mix one for you?”

Before Cali could answer, Zainab’s eyes widened and she gestured over at Cali. “That’s not such a good idea, is it?”

I frowned. “Because… she’s not twenty-one? She’s drunk alcohol here before, and it’s not like we’re going anywhere.”

“Why can’t I?” Cali cut in. “I’d rather have the Dark and Stormy than a beer.”

Zainab’s brow wrinkled. “Uh, well, cause, you know…” She made a big circle over her body, looking super uncomfortable. What the hell was she talking about?

“What’s going on?” I demanded.

“Um… excuse me.” Zainab set down her beer and rushed out of the room.

My brows high, I passed my drink to Cali. “Do you have any idea what that was about?”

“No clue.” Cali shrugged and took a sip. She winced. “Oh, wow! You were really generous with the alcohol, Artemis.”

Her sister was nonplussed. “That’s the part everyone likes best. Otherwise you’d just be drinking a cup full of syrup and ice.”

“I guess there’s no arguing with that,” Cali muttered. She kept nursing the drink.

Torin came over, looking harried. “Can you come outside and help with the deep fryer? I’m not certain how to use it.”

“I’m no expert, either. Up until today, I didn’t even know we had one, to be honest.” I shrugged. “But how hard can it be?”

“Famous last words,” Rishika drawled.

I threw her a dirty look and followed Torin outside to the fryer—a big, stainless steel pot with oil and propane hoses.

*Huh. It’s kind of crazy that people use this kind of thing to cook.*

And yet a huge turkey rested beside the fryer, apparently ready for its bath of boiling hot oil.

I was crouched down next to the fryer, fiddling with the knobs and generally trying to pretend like I knew what I was doing, when Kira approached, sipping a beer.

Her lips curved up into a full smile. “Nice apron.”

I gestured to Torin. “His idea, not mine.”

She nodded. “I figured. It looks good, though.” She stared for another beat before looking away and clearing her throat. “So how does this thing work?”

I eyed the low flame and poked around with the dials. “Honestly? I have no fucking clue.”

That little baby flame didn’t seem like it could get the oil hot enough to cook a chicken breast, much less an entire werewolf dinner-sized turkey. I turned up the heat.

Torin eyed the oil in the pot. “How do we know if it’s hot enough?”

“There’s one way to find out.” I grabbed the turkey. “Stand back.”

“I don’t think that’s how you’re supposed to do it,” Kira said.

“Okay, would you like to offer some insight on how to use this, then?”

She winced. “I just don’t think you’re supposed to crank up the heat like that. Oil burns can be dangerous.”

I rolled my eyes. “You learn that in witch school?”

She held up her hands. “Fine. It’s your funeral.”

“And when you taste the fruits of my labor later, you can tell me all about how I was right.”

I held the turkey over the oil, which was now sizzling with significantly more heat than it had before. This was going to work wonders. The cooking time might even beat out Tom’s other two turkeys. I could just see it now—Tom complimenting my amazing cooking instincts, Cali being blown away by how good *my* turkey would be…

And, of course, Greyson moping in the shadows.

This was going to be the best Thanksgiving ever.

Kira’s eyes widened. “Xavier, stop—”

But it was too late. I’d already dropped the bird into the fryer. There was a loud sizzling noise, and I turned to Torin and Kira with a grin. “See? Piece of cake.”

And then—with a sizzling boom I’d never forget—the fryer exploded.

**Episode 1955**

MARTA

I couldn’t take my eyes off the letter in my hands—or the matching bracelets that had appeared out of nowhere and were now locked around both of my wrists.

“What the hell are these?” I demanded.

Big Mac frowned, moving closer. “I bet that letter will answer your question. Why don’t you read it?”

I looked up at her, my eyes wide. “Read it?”

She nodded. “It’s addressed to you, isn’t it?”

When she said it like that, it sounded so obvious. But I didn’t like this one bit. And if I was being honest with myself, I wasn’t sure I wanted to know who the letter was from. It wasn’t like it could be good news.

*I’m on a roll right now.*

As if having the touch of death wasn’t bad enough, now I was randomly getting magical bracelets and correspondence from… I didn’t even know! Everything was going from bad to worse, I could feel it.

Slowly, hesitantly—because I had no clue whether this letter was just some kind of magical correspondence, or if it was about to give me the worst paper cut of all time—I slipped my finger beneath the wax seal on the envelope and pulled out the letter. The message was written in old-style calligraphy, on thick parchment.

*Dear Marta Zhao,*

*It has come to our attention that you have not heeded our warning and continue to engage in unsanctioned use of your necromancy. Yesterday at Fairly Fresh Finds, you haphazardly destroyed produce in front of humans and fled. Because you continue to use your magic in clear violation of your summons, we have restricted you to the property in which you are currently residing, the home owned by Mr. Xavier Evers.*

*In addition, the bracelets will prevent you from performing any more magic. You will have them removed on your summons date: December 7th.*

*Regards,*

*The Witches’ Council*

I was numb when Big Mac plucked the letter out of my hands and read it herself. The Witches’ Council had put me on house arrest? And the bracelets they’d slapped on my wrists were blocking my magic? Didn’t they understand that I’d never intended to use my magic at the grocery store? It had been an honest mistake—everything I’d done that they wanted to punish me for was all just one big misunderstanding!

“Hmm.” Big Mac lowered the letter. “It seems like the real deal.”

I looked down at the gaudy bronze bracelets. They looked like they’d been crafted centuries ago.

*They must be imbued with some pretty powerful magic to have survived this long.*

“Does this mean I can’t do any magic?” I asked. “They’re cutting me off?

Big Mac nodded.

My shoulders slumped, and my mind whirled with the implications of this decision. My magic had become part of me, and it was hard to imagine myself living as a normal human being. I mean, the only reason Lilac was back in the living world—permanently—was because of that well of magic. What if I’d been cut off before I brought Lilac back? Would he still be here? Now that he was back, did I even need my magic anymore? God, I hoped that me having these bracelets wouldn’t hurt him.

Another realization slipped through my mind. If Lilac was safe, and he didn’t need access to my magic to stay on this side of the graveyard… did I even want to have my magic anymore? Lately, it had been nothing but a huge liability, both to myself and the people around me.

*Torin would certainly appreciate it if I no longer had the ability to ruin his “perfect root vegetables,”* I thought with a grim smile.

Big Mac placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder. “How about we take it one step at a time?”

I looked down at my exposed fingers. “If my magic has been taken away, do you think I can still harm things by touching them?”

“I doubt it. If that’s not a side effect of magic, then I’d be seriously surprised.” She grabbed a plant from an end table. “Here, touch it.”

I balked at her order. “What if I kill it?”

“Better a houseplant than a person. That’s literally the question we’re answering right now.” She shoved the plant even closer. “Go on.”

I slowly reached out and brushed my fingertips against the plant

Nothing happened. The plant stayed lively and green, even as I felt its waxy leaves against my skin. A spark of hope flickered inside me.

“Maybe I’m cured?” I looked up at Big Mac. “If this is my punishment, then it’s not so bad.”

The witch frowned. “This is serious. The council doesn’t take away magic unless it’s considered dangerous.”

Well, they certainly weren’t wrong in that regard. In a house full of witches, werewolves, vampires, and Fae, I was undoubtedly the most dangerous person here. But the way Big Mac was looking at me told me that this probably wasn’t the lucky break I was hoping for.

I shook my head. “I don’t understand. I helped defeat Letifer. I helped restore the balance of nature. I made *one* mistake in bringing Lilac back… Well, Didi too, I guess. But are a couple of mistakes truly enough to outweigh all the good I’ve done?”

“It doesn’t work like that. The council doesn’t keep score. If you make a mistake, there will be consequences.”

“Okay, sure. But the plant, the produce section, the onion—I didn’t ask for them to die. The magic just did it on its own, completely independent of me. Isn’t that the council’s fault? Isn’t that punishment enough?”

Her brows rose. “Apparently not. But don’t forget—Kira and I will defend you before the council, and we’ll bring up your arguments.”

I sighed, nodding. “Thank you.”

Surely with two powerful witches like Kira and Big Mac on my side, along with the fact that I *was* actually innocent, I’d be okay.

Big Mac put up a hand. “Don’t thank me yet. This isn’t a typical human hearing. It isn’t always about evidence, and you’re not always considered innocent before being proven guilty.”

Any comfort she might have given me dried up in an instant, replaced by deep anxiety that clawed its way up my throat.

*Great, so not only am I being punished for a crime I didn’t intend to commit, now I’m going to face an unfair trial for those crimes.*

Was there nothing I could do to get out of this?

Big Mac squeezed my shoulder. “The best thing for you to do right now is to play it safe, play by the council’s rules. And hey, losing your magic might be a good thing, since you were struggling to control it. Now, you don’t have to worry about it for a while.”

I nodded and forced a weak smile. The witch caught me in a stiff, short hug, ending with a couple of pats on the back that were just this side of too hard.

She looked down at my bracelets. My new handcuffs, really. “At least they’re not ugly.”

I snorted. “Yes, because being a well-dressed criminal is priority number one.”

“Why don’t we not worry about that for now? Big holiday celebrations have never been my thing. I tolerate them because Sabine enjoys them, but I think maybe we should both try to have some fun.”

“Okay. That sounds nice.”

We headed downstairs—only to meet Lilac on the landing. He glanced from me to Big Mac, then back to me, where his eyes lingered.

“I’ve been looking for you,” he said.

He didn’t look like his usual happy-go-lucky self, and I suddenly remembered all the terrible things I’d said to him earlier. I hadn’t meant any of it, of course, and when I was talking with Big Mac, I’d been so worried about the council and the cuffs and my killing power that I’d forgotten about Lilac.

But clearly he hadn’t forgotten. My words had cut deep, so deep he was still feeling it.

*Dammit, Marta.*

Big Mac probably picked up on the tension between us—it was hard not to—because she sidestepped Lilac and mumbled, “I think I’ll get a beer,” before hurrying away.

I sighed. “Lilac, I’m so—”

He cut me off. “I know you want me to leave you alone, but I’ve got some things to say.”

He grabbed my hand and pulled me into one of the empty rooms nearby.

This was probably for the best. At least now there wouldn’t be an audience for what was probably going to turn into a fight. He let go of my hand as soon as I stepped into the room.

“Lilac.” I reached out for his hand, but he pulled away before I could make contact.

“I thought you were afraid you’d hurt me by touching me,” he sneered. “But you didn't have to touch me to hurt me, did you?”

“I didn’t mean it!” I blurted out. “I was just scared, and I killed Torin’s onion, and—”

His cheeks were bright red, and his eyes shone with unshed tears. “I thought you brought me back from the spirit world because there was something between us. Was I wrong?”

I sighed. “No, you’re not wrong. You mean the world to me.”

“Do I?” He snorted. “I just want you to be honest with me. Are we breaking up?”

**Episode 1956**

GREYSON

I took a deep breath.

*Don’t panic, Greyson. Everything’s gonna be fine. You have nothing to worry about.*

Nothing—except for the fact that the look on Sabine’s face was freaking me the fuck out. She was talking in riddles and acting like there was something life-or-death going on. But whatever that something was, I still had no fucking clue.

“I’ll ask again,” I said. “What are you talking about? Who didn’t tell me what?”

She just shook her head and held up her hands. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything. Cali will never forgive me if she finds out I’m the one who—” She stopped herself. “Well, I’m sure she’ll tell you when she’s ready.”

All that slow-simmering panic I’d been trying to hold back went into DEFCON 1 at the mention of Cali’s name. What the hell was going on? What was Cali allegedly supposed to have told me?

“Sabine,” I said tersely, trying to ignore the hurt look on her face when I didn’t call her “Mom.” “Tell me, *now*. What the hell are you talking about? Did something happen to Cali?”

She grimaced. “Well… in a way. I think you need to talk to her and sort this out between yourselves. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have gotten involved.”

*Oh* now *she doesn’t want to get involved. She’s apparently willing to wind me up with a thousand worst-case scenarios, but she’s not willing to explain what the actual fuck is actually happening.*

I racked my brain for an explanation, but again and again I came up short. I couldn’t figure it out. I was *just* with Cali. And sure, she was worried about her father, but that was it. Otherwise, she seemed fine. What could possibly have happened between then and now?

*Well, it* is *Cali we’re talking about, so pretty much anything is possible. Did my brother say or do something to her? Did he upset her? Did he* hurt *her?*

My fingers tightened into fists. *Maybe Xavier will get his fight after all.*

I stalked toward the closed door, but Sabine reached out to stop me. “Greyson, just… Talk to Cali first, okay?”

I pulled in a deep breath, the only thing keeping me from screaming in my mother’s face. “What, exactly, should I be asking Cali about?”

Her expression tightened. “So she definitely didn’t tell you, then?”

I blew out a breath. “No, she *didn’t* tell me. Why are we going in circles here? Just spit it out!”

My mother hesitated, like she knew whatever she was about to say, the words would be a heavy weight to bear.

“Just tell me, please,” I said. “Whatever it is, I can handle it.”

She took a deep breath. “Cali is pregnant.”

My heart stopped. My mind froze. The entire world shuddered to a halt the moment that string of five syllables hit my ears.

*Cali’s pregnant?*

I didn’t realize I’d actually said the words out loud until my mother responded.

“It’s a rumor,” she said, her tone apologetic. “I don’t know for sure if it’s true. That’s… That’s why I came to talk to you.”

My lungs finally unclenched long enough for me to draw in a breath, and slowly but surely my brain started whirring to life. My heart still ached with an emotion I couldn’t quite name. Fear? Joy?

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I shouldn’t have mentioned it.”

I just shook my head. Yeah, she probably shouldn’t have started this whole thing based on a rumor, but we also both knew enough about how rumors usually panned out. There was normally some basis for them. The whole “where there’s smoke, there’s fire” thing.

I glanced around the room, anywhere but my mother’s face, as I tried to come to terms with this news. It was then that I noticed there was an actual *fire* in the yard.

“What the hell?”

I raced outside to find the deep fryer in flames. Bits of oily turkey were scattered all over the yard, and Torin was jumping up and down in hysterics.

“Oh, spirits! You destroyed them!” he wailed. “The fryer and the turkey—they’re gone!”

My eyebrows disappeared into my hairline. I found Xavier and Kira standing together a few feet away. As I approached, Kira raised her hands and muttered an incantation to bring the flames down to a pile of smoldering metal and turkey carcass.

I looked around wildly, trying to make sense of the scene. As far as I could tell, Kira, Xavier, and Torin were the only ones nearby, and none of them seemed to be in anywhere near as bad shape as the fryer. “What the hell happened here? Is everyone okay?”

“It was terrible!” Torin cried. “The turkey *blew up*! There’s hot oil everywhere! Thanksgiving is ruined!”

The front door swung open, and Cali came rushing onto the scene. My still-aching chest tightened when she rushed past me and threw her arms around Xavier. “Are you hurt?”

I watched, passive, as she looked Xavier over for any injury. She was practically patting him down to make sure he wasn’t harmed. I was half expecting her to start stripping him just in case he’d somehow been burned beneath his clothes.

My mind, which was still struggling with the weight of what my mother had told me, whispered horrible little what-ifs about the rumor of Cali’s pregnancy—and who the father of that baby could be.

Xavier caught her hands. “Cali, I’m fine. Kira used her magic to save me from the burning oil.” He pointed to his face with an annoying smirk. “This is worth saving, right?”

*In my opinion, a few oil burns could only improve that mug.*

Tom descended the porch stairs and approached the Thanksgiving casualty. “Wow, what a mess! Everyone okay?”

Xavier and Kira were quick to catch him up and assure him that nobody had been harmed in the turkey explosion. Torin just looked devastated.

“I’m glad nobody’s hurt,” Tom said. “But will we have enough turkey now?”

“There are two others,” Torin reminded him, his voice dull.

Cali patted the Fae man’s shoulder. “Two *huge* turkeys.”

The rest of the group continued their discussion, but I wasn’t even trying to listen. All I could do was ruminate on that rumor. How had something like that even gotten started? What was the story there? And how the hell had my mother found out about it before me?

My stomach clenched. If there was some truth to the rumor—if Cali was truly pregnant—and I was the last to know, did that mean the baby wasn’t mine?

I looked over to where Cali was still standing next to Xavier. One of my brother’s arms was looped loosely around her waist.

*Could the baby be Xavier’s?*

The mere thought made me want to take another fryer’s worth of hot oil and dump it over my brother’s smug head. Just thinking that my brother could be the father of *my mate’s* child tore me up inside and filled me with a deep, unrelenting rage that I hadn’t felt in a long time.

I pulled in another deep breath. This revelation had me on the verge of losing control, and I couldn’t afford to do that. Not in front of the pack, and not in front of Cali.

I knew I needed to follow my mother’s advice and talk to Cali about it first—before I allowed myself to blow up at anything, or anyone.

But my mind wasn’t interested in doing the logical thing right now.

*How long has she known? How long has Xavier known? How long were they planning on keeping this secret between them?*

Another deep breath. No. I couldn’t get worked up right now. I needed to talk to Cali. Nothing else mattered. There could be a perfectly good explanation for the rumor going around.

I walked right up to where she was standing with Xavier, still finalizing Thanksgiving plans with the group.

“Can I talk to you?” I asked. “Alone?”

She looked up at me, her brow furrowed. My tone must have freaked her out. I sounded too serious. But the thing was, I *was* freaking out.

Cali left Xavier’s side to go with me, but then Lola swooped in between us.

“Emergency meeting!” she cried, grabbing Cali’s wrist and pulling her away.

Cali flashed me an apologetic look. “I’ll find you after!”

And that was how I was left face to face with Xavier, who chuckled. “Guess you’ll have to take a number if you want to talk to Cali.”

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew this comment was harmless. Especially coming from Xavier. But, again, logic wasn’t running the show.

“Don’t push it,” I growled.

But my brother took the warning as a challenge. Just like always. “Looks like one of us is looking to get burned today.”

Never let it be said that I hadn’t warned him. I shoved him. Hard.

So hard Xavier was knocked back a few feet. He recovered quickly, looking surprised, but he quickly schooled his expression into one of determination. “Is that all you’ve got?”

I shook my head. “I’m just warming up. You want to fight? Bring it on, baby brother.”

**Episode 1957**

My gaze kept snapping back to where Greyson was as Lola led me into the house. He’d seemed so… intense. Something was wrong. *Was* something wrong? And when Lola had swooped in and pulled me away from him before we could talk, he’d looked the worst combination of pissed off and devastated.

Lola wasn’t any better, though. She was putting off some seriously manic energy. And what was the deal with swooping in and calling an “emergency meeting”?

She led me into the den.

“What’s going on?” I asked. “Why are you acting so weird?”

She gave me a wide smile, but I could tell it was forced. “I mean… can’t a girl just want to chat with her BFF?” She laughed. A fake laugh. “Let’s have some girl talk!”

I blinked. “Okay, sure. But my mate was nearly flash-fried just now, and the other one was trying to have an important conversation with me before you rolled up. Can’t this wait till later?”

She scoffed. “Xavier looked fine. He doesn’t need you right now.”

What was going on? Why was she pressuring me to stay inside right now? Obviously something was going on. Lola was doing a spectacularly terrible job lying right now, and it didn’t take being her best friend to know she was hiding something.

“Right. Xavier’s okay,” I conceded. “But I still need to talk to Greyson, and after that, there’s still a lot that needs to be taken care of for Thanksgiving dinner. I don’t know if you’ve forgotten, but Dad is going to shift for the first time tonight, so we really don’t have any time to waste.”

Lola frowned. “But—”

I continued as though I hadn’t heard her. “Actually, you should come help. It’s fun once you get past my dad and Torin barking orders at everyone—and the exploding turkey. I’ll see you in there.”

I turned to leave, determined to find my way back to Greyson and have that talk with him, when from behind me Lola blurted out, “The entire pack thinks you’re pregnant!”

I froze. There was no way in hell I’d just heard what I thought I’d just heard. I slowly turned to face my best friend. “I beg your *what*?”

“That’s what I said!”

I shook my head, still stunned. Still waiting for her to call out “Thanksgiving Fools!” or something.

She didn’t. And so we stood there in silence as the seconds slogged past. Finally, I forced myself to speak. “What? How? Why? Explain, Lola! *Now!*”

Lola took a deep breath and grimaced. “Just… promise me you won’t get mad, okay?”

“Too late.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “I’m already mad, and getting madder by the second. *Spill*.”

She forced a laugh. “It really was just one big misunderstanding, you know?”

“How can something like that come down to a misunderstanding? I’m *not* pregnant, and I haven’t said a single thing to anyone else to suggest otherwise!”

“Well… It all started because I thought *I* was pregnant,” she admitted.

My jaw dropped. The surprises just kept coming. “Are you?”

She shook her head. “No. I just… I thought I might be—”

I cut her off impatiently. This was taking way too long. Greyson was waiting for me, and my dad needed me. I didn’t have time for whatever fuckery was going on here.

“I’m sorry, but what does this have to do with me?” Then a new realization hit me. “Wait, you’re a vampire. Can you even *get* pregnant?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugged. “But that’s not the point. I thought I was pregnant, so I bought a pregnancy test. Only, Jacqueline saw it… and I panicked.” Words fell out of her mouth in a rush. “I didn’t want Jay to find out before I knew, only he did find out… and that was kind of wild… and embarrassing and intense and wonderful. But that only happened after—”

I held up a hand. “Lola, slow down. How does this make *me* pregnant?”

“I told Jacqueline that I bought the test for a friend.”

My eyes nearly bugged out. *Oh, hell no.*

“And *I’m* the friend?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you!” she cried dramatically. Like I was somehow the bad guy here.

“Jacqueline assumed the friend was you, of course, even though I told her it wasn’t.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Oh, did you now?”

“I did! I swear. I told her it belonged to another friend, but she clearly didn’t believe me. And later I found out that she told a few people and, well, you know how packs are. The rumor spread faster than I thought possible. I’d be impressed if I wasn’t so pissed off at Jacqueline for doing this to you.”

“Maybe save a helping of anger for yourself, then. Because it seems like you had a pretty big role in this too.” I groaned and hid my face in my hands. “What if my mom and dad hear the rumor?”

A shout echoed from the front yard, and through the window I saw Greyson and Xavier circling each other on the lawn. My eyes widened.

*Oh, no. What if my mates heard the rumor? Is that why they’re about to fight?*

I raced out of the den and down the hallway to the front door, ignoring Lola’s calls for me to come back. By the time I made it back out onto the lawn, my mates were dangerously close.

I shoved myself between them. “What are you doing?!”

I couldn’t believe this was happening. One minute ago, everyone was getting along just fine, and now it was like the Lupo Finale all over again—only this time without all the trimmings.

Xavier held up his hands and stepped back, as if he was portraying just how innocent he was in this situation. “If you have a problem with what’s happening, I suggest you take it up with my whacked-out brother.”

I turned to Greyson expectantly. “Well?”

Our eyes locked, and his gaze lost its fire. He looked away. I couldn’t believe this was happening. What was wrong with him? He’d been acting so odd lately—something wasn’t right.

*Did he start this fight?*

He turned back to me. “I need to know the truth.”

“Oh my god,” I groaned. “So did you hear the rumor, then?”

With absolutely impeccable timing, my parents and the rest of the pack members who hadn’t already been outside when the fight broke out gathered in the yard.

“What’s going on?” Artemis called.

I sighed. “Shit.”

Greyson moved even closer, commanding my attention. His eyes were fixed on me with an intensity that took my breath away. “Is it true?”

Xavier moved in, his brow furrowing. “Is what true?”

I looked around. *Everyone* was staring at us, including my parents. I scanned their faces. How many of them had heard the rumor? And how many had passed it along to other pack members instead of even trying to verify if it was true?

*What a clusterfuck.*

I didn’t want to have this conversation—like, ever. But already things had gotten out of control. Greyson was ready to rip out Xavier’s throat because he thought I was pregnant, and the rest of the pack were all too happy to make assumptions about my personal life, too.

It was only a matter of time before my parents got involved.

No, it was better to put an end to this *now*, before it could get any worse, no matter how painful or awkward it would be. If I didn’t nip this in the bud now, my mates were gonna kill each other.

I turned away from my mates and faced the crowd, then I cleared my throat and said in as loud a voice as I was able, “I would like to clear the air *right now*. Someone has spread a terrible rumor”—I gave both Lola and Jacqueline a pointed, pissed-off look—“that I am pregnant.”

Shock seemed to ripple through parts of the crowd. Sabine didn’t even flinch, but my father outright gasped. I’d have known that gasp anywhere. I’d heard it all my life.

I risked a glance over my shoulder. Xavier was staring at me, wide-eyed, and Greyson looked some awful mix of hopeful and devastated.

*This is gonna be hard.*

I faced forward again and took a deep breath. “For the record, I’m *not* pregnant. Never have been. No plans to be.”

Sabine and my parents seemed to slump with relief.

*Glad I could clear that up for them, I guess.*

Lola rushed over to me. “I’ve got this.” She turned to face the crowd. “Excuse me, people! Now you know the truth! Let’s get back to preparing dinner!”

I watched, relieved, as Lola ushered everyone back in the house. She’d stepped up to correct her mistake, and I appreciated that.

But I still had one more fire to put out.

I turned back to my mates and took them both by the hand. “Why don’t the three of us go talk alone?”

**Episode 1958**

Xavier and Greyson gave me stiff nods in near unison in response to my request to pull them aside. This was getting out of hand, and there was no way I was going to talk to them in front of the entire pack—we’d given them enough of a show already.

“Good, come with me,” I said, avoiding the scandalized looks everyone cast our way as I ushered the two men into a quiet corner of the yard.

I could feel the two of them quietly fuming as they refused to look at each other. I knew without a doubt the only reason they weren’t openly squabbling was because I was standing between them.

*Well, I guess it’s up to me to break the ice*,I thought to myself with no small amount of annoyance. I hadn’t even done anything, and now it was up to me to fix things. How had things gotten so out of control so quickly?

“There’s a lot to unpack here, the first being why either of you would believe I was pregnant before you’d spoken to me first. No matter how much you hate it, you’re *both* my mates. If I were pregnant, why the hell would I tell anyone other than you first?”

Greyson and Xavier looked at each other out of the corner of their eyes, shifting uncomfortably like two children caught red-handed. It was strange seeing two big, strong men like them all but cowering in the face of their mistake. If I weren’t so absolutely pissed right now, it might have been funny. It was rare for me to find them both at a loss for words, and I had to admit that I was enjoying it just a little bit—but not enough to let them off the hook.

“Let’s make something clear. I am only twenty years old, and I am not ready to have children—I’m not even legally allowed to drink yet.” I paused, waiting to see if they had anything to say for themselves. When neither of them spoke, I continued. “Tell me, why didn’t either of you come to me first when you heard this?”

“I only found out when you confronted everyone, so I didn’t actually have a chance to talk—”

“Xavier, save it. It was just a rumor, but part of you believed it.” I turned to Greyson. “What about you?”

“I’m sorry, Cali—I heard it from my mother, so I had reason to wonder.”

*Really? Mrs. Smith was part of this as well?*

“Greyson, I can’t believe your mother fell victim to pack house gossip.” I pinched the bridge of my nose and closed my eyes, trying to collect my thoughts. Living in this house was starting to feel a lot like living in high school 24/7. “Just so you both know, Jacqueline is the one who started this—and why anyone would believe her is beyond me. She’s not a pack member, she’s pretty much a stranger to everyone here—even to Lola, who’s the sole reason she’s here in the first place. Despite that, every one of you just blindly believed what she said. It’s unbelievable, really—and eye opening.”

“Whoa, I think you’re taking all of this just a little too seriously. It’s not a big deal—it was just a game of Telephone that got out of hand.” Xavier had finally lost his deer-in-the-headlights look and was apparently ready to defend himself. I knew that Xavier wasn’t the type to stay repentant for long—especially if he honestly didn’t think that he’d done anything wrong.

I gave him a look, realizing then that I’d found out about my so-called pregnancy the same way as everyone else, but still, I was angry.

“How do you think that made me feel?” I demanded. “Having to announce that I wasn’t pregnant to a crowd of people, including my family? You’re both fighting for the mantle of Alpha, and that’s an important role with a lot of responsibility, so it seems to me that you both would’ve been smarter about something like this. What if the rumor was about something else? Something that threatened the pack? Or what if it were true? It’s *not*, but if it were, would you both kill each other over it without a second thought? Without at least trying to get to the bottom of things, first?”

Xavier and Greyson both looked up into space, now seemingly afraid to even make eye contact with me.

“So, are you two good now?” I demanded. “Or are you going to be at each other’s throats again as soon as I turn away?”

Xavier nodded. “We’re good.”

Greyson nodded. “Solid.”

I glared at both of them, noticing that their words didn’t quite match up with the looks on their faces—which included a pair of clenched jaws, cagey postures, and stony expressions. They were still doing their absolute best not to look at each other, as if they didn’t trust themselves to connect gazes for fear that they wouldn’t be able to help tearing each other apart. All I could think was that if they *were* going to kill each other, at this point they should just go ahead. I’d done all I could to defuse the situation, and I was over the whole thing.

After giving them both another intense glare for good measure, I left them to rejoin the others. I couldn’t shake the feeling that the moment I rejoined the group, everyone was going to be staring at me, murmuring amongst themselves about my newest round of drama. I hated being the center of attention, especially for something like this.

To my surprise, though, the pack seemed to have moved on already and were more concerned with enjoying the Thanksgiving festivities and having a good time. Appetizers were being passed around, drinks were flowing, and people were laughing and talking amongst themselves like my whole embarrassing outburst was a distant memory. I was relieved, but also troubled by how quickly a rumor like that could take root and then just disappear like nothing had ever happened.

I made my way over to the drink table and tossed back a wine cooler, just to make it clear to anyone who might still have had doubts about my current condition.

My mom and I connected gazes as I opened another wine cooler, and she came over to join me.

“Hey, Cali, are you sure that you should be drinking like that?” she asked.

I rolled my eyes. “Mom! Don’t tell me you still think I’m pregnant?”

“No. But Cali, let’s not forget that you’re still not old enough to drink. Your father and I trust you, of course, and we know that you’ve always been good about things like this—”

I stopped her. “Mom, please. I don’t need a lecture about drinking. I am very careful—everything in moderation, all of that.”

After everything I’d been through, my drinking was literally the last thing she needed to worry about—I would have said as much, but I didn’t want her to worry about all the other things that were a hell of a lot more dangerous than a wine cooler that contained less alcohol than a basket of beer battered shrimp.

“I know that you’re careful, honey.” She hesitated and looked down at her feet. “Actually, that’s not what I came over here to talk about.”

“Oh?” I said, arching an eyebrow and bracing myself for whatever was coming. I raised the wine cooler to my lips and took a swig.

“We haven’t discussed birth control.”

I choked on my drink, nearly spitting it out like I was in a bad sitcom. *Birth control? Damn you, Jacqueline!*

“Mom, come on!” I wished I could close my ears, or even suffer an episode of temporary deafness—anything to save me from having this conversation.

“I know this is probably the last thing you want to talk about—with me, especially—but since it appears that you are… involved… with two men, your father and I want to make sure that you’re being careful. Have you discussed the possibility of having children with either of them?”

I couldn’t believe that this was happening. She was right—I *didn’t* want to have this conversation with her. Not only that, I definitely did not want to have it in front of everyone. What if someone overheard us? They’d had enough exposure to my private life for today. I looked around. *Where’s Artemis to save me from this horror show? Or Lola? Anyone would do.*

“Mom, I love you, and I get that you’re trying to help, but I’m not having this conversation right now.” *Or ever, if I can help it.*

“I get it, honey. I know it’s a sensitive topic, but I’d be lying if I said I didn’t have some concerns. I really want to know—are you interested in having children with either of your mates?”

**Episode 1959**

XAVIER

Everything in me wanted to go after Cali, but I knew it would be best if I gave her some space. I had to admit, in the mere seconds that I’d believed she could be pregnant with Greyson’s baby, I’d been angry as hell. Livid, really. If anyone was going to get her pregnant, it was going to be me. Not that I was ready to be a father or anything, but I knew that I’d be a hell of a lot better at it than Greyson or my own murderous father, Silas.

“So, are we good?” Greyson piped up, interrupting my thoughts.

“I don’t know,” I said, because I really wasn’t sure. I was still pissed, and there were so many other things that I was mad at Greyson about. The pregnancy thing—even though it had been a complete lie—had me all riled up. “Just as a quick reminder, you were the one who freaked out. So, how about you answer the damn questions yourself.”

Greyson shrugged and looked off into the distance. “For Cali’s sake, let’s just bury the hatchet.”

“Oh, I’ll bury the hatchet all right. Right in your fucking neck.”

I couldn’t help myself. Even the sight of Greyson and that smug look on his dumb face pissed me off more than I could handle. It was a good thing there were so many people around, or I might have had a go at him right then and there.

“I’d love to see you try—but not today. Today, we let things slide. I hope you’re mature enough to put things behind us so that we can still go pay the Vanguards a surprise visit later.”

“Don’t talk to me about maturity,” I spat. He had a lot of nerve. He was the one hiding something because he didn’t have the guts to come clean, but he wanted to pretend like I was the immature one? “But yes, I’m still on board, looking forward to it.” I even managed to give him a stiff smile that we both knew was faker than Cali’s pregnancy scare. Greyson nodded and turned to leave, but I blocked his path. “What about you, Greyson? Are you ready to have a family?”

Greyson paused and looked me in the eye without even a hint of a smile on his lips. “Not now, I’m not. But someday, I will have a family. With my mate.”

Without another word, Greyson turned and left.

It was a good thing he’d gotten out of my face, because my blood was boiling, and I wasn’t sure if I was going to be able to restrain myself from finishing what we’d started before.

*With his mate? He’s got a lot of nerve. Well, I hope that he’s planning on meeting someone else soon, because there is no way he’s talking about Cali.*

Sure, the *due destini* bullshit had us by the balls for now, but I knew in my heart and beyond a shadow of a doubt that I was Cali’s true mate, and nothing that Greyson said or did or hoped would change that.

*If anyone’s going to have a family with Cali, it’s going to be me. Trust that, brother.*

I sighed and was starting back toward the group when Tom jogged over to me. “I thought you were going to help me with the turkey?”

Honestly, I was surprised that he still wanted my help, since I’d essentially turned one turkey into a pipe bomb.

“Sure, Tom. I’m ready, willing, and able,” I said, clapping my hands and rubbing them together briskly.

“Great, let’s get to it—we lost time with the turkey explosion before, so we need to get on top of this quick,” Tom said.

“Got it.”

I followed Tom to the kitchen while he talked about all the various ways to cook a turkey, and the importance of proper seasoning.

“Seasoning makes or breaks a turkey. You can have the best, most tender bird there is, but if you botch the seasoning—too much salt, too little salt, or if you use bad basting technique—well, you might as well have not cooked a turkey at all.” Tom grabbed a baster and looked me dead in the eye. “You do know what this is, right?”

“Um, yeah.”

He was really obsessed with basting technique. I’d never been one to get too wrapped up in cooking. If I wanted something badly enough and I wasn’t capable of cooking it in a few minutes, I’d hire a chef. I knew that Tom had different sensibilities about food prep, though.

“This is important, Xavier. Like I was saying, if you don’t baste a turkey properly, it will dry out. And—this is very important—once you put it in the oven, there’s no turning back. Do you understand what I’m saying?” Tom’s eyebrows were arched so high I wondered if they hurt, and he was staring at me so hard that I looked away.

All of a sudden, it hit me. He wasn’t talking about a turkey anymore. I shifted uncomfortably on my feet, suddenly feeling very over Thanksgiving and this whole family time thing.

“I get it, Tom,” I said. “Bad seasoning, bad preparation, bad turkey.”

“Good, good.” Tom clapped me a touch too hard on the back and put a hand on my shoulder. “I knew that you’d get it, Xavier. I treat cooking like I treat my family: with tender loving care. I expect you to do the same.”

Tom’s grip on my shoulder was getting tighter by the second. Damn, Tom could be the scary dad when he wanted to be.

“Got it,” I said again, as I searched the kitchen for any excuse to get out of this not-so-subtle discussion about Cali being pregnant.

I breathed an audible sigh of relief when Torin came over to join us.

“Have either of you seen the meat thermometer?” He was opening drawers and rummaging around in them frantically before slamming them shut with a dramatic sigh.

“I think I saw it in that drawer over there,” Tom said, jabbing a finger toward the long drawer next to the sink.

“Ah—Tom, you’re a lifesaver!” Torin said, waving the thermometer in the air as he rushed back outside.

“As you know, Xavier, my family is dealing with a lot right now. What with this werewolf thing I’m going through and all—”

“And I’m here to help you with that, Mr. Hart.” I winced, realizing that I hadn’t called him that for a long time. Whatever, maybe calling him by his last name would lighten him up a little, since it showed deference. I really liked and respected Tom, but he was starting to cramp my style, literally. His fingers were beginning to feel like a vice on my shoulder. “Whatever happens tonight during the full moon, I want you to know that I’m here and I’ll get you—and your family—through it.”

“I appreciate that, Xavier, I really do, but the shock of finding out that my twenty-year-old daughter could’ve been in the family way… Well, you can see how a father might react to that.” Tom pressed his lips into a straight line and looked me directly in the eyes.

I nodded. *God, I’d take a revenant horde right about now, or an appearance from Silas—just about anything if it meant he’d end this conversation.*

“I have to say that I’ve never quite been able to wrap my head around this double mate thing that you, Greyson, and Cali have going on, and maybe I never will, but the important thing is for Cali to be happy—and safe. You *are* being safe, aren’t you?”

I nodded, wondering if anyone had ever keeled over from awkwardness. If they had, I was on my way there too. I’d never imagined myself having a conversation with my mate’s father about safe sex.

I put a pointedly gentle hand on Tom’s shoulder. “Your daughter is the most important person in my life, and I won’t let anything happen to her.”

There was no way in hell I was going to get into specifics—I couldn’t imagine talking about condoms or any other birth control methods. I was happy to be just as vague as he was being.

Just then, Torin returned. “Xavier! So glad you’re still here, I need your help with something.”

“Of course,” I said, tearing out of Tom’s grasp and all but running up to Torin like an excited puppy. “Tom, it was so great chatting with you—heard you loud and clear.”

“Sure, and I look forward to picking up where we left off, later,” Tom said with a smile.

The wind flew out of my sails. It was clear that Tom wasn’t going to let this drop. “Great, I’m so looking forward to it.” I followed Torin outside, and he led me away from where everyone else stood laughing and nibbling and talking. “Where are we going, Torin? I thought you needed help with some food thing?”

Torin’s face darkened into a menacing look that I hadn’t known he was capable of. He leaned in close. “You and Greyson cannot ruin this day. If you don’t stop with all your nonsense, I’m going to go full Fae on your asses!”

**Episode 1960**

MARTA

*Are we breaking up? Is he serious?* Talk about jumping to conclusions. I’d snapped at Lilac one time—which I wholly regretted—and he thought that meant that things were over between us? I couldn’t believe my stupid remark had upset him enough to assume such a thing, and honestly, it seemed a bit rash. Was he going to react this way every time one of us said something that we didn’t mean? I couldn’t help but think about all the broken relationships there’d be in this pack house alone if that was how relationships worked.

“So, are we done?” Lilac pressed.

He wasn’t letting this go. The thought occurred to me that maybe that was what he wanted—to be done. Was this his passive aggressive way of breaking up with me while letting me shoulder all the blame for it? He’d said he wanted to be with me, so I’d brought him back from the dead. He was also a virgin before I… deflowered him, and now he wasn’t. Was that what this was all about? Maybe I hadn’t been off the mark when I’d snapped at him and insinuated that he’d gotten what he wanted from me. *Isn’t that what young men do? Sleep with you and then ghost you—almost literally, in Lilac’s case?* In fifty years, some things hadn’t changed in the least. Men were still afraid of commitment and antsy to find the next best thing out there. Wow. He was already itching to move on to someone else. How could I have been so stupid as to fall for it?

“I risked everything to bring you here, Lilac.” I held up my hands—my messed-up death hands, complete with a pair of otherworldly bracelets. “And now, I’m paying for it.”

I shook my head and looked down at the floor, unable to fathom how quickly things had fallen apart between us.

Lilac’s eyes went wide as he examined the bracelets. “What are those?”

“I’m under house arrest now because of what happened at the grocery store, and because I brought you back.”

“They did this to you?”

I nodded, feeling hopeless and scared all over again. Was I going to be stuck with these bracelets forever? Or just until the trial? *Can I shower with these things on?* The devices looked strange, like getting them wet might be a bad idea.

“I didn’t know, Marta. I’m really sorry.” Lilac reached for me, but I pulled back before he could touch me. He looked like I’d struck him. “I know that you didn’t mean what you said. I was just shocked to hear it. Don’t you know by now that I would never do that to you? Abandon you? Do you really think I’m the type of guy that would just use you for sex?”

Lilac reached for me again, and this time I let his fingers brush my cheek. His touch sent shivers racing down my spine, reminding me of why I’d needed to bring him back from the spirit world in the first place. It hadn’t been for him, or for Violet, but for myself. I should have known the first time I kissed him, when he was still a ghost, but I’d been too guarded then to realize it.

I softened and pulled him into a hug, unable to resist him any longer. “I’m sorry, too, Lilac. I didn’t mean it at all. I was just overwhelmed by everything that was happening—and I was upset that everyone saw what I’d done to that onion.” I’d panicked at the thought of being exposed, of everyone judging me or shunning me because I was dangerous, or too much of a liability. “I’m sorry I hurt you—you’re the one person who’s been right here by my side through everything.”

Lilac smiled. “Literally. We were tethered. I had no choice. But I definitely have a choice now.”

I couldn’t help the laugh that escaped me at the thought. There’d been so much push and pull between us when he was a ghost, and I’d fought him almost every step of the way, but over and over again, he’d proven that he was devoted to me and that he would always be there if I needed him. He’d even saved my life a few times, and that had to count for a lot.

We locked eyes for a heated moment before our lips came together like they had minds of their own. I clutched him tightly, like he might slip back into the spirit world if I let go. I moaned and stroked my tongue in and out of his mouth, liking the way he pressed the tip of his tongue to mine each time I entered his mouth. He wrapped his arms tightly around me and walked me back until he’d trapped me against the wall, and I fully submitted to the press of his lips and the exploration of his hands as they left trails of heat all over my body.

Lilac pulled away. “Do you really think that I would do anything to jeopardize this?” His voice rasped with need.

I shook my head, and he pressed his lips against mine again before I could speak, taking the lead now, dipping his tongue into my mouth after running the tip along my lips in a way that promised more to come.

I leaned back against the wall and let my hands drop to my sides as his hands continued a slow exploration of my body. He ran his hands over my stomach and across my back, then he pulled me in tighter to him so that I felt like we might merge into one being if we weren’t careful.

When we finally came up for air, we were both breathing heavily, smiles playing across our swollen lips.

“I could do that all day,” Lilac said with a mischievous smile.

“I could, too. That and other stuff,” I said.

Lilac’s cheeks flushed, and longing shone in his eyes. “I’m going to hold you to that.”

We went out into the hallway, holding hands. I felt safe and satisfied with him close, and I was certain that I would never again think that he was just trying to get away from me. It just didn’t match up with how he’d treated me from the moment we’d first laid eyes on each other. I simply needed to trust that he was genuine, and that he wanted to be with me as much as I wanted to be with him.

Lilac held my wrist up as we walked toward the living room, examining the strange bracelets more closely. “This really sucks. I don’t see how this is legal.”

“Whatever laws they’re living by definitely allow for this, and worse,” I said, remembering all the things that Big Mac had said about the “necromancy police” that were apparently watching my every move and passing judgement. “And no, I don’t think Big Mac can remove them. She already said as much. Also, a letter came with the bracelets, saying that I could no longer use my magic.”

“What? I’m so sorry, Marta. This is all my fault. You don’t… you don’t regret bringing me back? If you hadn’t, you wouldn’t be in the middle of all this mess.”

I stopped him. “No, I could never regret that. Even with the hearing and all this other stuff, I wouldn’t change a thing. The truth is, I’m already starting to enjoy the quiet.”

Lilac furrowed his brow. “What do you mean?”

I looked up at him, realizing that he was someone that I could trust, someone who’d been through a lot with me and never run away, someone who would’ve remained a ghost rather than expose me to the dangers that necromancy could inflict on me, and I decided to tell him exactly how being a medium had affected my life for as long as I could remember.

“I’ve always been able to hear the spirits. Over time, I got used to it and they became like background noise. They never stopped chattering away, but as time passed, I learned to ignore them and to pretend that they weren’t there. It was either that or go insane.”

Lilac stopped, took my hands in his, brought them up to his lips, and peppered warm kisses across my knuckles. “Marta, I can’t imagine how hard that must have been. I love Violet and all, but sometimes I have to block her voice out just to get some peace. I can’t imagine how it would’ve been if she literally never shut up—and the thought of hearing multiple voices speaking at once all the time?” Lilac shook his head in disbelief.

“It wasn’t a walk in the park, but like I said, I learned to live with it. Now, it’s different. You know how it is when you have a headache that’s nagging at you all day, and then suddenly you realize it’s gone? That the pain is no longer afflicting you? That’s exactly what this feels like. For the first time since I discovered my magic, I don’t have to work overtime to block anything out. I’m free. Finally.” I grabbed Lilac and pulled him close. “Do you think there might be a way to get rid of my magic forever?”

**Episode 1961**

“Do we have to talk about this now?” I spluttered. Couldn’t a girl just enjoy her deviled eggs and barely alcoholic wine cooler in peace without having to discuss her reproductive future—with her *mom*, of all people?

“Honestly, Cali, what better time?” my mom said, crossing her arms. “I know there was nothing to the pregnancy rumor, but, honey you *are* sexually active—with two men no less…” She cocked her head to the side and gave me one of those looks that only a mother was capable of giving.

I literally wanted to vomit. Even though there was nothing inaccurate about what she was saying, somehow hearing it come out of my mother’s mouth made it sound so weird, and more than a little scandalous. And even though I knew she wasn’t judging me, that didn’t mean I wanted to talk to her, in detail, about the complicated dynamic that I shared with my mates.

“… and we all know that accidents sometimes happen, so this seems like the perfect moment to discuss this.” She smiled pleasantly, trying to soften the blow of her words. It wasn’t working.

I groaned and covered my face with my hands, hoping that my clear and obvious embarrassment would make her show me a shred of mercy.

“Oh Cali, you shouldn’t be this embarrassed to talk about having children. It’s a decision that you need to be prepared for.”

It was clear that she wasn’t going to let this go, no matter how much I wanted to forget that the last hour had even happened. All I could think about was whether or not I should make Jacqueline pay for what she’d done.

“Okay Mom, yes, I’ve considered it.” I paused, remembering the dream I’d had about having a little girl with Greyson. It had been a beautiful dream, and it had felt so right, but it had been just that—a dream. I couldn’t even begin to imagine taking that step, especially with how complex things were between the three of us right now. “But I’m too young, Mom. Having a family is something I’m going to be putting off for a long time, at least until I know that I’m ready and that the time is right.”

*And until I don’t have a deadly curse hanging over my head, and my mates’.*

Mom smiled at me. “Cali, there’s never really a right time to start a family; take it from me.”

“Yeah, but you must have figured it out somehow.” Then a thought hit me. “Hold on, was I not planned? Was I a *mistake*? And what about Artemis?”

I’d never really considered it before, but had Artemis and I been accidents? Inconveniences?

Mom placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. “Both of my children were planned. With Kadmos, we were so in love and had talked at length about having children—what they would look like, what we’d want to teach them. We were ready and willing to take the leap.”

Mom had a wistful look as she spoke, a look I didn’t see in her eyes too often, especially when she talked about Kadmos.

I tried to picture my mother young, unburdened by children, madly in love with a man who wasn’t my father—and it wasn’t an easy thing to picture. I’d only ever seen my mother with my dad, and I couldn’t imagine her loving anyone else—let alone planning to start a family with that person.

“You should be glad that you can choose freely—it’s not that I regret anything, but Kadmos and I were under a lot of pressure to have a child for the Light and Dark Fae alliance. Maybe if we hadn’t been under that type of intense pressure, we would have waited a couple more years. But we were ready, that much was for sure…” Her voice trailed off, and she wiped a tear from her eye as she looked out at Artemis, who was laughing at something Rishika had said.

I took her hand and squeezed it.

“Kadmos never had a chance to see what a wonderful daughter he helped bring into the world,” my mom continued in a shaky voice.

She hadn’t, either—not until I’d brought Artemis back from the Fae world.

“As for you, your father and I knew that we wanted to start a family. We were a little older than I was when I had Artemis, and we were so blessed to have such an amazing baby girl.” She squeezed my hand and kissed me on the forehead.

I thought about how nice it had to have been for my parents, and I wished that I could be in a similar position. Though I was sure that everything hadn’t been entirely easy—no relationship was—there was no question that in comparison to mine, their relationship had been relatively normal and straightforward. After all, my mother didn’t have the *due destini* curse to contend with. She wasn’t torn between two men. Even the thought of the predicament that I was in made my head hurt. Why couldn’t things be easy for me, too? I’d asked myself that question so many times, and I was no closer to understanding why I was the lucky one who had to deal with something as dangerous as *due destini*.

A moment later—and not one too soon, as I could tell my mother still wasn’t finished—Artemis came to join us.

“Hi, honey. Cali and I were just discussing having children. Have you ever thought about having kids, Artemis?” my mother asked. I was happy that the attention had shifted away from me for the moment.

Artemis laughed and looked at our mother with one eyebrow raised in confusion. “I’ve never really thought about it. When I was in the Fae world, I thought that I’d be under the Kollector’s control for the rest of my life, so even the thought of having children… It was never an option, so I didn’t even trouble myself with thinking about it. That was something for other people, people who were in charge of their own destiny.”

“What about now?” I asked my sister as I imagined Artemis and Rishika raising little warrior children, strong and smart and kick-ass like their parents.

Artemis looked around. “I think that I have all the family I need right now.” She turned to face our mom. “Sorry, Mom, but I think you might have to rely on Cali for those grandkids.”

She smiled that wistful smile again. “I guess I won’t hold my breath. Your sister just made it clear that she’s not ready to have kids any time soon.” She laughed. “Come to think of it, I don’t think your father and I are ready to be called Grandma and Grandpa quite yet.” Her attention drifted, and her eyes searched the group of people gathered on the lawn. “I should go check on Tom—I need to make sure he hasn’t fired everyone from helping prepare dinner.”

As soon as she was gone, Artemis made a face. “Was the conversation you were having with Mom about kids as awkward as it sounded?”

I laughed. “Worse.”

“Well, since Mom isn’t here now, tell me—what’s the truth?”

“The truth? About what?”

Artemis rolled her eyes, clearly annoyed. “About having kids! What else?”

I sighed. I was tired of talking about myself and my womb, so I decided to avoid the question as best I could. “What about you, Artemis? Were *you* being honest with Mom about the whole kids thing?”

“Me? Yes, of course I was—the difference here is that I don’t have two mates to worry about. Clearly Mom is concerned with you because of your, ahem, unique situation.”

She had a point there. “True enough. Things are a little more complicated for me. Having children is complicated for anyone, regardless of the circumstances, but add in werewolves, fighting Alphas, *due destini*, Lunas… It’s a mess.”

“You can say that again. It’s kind of like trying to make a soup with way too many chefs. And we’re both too young—and too hot, I might add— to have kids just yet, so no way.”

We shared an easy laugh, and for the first time since the rumor had run amok, I felt a little better.

“I have to say that I’m glad I’m not in your shoes. Having Rishika in my life is all I need right now.” Artemis paused, as if deciding whether or not to say whatever was waiting on the tip of her tongue. “I was wondering…”

“Uh oh.”

“No, it isn’t anything bad. I’m just a little curious… If there was no *due destini*, no double Luna thing, if nobody would die or be cursed or whatever—who would you choose right now, in this moment, to be your mate?”

I was stunned by the question, and afraid that even answering a what-if question like that would cast Xavier, Greyson, and me into the very outcome we’d been fighting so hard to avoid. It was too hard with *due destini* to know what would be taken as a choice and what wouldn’t. *But if none of that were an issue, who* would *I choose?*

Artemis grinned. “Fine, let me answer for you. I think you should pick…”

**Episode 1962**

GREYSON

Still upset about how I’d lost control in front of everyone, I decided to take my anger out on a pile of uncut wood out back. I placed a tall, wide log on the stump, raised the axe above my head, and brought it down with a satisfying crack, splitting the log in two. I let out a satisfied breath. I was killing two birds with one stone—blowing off some steam while making sure that there was plenty of wood for tonight’s bonfire. I took a quick glance at the chainsaw leaning against the shed. Sure, it would have made quick work of the wood, but using it wouldn’t have provided the same visceral release as a good old-fashioned axe.

I placed another log on the stump and brought the axe down again, shattering the wood as I remembered what Xavier had joked about—burying the hatchet in my neck. *As if I’d ever give him half a chance…* I gritted my teeth, knowing Xavier would never even get close. Not that I had to seriously worry about it. It had just been a joke. *Yeah, only a bad. Stupid. Joke*, I thought, punctuating each word with a swing from the axe.

Lately, Xavier had been making a point of accusing me of hiding something, of being a liar. In this instance, he was right. I’d lied to him for sure—I wasn’t cool with any of this. I didn’t want to bury the hatchet, and I didn’t want to work with him. I could barely stand to look at him, let alone work side by side with him. He was a barrier, an impediment to me getting what I wanted, what I deserved. Cali was my mate, and I knew that we would have a family someday, and that the most Xavier would be was a distant—very distant—uncle that we barely saw, if ever. I’d seen what that life could be—in the dreams, the visions—and I wanted it. I licked my lips and took a deep breath as I placed another log on the stump.

I was mid-swing when Sabine appeared beside me. “Hey.”

“Hey,” I answered, bringing the axe down and sending the two halves of the log tumbling into the grass.

Sabine picked up the wood and threw it onto the pile, her expression soft and open. “I wanted to apologize about earlier, getting you all worked up over the whole Cali being pregnant thing. I should’ve been more careful and not gotten so carried away. I know better than anyone how rumors have a way of taking on a life of their own in a pack house—true or not. I guess that the idea of having a baby around excited me. I was robbed of the joy of being able to raise my own child, and I was ready to leap at the chance to be a part of a baby’s life.”

I put the axe down and used my shirt to wipe off the sheen of sweat covering my chest and forehead. I could see that she was getting emotional. “I’m sorry, but Cali and me, we aren’t ready to take that step just yet.”

Sabine’s eyes went wide. “No, I wasn’t implying that you should. The last thing I want is to put any pressure on you; that’s not what I meant at all. All I was trying to say was that if it was happening, then I was excited about it.”

“I know, it’s okay.” I didn’t blame her; how could I? Just like Cali had said, I’d believed the rumor without taking a second to talk to Cali about it. I’d seen red, and the first thing I’d wanted to do was smash Xavier’s face in.

Sabine looked at me. “I don’t think it’s okay, actually. I was watching you chop that wood. You were putting enough into each swing to level an entire forest. Do you want to talk about it?”

I shook my head. “No. Thank you, though. I just need a little time to cool down, that’s all. Xavier and I have some stuff we still need to work out.”

As if we were capable of working anything out at this point. I was starting to think that this was the way things would always be between us, that we’d always be messed up and on the brink of a fight. He’d threatened to whack me in the neck with a hatchet, after all. That was a whole new level.

“Are you sure? I’m here, Greyson—if you need to talk, if you need advice, if you need anything. I’m here.”

I could see that she meant it, and that she was doing her best to get me to open up, but I wasn’t there yet. Besides, how could I explain to anyone other than Cali what I was going through? I hadn’t even shared it with Cali yet, and when I did, it would be without Xavier lurking around muddying the waters.

Eager to change the subject, I returned my attention to the logs piled at my feet. I’d cut way more than I’d realized. “You think that’ll be enough for the fire tonight?”

Sabine sighed. “Probably.” She placed her hand gently on my arm. “Just so you know, I hope that it all works out for you and Cali.”

I was taken aback. I hadn’t expected her to say that. I realized then that there *was* a way that it could all work out—a way for us to overcome the *due destini*—and it had to do with the three witches.

Sabine gave me a small smile and squeezed my arm before heading back to join the others. I watched her go, thinking that she’d just given Cali and me an endorsement. I racked my brain, trying to think if there was anyone else who’d said that to me about Cali. I came up with nothing. No one ever had, until now. It filled me with hope—a hope that I was reluctant to accept. There were still so many damn obstacles in front of us. Again, I thought of the witches. They’d offered a way to make it so that Cali would be able to choose without harming anyone. That was what I wanted, because there was no doubt in my mind that she would choose me.

I needed to speak to Cali alone so that I could apologize for what I’d done—without Xavier there to screw things up and throw me off.

I walked back over to join the others, looking for Cali. After a few moments, I spotted her standing with Artemis. I waved at her, but she didn’t seem to notice. Suddenly, she covered her ears and ran away from Artemis. What the hell was that about?It hadn’t seemed too serious, but it was still strange. I was about to chase after her when Artemis intercepted me.

“Hey, Artemis, what happened with Cali? Why’d she run off like that?”

Artemis laughed. “Oh, it was nothing. I guess she wasn’t ready to hear my opinion about something.”

I nodded slowly, thinking that I had no desire to get caught up in the middle of sister stuff. I gave her a quick smile and was starting to excuse myself when she grabbed my arm in a way that showed she meant business.

She narrowed her gaze and looked me straight in the eye. “I’ve lived most of my life only worried about myself, but now that I have a sister, a family, things have changed. I’d die to protect them.”

“I get that,” I said quietly, wondering why she was telling me this while she had me bolted to the spot with her strong hold.

Artemis gazed out into the woods, a distant look in her steady eyes. “In the Fae world, especially doing the work that I did, I learned that there are over a million ways to get rid of a body. Did you know that?”

I swallowed.

“You can burn it, feed it to one of the many hungry creatures with sharp teeth and claws that lurk in the Faewood. You can even serve it to guests—with the right seasoning and presentation, no one’s the wiser.”

I grimaced and yanked out of her hold. “What the hell, Artemis? Are you threatening me?”

“Walk with me,” Artemis said, motioning for me to follow her.

I groaned and hesitated until she was a few paces ahead, but eventually I followed. I was too scared not to.

“The point is, Greyson, that Cali is my sister. She’s in love with you, and she’s in love with your brother, too. I’ve seen what it’s doing to her. It’s driving her crazy, making her doubt herself—and more than that, it’s making her unhappy. I don’t like it at all. So, I wanted to take a moment to speak with you, to talk with you woman to man.”

“Sure, I understand.”

“Do you?” Artemis stopped walking and looked me straight in the eye. “Can I give you some advice?”

**Episode 1963**

XAVIER

I couldn’t stop laughing. “Go Fae on our asses? Torin, really.” I clapped a hand over my mouth as the laughter kept coming, drying up only when I realized that Torin wasn’t smiling. I took a deep breath, calming the last waves of laughter that were still trying to bubble up. Torin looked like he was two seconds away from making good on his threat. I raised a brow at him. “Oh, you *are* serious? I have to tell you, I’m not one to take threats casually.”

“And I’m not one to make casual threats,” Torin said, his expression stony. “Everyone here thinks I’m all fun and happy all the time, but I’ve reached my limit.”

“Your limit? Okay, what’s the problem?” I had to admit, seeing Torin like this was a little unnerving.

“This is my first Thanksgiving. It was supposed to be Astrid’s first Thanksgiving as well.” Torin’s lip quivered ever so slightly as he paused, trying to collect himself. “Astrid and I were so excited; we talked so much about it and had all these perfect visions for how it would go.” Despite his attempts to keep it together, his voice trembled as he spoke, and he looked away, blinking back tears.

Aw, damn. I had forgotten about Astrid in all the commotion of… well, everything. Now I kinda felt like a jerk for riling him up.

I put a hand on his shoulder. In spite of his desire to “go all Fae” on me, I felt for the guy. He’d lost someone really close to him, and I knew it had to be hard on him to keep going without her.

“We planned to spend it together, you know? And because of that, I wanted it to be perfect. But you and Greyson are trying to ruin it.”

“Ruin it? Torin, you have to know that—”

“Stop it, Xavier. Don’t make excuses. You were about to fight your brother right in the middle of everything only a few minutes ago!”

I sighed. “You’re right, Torin. I’m sorry. Sometimes things with me and Greyson reach a boiling point before I even know it. You have to know that ruining Thanksgiving is the last thing I want. I know how much you’ve put into making sure it’s a special day for all of us, and believe me when I say that I’ll be on my best behavior. There’s no way in hell I’ll let an honorary werewolf down.”

Finally, Torin smiled and nodded at me. “I *am* a werewolf.”

I held up my fist, and with only the slightest hesitation, Torin fist bumped me. “We good?”

“We’re good,” Torin said. Suddenly his eyes went wide with alarm, and he started sniffing the air like a hound dog. “You smell that? Is something burning?” He turned and yelled, “Tom! The pies!”

Without another word or even second glance in my direction, he raced off to face the latest food-related catastrophe.

I shook my head, thinking back to how Greyson and I had squared off, more than ready to tear each other to pieces. Torin was right. Things were getting too tense between Greyson and me, and I needed to be careful and make sure that there weren’t any more flare ups between us—though as I remembered it, my brother was the one who’d started it this time.

I walked back over to join the others, looking for Kira as I went. I’d never gotten a chance to thank her for saving my pretty face from the wrath of the exploding turkey. If it hadn’t been for her, I would’ve ended up looking like a melted candle, and how could I have competed with Greyson then?

I spotted Kira sitting by herself, looking deep in thought. I could only imagine what she had on her mind after everything that had been happening lately.

Remembering that she liked beer, I grabbed one for each of us on my way over to her. She looked up and broke into a smile when she caught sight of me heading toward her.

“I brought you a beer,” I said, shaking it enticingly back and forth.

“Thanks a lot,” she said as she took the beer.

“No, thank *you* for saving Thanksgiving. The turkey caught fire so fast—I’ve seen a lot of shit in my life, but I’ve never seen anything as flammable as that bird. Even with my fast healing, that hot oil would’ve made a complete mess of this masterpiece,” I said, pointing to my face and arching my eyebrows.

Kira chuckled. “Hey, we make a good team, what can I say? We seem to always be looking out for each other.” She raised her beer. “To us.”

We clinked bottles and each took a sip. An awkward silence passed between us before Kira looked back at everyone.

“Geoff would have really liked this,” she said. “He was a very social vampire, though he wasn’t crazy about werewolves.”

I shrugged. “What vampire is? Especially since the feeling’s mutual.”

Kira nodded her agreement. “You, though? I think he would’ve liked you. And I think you would’ve liked him, too.”

I laughed. “Well you probably should get to know me a little better before you go drawing that conclusion.”

Kira smiled. “I hope I can.” She reached up and brushed a pine needle out of my hair. “Make a wish!”

“Is that a thing? Wishing on a pine needle?”

“Definitely not,” she said, throwing it to the ground with a smile.

“Well, thanks for cleaning me up. You’re always making sure I look my best.”

“That’s what friends are for,” she said, taking a swig from her beer.

It occurred to me then that I hadn’t seen Ava around in a while. Good. Maybe she’d finally left. I knew I should probably go and make sure. I didn’t want her lurking around the house, waiting to pop up right when I least expected her.

“You should join the others, cut loose, have fun,” I said.

Kira smiled up at me as I stood. “Yeah, thanks, Xavier. I will.”

I drained my beer and threw it into a trashcan that was nearly full of empties. The pack sure knew how to knock the drinks back—some things never changed. I headed toward the house, thinking about Kira. *Is she acting strange toward me? Is it my imagination, or…?* I didn’t know, and besides, who could tell why a witch did what a witch did? To say that witches were unpredictable was an understatement. Either way, Kira was a great girl—attractive and smart, if a little shy. I wished that she could find someone that would help get her mind off Geoff and everything she’d lost. She deserved to be happy. I wondered if she’d ever find a wolf attractive.

I bounded into the house and searched for Ava, but she was nowhere to be found. I went upstairs and peeked into her room, surprised to find her there packing the last of her things into her canvas duffel bag.

“You’re leaving?” I asked, taking a cautious step into her room.

“You seem surprised,” Ava answered, not bothering to look up at me.

“Yeah, I have to admit that I am.”

Ava sucked her teeth and flipped her long curtain of hair over her shoulder. “I don’t see why. You’ve made it clear that you don’t want me around.”

I didn’t bother to deny it—she was right, after all. “But why now? I’ve told you to leave so many times before.”

Ava shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s Thanksgiving, and I’ve tried, but I can’t really find anything to be thankful for. A day like this, with everyone in the pack house being all excited and festive, it reminds me of all that I’ve lost.” She finally looked up at me, and there was a sadness in her eyes that I hadn’t seen in a long time.

A flurry of confusing feelings crashed through me. I should’ve been happy, “the wicked witch is dead!” and all that. She’d done nothing but cause trouble from the moment she’d come back from the dead. But instead of feeling relieved, I was confused.

Ava stopped packing and turned to face me head-on, studying me. “What? You don’t want me to leave?”

I huffed and rocked back on my heels. “Of course I do.”

“Well you’re the Alpha—at least, I’ll always think of you as my Alpha—and I’ll do what my Alpha wants.” She stepped closer, closing the distance between us. “We used to mean a lot to each other.”

I fought my instinct to back away and put that safe space between us again. I wasn’t going to let her get to me. I flinched as she reached up and touched my cheek before tracing my jaw with one finger. It was something she used to always do, back before everything went to hell. She leaned in close, and I could smell her scent—as strong and familiar as ever. It sent a wave of memories whipping through my mind and I shook my head, trying to dash them away.

“I’ll go, but there’s one thing I want before I do.” She leaned in even closer, her breath tickling my ear as she whispered, “Will you kiss me goodbye again?”

**Episode 1964**

I locked myself in the bathroom and pressed my back against the door, letting out a breath as I closed my eyes. I hadn’t been able to get away from Artemis fast enough. I loved my sister dearly, but with everything that had happened today, I didn’t need even one more opinion about who I should be with, especially when everyone knew that I couldn’t make that decision without killing the person I didn’t choose. It was clear that no one understood how this whole thing dominated my every moment. I didn’t have the luxury of having a light conversation about which of my mates was the better fit for me. It was too risky.

One day, when it was safe for me to make that decision, I wouldn’t want anyone else to have swayed me—even a little. When the time came, I wanted to choose based on nothing but what I alone knew and felt about the two men in my life. As awkward as my conversation had been with my mother, at least she hadn’t thrown her opinion around.

*Yeah, but what if Mom likes Greyson better than Xavier? Or vice versa?*

I had no idea where she—or Dad—stood in that regard, and to be honest, I didn’t want to know. I sighed and ran a hand down my face, wishing that I could wipe the last hour out of my mind. If I chose the person that neither my mom *nor* Artemis liked, it would cast a shadow over my relationship with whoever I chose, and there was no way I was going to deal with that. I’d been through enough already.

*Dammit! Why does everything have to be so complicated?* By now, I’d asked myself that question a million times, and I wasn’t any closer to an answer. *I guess this is how life is gonna be for me. Maybe it was always meant to be this way*. A roll of the dice. Bad luck. All of it was making my head hurt. Why couldn’t I just enjoy Thanksgiving like everyone else?

*I know why. Jacqueline.*

I was suddenly hot with anger, wondering how much longer that temperamental vamp girl was going to be staying with the pack. What was she even still doing here, anyway? Maybe I would go talk to her right now and give her some choice words about spreading lies about someone she knew absolutely nothing about.

I left the bathroom, unsure of where I might find Jacqueline. I hadn’t seen her in a while. The last time I’d laid eyes on her had been earlier in the day, probably hours before she’d tried to ruin my life with her reckless actions. I gritted my teeth as I looked around at all the work that everyone had put in to make sure we had a great Thanksgiving celebration. As far as I’d seen, Jacqueline hadn’t even been helping. At all. With anything. I remembered a story about helping that my mother used to read to me when I was little. *Only those who help make the bread get to eat the bread.* The only thing Jacqueline had cooked up today was a pot of trouble.

I barreled through the house, looking for Jacqueline in every room and around every corner, determined to find her. I started a little when I ran smack into Greyson in the living room.

“Hey, Cali!” he said, his eyes lighting up. “I’m glad I ran into you—I was actually looking for you.”

“Why?” I asked, still distractedly scanning the house for any sign of Jacqueline. Now that I’d decided to confront her, I could hardly wait.

“I wanted to talk about what happened before.”

I waved a hand at him. “It’s all right, no big deal. Water under the bridge.”

“No, I insist. I wanted to get you alone, to say that I’m sorry for what I did. And it was true that I instigated the fight with Xavier.”

I finally turned my full attention to Greyson, surprised by his admission. “I know Xavier blamed you for things getting out of hand, but it just seemed so out of character for you to lose your cool like that.”

Greyson sighed and shook his head. “When it comes to you, Cali, my reasoning function sometimes gets a little short circuited.”

“Oh, so you really did think that I was pregnant with Xavier’s child?”

Greyson winced. “Look, I know it seems ridiculous, but it was driven by envy more than anything else.”

I shook my head in disbelief. *Envy?* “So… does that mean you want to have children?”

Greyson took my hands in his. “Yes, one day—when we’re both ready and when things aren’t so… aren’t like this.”

I was moved by his words, and by the earnestness in his eyes. There were a lot of things to love about Greyson, but his sincerity was one of my favorite things about him. And it didn’t hurt that he was absolutely gorgeous. I found myself getting lost in his eyes for a moment before I pulled myself back to the present.

“I’m glad that you came to tell me all of this,” I said, “but I’m not ready to even talk about having a family.”

“I know that, Cali, believe me. I only wanted you to know that when the time comes, whenever that might be, I’ll be ready.” He pulled my hands up to his lips and placed a gentle kiss on the tips of my fingers. I leaned in close to him, inhaling his spicy scent. “I’m sorry again.”

“So, you were jealous at the thought of me being pregnant by Xavier?”

Greyson gave me a look. “Come on, Cali, isn’t that obvious? Why wouldn’t I be? The thought of you having a baby with any other man but me? No way.”

A fire had ignited in Greyson’s eyes, and once again I could tell that he meant every word he was saying.

I liked hearing this. Knowing that Greyson wanted me, that he wanted to have a family with me one day, truly meant everything to me. I knew that our relationship was far from traditional, and that things weren’t quite as straightforward as I would’ve hoped, but there was no question that thinking of Greyson and me having a child that brought together the best parts of us made me excited about the future—even though that future remained pretty uncertain.

“So, do you forgive me?” Greyson asked.

“Do you need my forgiveness?”

Greyson pulled me close and wrapped his arms around my waist. “If you’ll offer it, yes.”

I nodded, and Greyson kissed me. I stiffened for a moment, then relaxed against him as the kiss deepened. I tried to lose myself in the feel of his lips—and as always, his nearness was reassuring and filled me with warmth—but I couldn’t quite stop my mind from racing, worrying about the future, worrying about what the *due destini* meant for us and any family we might hope to have one day. Still, I returned the kiss, matching his heat and molding myself against him, taking in what little comfort I could. I reached up and ran my hands through his hair—just as my phone alarm started dinging. I scrambled to slide it out of my pocket, my lips still pressed to Greyson’s as I fumbled to stop the loud bleating sound.

“Shit!” I snapped as the phone slipped from my hands and fell.

“Ow, damn!” Greyson said, pulling away from me and reaching to rub his foot, where the phone had landed as the alarm continued to ring.

“My bad, Greyson!” I said, scrambling to pick it up from the floor, hoping that the screen wasn’t cracked. I stared down at it. *Phew. Intact.* The moment thoroughly broken, I finally stopped the alarm, slid the phone back into my pocket, and gave Greyson an apologetic glance. “Is your foot okay?”

“Yeah, it’s good. It surprised me is all,” Greyson said. “What was the alarm for, anyway?”

“It’s my moon alarm,” I responded, taking a quick glance out the window. “I set it to go off every hour on the hour, so I’m prepared for when the moon starts to rise at five o’clock.”

Greyson laughed. “Don’t worry so much, Cali. Like I told you, I’ll look after Tom. He has a huge support system here—I mean, we’ve taken in a diverse set of characters recently, but the house is still overwhelmingly werewolf. There’s really no better place for him to be at a time like this.”

“Yeah, I know, thanks. I really appreciate everything you’ve done for him so far. I don’t know what Mom and I would’ve done without you. And speaking of my dad, we should probably get back. I don’t need any more rumors spreading.” I rolled my eyes and started toward the door, but Greyson grabbed my hand, stopping me. I whirled to face him, about to ask him what he wanted, but then I saw the look on his face.

He shook his head, his eyes sparkling and so fixed on me that it made me tingle. “Who said you could go?”

**Episode 1965**

ARTEMIS

“What were you doing talking to Greyson?” Rishika asked as I rejoined her near the jam-packed finger food station that Torin had set up. Lately it seemed like if I lost track of Rishika, I could always find her if I sought out the nearest food source. “You looked so intense,” she added, popping a buttered roll into her mouth.

“It wasn’t anything too serious. I just had to clear up a few things with him.”

Rishika arched an eyebrow. “Like what?”

I took a deep breath and reflected on the conversation I’d had with Greyson. Rishika was right—it had been intense, but also very necessary. “Well, I made it clear that Cali would do anything to make him happy—and I told him that that’s the problem. When it comes to him, and Xavier, quite frankly, Cali tends to put them before her own feelings and her own needs. I warned him that he’d better do the same for her or else he’ll have to deal with a very angry Fae bounty hunter.”

Rishika shook her head and let out a low chuckle.

“What? Is something wrong?”

“I hope not.”

*What the hell is up with her? Why is she acting so strange?*

“What do you feel about Greyson?” Rishika asked, her expression unreadable.

I shrugged. “What do you mean ‘what do I feel’? He’s been kind of a friend to me. He’s my sister’s mate…”

“Are you sure you only think of him as a friend?” She pinned me to the spot with what could only be described as an accusatory look.

There she was, being strange again. Of course he was just a friend. I thought about Greyson and how guarded he seemed sometimes, deciding to avoid taking the conversation down the road that Rishika was so hell-bent on traveling down. “He lets more of his heart show than he lets on. If he didn’t have his brother to cope with, he’d be a lot easier to deal with.”

“I think he can be pretty revealing,” Rishika said, taking a sip from her glass of wine. She let her eyes drag over the party, like she was waiting to see what response I had to that little tidbit.

Sensing that Rishika’s vibe was only getting weirder, I decided to face it head-on and get to the bottom of it before it festered into something that caused a problem for us down the line. “Okay, Rishika, enough with the loaded comments. What’s going on?”

Rishika hesitated, as if taking a moment to decide something. “I’m not sure that I should even bring it up, but you and Greyson were kissing during the battle with Letifer.”

*She has to be joking.* I looked at her closely. She wasn’t joking, in fact, she seemed really uncomfortable. “What? When?”

“You don’t remember?”

“Uh, no. I don’t remember. Maybe *you* don’t remember, but I was possessed. I wasn’t in my right mind. You know that. The only kiss I remember is when I first came out of the Fae world with Greyson. He took me to a whiskey bar in Portland, and we kissed,” I said with a shrug. “It’s not something I ever think about, and it was before I met you.”

I’d heard mutterings about what had happened between Greyson and me during Letifer’s reign of terror, but no one had bothered to confront me with the details of that strange night for obvious reasons—not even Cali had made a big deal out of it, and it was her mate I’d kissed, apparently.

“Don’t get me wrong, Artemis. I’m not jealous—I know that you wouldn’t cheat on me—but it still really bothered me, seeing the two of you kiss like that. I can’t get the image out of my head.”

“Again, Greyson and I were possessed by Letifer. We didn’t know what we were doing. But I like that it bothered you so much—there’s comfort in knowing that.” I smiled and gave Rishika a playful shove. “Would you say you were a little jealous?”

Rishika pulled me into a kiss and then broke away, a smile playing across her lips. “Maybe just a little.”

Suddenly, I wished that we were inside, in our room. I started to think about all the things that I’d like to do to her… and all the things that I wanted her to do to me. Rishika pulled me close, and we gazed into each other’s eyes, and I knew then that she was thinking what I was thinking—that some alone time sounded great right about now. But our moment was interrupted by Torin, who burst out onto the deck with a huge smile on his face.

“Attention all!” Torin yelled, smacking the bottom of a pot with a wooden spoon. “Attention! It’s time; the turkeys are ready to be carved!”

A wave of cheers whipped through the crowd.

Our heated moment forgotten, Rishika slapped her hands together and licked her lips, her eyes shining with excitement.

“I’ve been hearing about these damn turkeys for so long, I can’t wait to taste them,” she said.

We joined the others in migrating over to the long tables that had been set up in the center of the yard. Torin and Tom had outdone themselves. The centers of the tables were decorated with tall white candles in gold candelabras. There were real, multi-colored leaves sprinkled across the thick white linen tablecloths, and each of the chairs had papier-mâché cornucopias hanging from the seat backs. I felt like we were in some sort of Thanksgiving wonderland.

I smiled as I looked over at Rishika. “I’m excited, too. I’ve never had a Thanksgiving dinner before. We obviously don’t have it in the Fae world, and even the holidays we do have, I never had anyone to celebrate them with in the first place.”

There definitely hadn’t been much time for such things when I was working as a bounty hunter for the Kollector. Back then, I’d barely known what day of the week it was, let alone what holiday.

Rishika squeezed my hand. “You do now. This is going to be a Thanksgiving that you will never forget, I promise.”

Rishika had a sly smile on her face that made my cheeks catch fire, and I couldn’t help but smile to myself as I anticipated what her words might mean.

As we found our place cards written in Torin’s freakishly neat handwriting and took a seat, I spotted Greyson talking to Mrs. Smith. He was laughing about something and looking at his mother with a loving glint in his eye.

“Handsome guy,” Rishika said, gesturing toward him. “I can see why Cali is attracted to him.”

“I suspect that everyone can see why I’m attracted to you, too. I’m not hiding it,” I said, giving Rishika a sly smile of my own.

Torin and Tom emerged from the house with two giant turkeys steaming on fancy sterling silver platters, the big, golden-brown birds surrounded by delicious-looking potatoes, tomatoes, celery—the works. Both men beamed as they placed the platters on the tables with a flourish.

“We present, the turkeys!” Tom announced.

I was impressed. The turkeys looked delicious, and I was getting hungrier by the second. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Ava entering the woods with a bag hanging from her shoulder. *Weird. What’s that girl up to now?* Xavier came out of the house a few moments after Ava, and as he approached the table, I could tell from the set of his jaw that he was flustered. Angry, even. *Interesting.* Maybe I needed to have a talk with him, too.

“If I could have everyone’s attention!” Tom said, taking his turn to bang the bottom of a pot with a spoon. I couldn’t blame him; this was a pretty raucous group, and the talking and murmurs of excitement had reached a fever pitch the moment they’d brought out the turkeys. “First and foremost, happy Thanksgiving!” There were some whoops and hollers. “I want to thank Torin for being the best cooking partner a guy could ask for!” More whoops and hollers, accompanied by claps for Torin. “Thanksgiving is an incredibly special day. It’s a time for friends and family alike to come together and break bread. It’s a time to sit back and reflect on all the good things in your life.” He took a moment to look at me, Cali, and our mother with so much love that I was filled with an overwhelming sense of belonging. “Especially since it’s so easy, sometimes, to only think about all the bad stuff.”

“Ain’t that the truth!” Jay yelled out as Lola shushed him.

“But tonight, we’re going to enjoy each other’s company and take a moment to be thankful for great friends, great family, and great food.”

“Pretty much, he’s saying that tonight, we feast!” Torin added.

Everyone erupted into joyous applause.

“Okay!” Tom said, clapping his hands loudly to get everyone to calm down. “I’m going to carve one of the turkeys, but which one of the Alphas is going to carve the other?” He held up a massive knife.

I tensed up, looking from Xavier to Greyson. Had he really just said that? Did he not understand the ferocious competition between Xavier and Greyson?

Both Greyson and Xavier stepped up to Tom’s side. “I’ll do it,” they said in unison.

There was an uneasy, awkward silence as everyone stared at the two Alphas facing off over the turkey, the large knife hovering between them.

I looked back and forth between them, knowing that things could get out of hand fast.

*Oh no. Are they going to fight again?*

**Episode 1966**

My mouth dropped open as I watched my two mates facing off over a turkey. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. Moments ago, I’d been kissing Greyson right after he’d apologized for fighting with Xavier—and at least that fight had been about me. This fight was about a fucking turkey! I thought about how Greyson had teased me about not letting me go after he’d apologized. I’d felt weak in the knees as a wave of hot burning desire for him had built up inside me almost instantly—but thankfully, he’d just been teasing. It wasn’t like we could’ve snuck away without anyone noticing on a day like this. Besides, I’d learned my lesson about how fast news travelled around the pack house, and I’d had enough scandals for the day without someone mentioning that they’d seen me and Greyson sneaking off together.

As everyone watched the tension building between the two men, I wondered if I should jump between them like I had before—or if I should let them have it out and finish each other off and be done with it. *Of course that’s not an option!* I couldn’t let them hurt each other. I loved them both, but this was all getting more than a little ridiculous.

Xavier gestured to the turkey. “You’re the older brother, Greyson, so you should do it.”

My mouth dropped even wider, and I closed it quickly before anyone could notice. Actually, I wasn’t sure who was more shocked: me or Greyson.

Greyson studied Xavier for a moment before taking the knife from Tom’s hand.“I would be honored to carve alongside you, Tom.”

I shifted my attention to Xavier, who smiled at me and mind linked, *I meant what I said. I’m not going to pick any more fights with Greyson. Also, Torin said he’d kill me if I did, and we know how vicious he can be.*

I laughed, trying to picture Torin intimidating Xavier. I couldn’t.

Greyson paused with the knife hovering inches from the turkey’s breast. “Um… I don’t actually know how to carve a turkey.”

I burst out laughing, drawing attention from some of the others, who all seemed relieved that they hadn’t been forced to watch a turkey battle between the two Alphas.

*You’re so sweet*,I mind linked back to Xavier.

Despite his uncertainty, Greyson concentrated and began carving as my dad did the same right beside him. Greyson looked over at my dad’s carving technique from time to time to get reassurance that he wasn’t making a mess of things. In the end, he was a natural, just like I thought he’d be. With speed and grace, he produced stacks of tender, juicy turkey slices that he put on plates that were then passed around the table to a chorus of *ooh*s and *ahh*s.

Once everyone had their turkey and their sides, Torin sat down and raised his glass. “I’d like to propose a toast,” he said, looking up at the fast darkening sky. “To Astrid!”

“To Astrid!” I repeated, accompanied by the cheerful voices of everyone at the tables. I raised my glass higher. “I’d like to propose another toast!” I turned and held my glass out toward my dad and Torin, who were sitting right across from me. “Cheers to the two chefs who made all of this possible!”

“Here, here!” Everyone cheered as glasses clinked around the table.

The chatter of the table died down as everyone dug into their plates, only to start up again as we all commented on how tasty everything was. I looked around, my heart warming at the sight of everyone getting along so well. We’d had a rough time of it lately, and the pack deserved moments like this. I thought back to Big Mac and Mrs. Smith’s engagement party last night, which had been another amazing opportunity for the pack to bond and have a little fun. I couldn’t help but remember other things about the night, like how Greyson and I had snuck away to the pantry to enjoy a little free time of our own. I snuck a glance at Greyson as my pulse quickened, and we locked eyes for an electric moment before I averted my gaze, afraid that people would see us gazing at each other like two animals in heat.

“Football, anyone?” Jay asked much later, pushing his chair back from the table and standing up. He already had a football spinning in the middle of his large palm. “Isn’t this a T-Day tradition?”

“Hell yeah it is!” Rishika called out, nudging Artemis’s shoulder. “Babe, you should totally play. Show these folks what you’re made of. You’ll be able to hit opponents, and tackle them, and practically beat them into submission. It’ll be loads of fun, and right up your alley.”

Artemis nodded briskly, still chewing the last of her food as she followed a group out into the yard to get a game started.

Even Jacqueline, who I still hadn’t gotten the chance to confront, seemed excited about joining in on the festivities.

*I’ll let you slide for now*,I thought as I watched her sashay over to join the others. I wondered if she’d ever played football in her life, or if she just wanted to be where most of the guys were.

I saw my mom cast a loving glance at my dad, and again I was reminded of how lucky I was to have parents that really loved and cared for each other.

Torin was busy talking pies with Ravi, Sage, and Zainab.

“I can’t decide,” Zainab said. “They all taste damn good to me—apple, pumpkin, pecan, or mince. They all shine in their own way; it’s so hard to decide between them.”

“Well, we have all four here tonight—let’s try them and decide, once and for all,” Ravi said with a mischievous glint in his eye.

I turned away from the riveting pie discussion just as Xavier came walking over to join me.

“Thank you,” I said to him as he took a seat beside me. “What you did, letting Greyson carve the turkey without making a big deal about it… It was surprisingly unselfish of you.”

Xavier nodded, a small smile playing across his lips. “Good to know I can still surprise you. And I’d do it all over again if it made you happy. In fact, I’d like to make you happy right now.”

I blushed at the suggestion of his words. “Xavier! Not here,” I said, even though my body was already responding.

Xavier pulled at my hand. “Just for a minute,” he urged. “Have you ever made out in a shed?”

I stopped and gave him a look. “No, and I’m not going to make out with you right now, in a shed, or anywhere else for that matter.”

Of course, there was nothing I wanted more, but I couldn’t admit it. Xavier had apparently seen straight through my protests, because he was still dragging me away with a smirk on his face. He pulled me around to the side of the shed where no one could see us.

“Xavier! Someone might catch us.”

“What, Cali? You afraid of the big bad wolf?” Xavier teased, pressing me up against the wall. “Don’t worry, I don’t need to take you into the shed. I can get what I want right here.”

He kissed me hard, and I moaned against the press of his warm lips. For a moment, I forgot everything—where we were, the turkey fight, the fake pregnancy scare fight, everything. There was only me and Xavier, and the feel of his warm, taut body against mine. I arched against him so that he could feel the press of my breasts against his chest, and then I pulled back slightly, knowing that things between us could heat up fast.

Xavier pulled back too, his eyes hazy as he plied me with a searching look. “Cali, this is the best Thanksgiving I’ve ever had, because I have you by my side.”

“Really?”

“Really. Family’s great and all, but it’s not like I can do *this* with Colton,” Xavier said, giving my ass a gentle squeeze.

“Ugh, come on, Xavier,” I said, giving him a playful swat on the arm.

Xavier smiled and covered my lips with his again, increasing the heat of the kiss quickly. He nipped gently at my lip, pressing his body against mine so that I could feel how his own body was responding to me. I let my hands drop to my sides in invitation for him to take the lead, and he did, sliding his hands under my ass and lifting me up so that my legs wrapped around his waist. His tongue invaded my mouth in a way the suggested all the things he actually wanted to do to me, and as the heat between us continued to build, I wondered if a kiss would be enough.

I placed my hands on his face as I opened my mouth wider, surrendering to him. He countered by nearly devouring me.

“God, Cali, you drive me so crazy,” he breathed against my lips, grazing his mouth against mine for a second before snaking his warm tongue into my mouth once more.

I moaned as waves of heat built inside me, starting in the pit of my stomach and spreading out to every inch of my body.

“Do you think we’re being too loud?” I asked, suddenly horrified by the idea of someone walking up on us—especially if that someone was Greyson.

“No, but let’s be careful all the same,” Xavier grunted, barely breaking our kiss.

Just as Xavier’s lips migrated to the sensitive curve of my neck, a loud cracking sound echoed around us, following by a loud crash and a flurry of commotion back at the party. Xavier and I broke apart.

“What the hell was that? Is that my dad?”

“I don’t know, come on!” Xavier said, grabbing my hand.

We raced back to the party, and I was shocked by the sight of Lola, lying on the ground, her face twisted up in pain.

**Episode 1967**

LOLA

I was doing my best to enjoy the festivities, but I was having a hard time focusing. I couldn’t quite put my finger on what was wrong, but something didn’t feel right. I started to fidget as I grew restless. I shook my head, trying to gain a bit of clarity, trying to be present.

*Calm down, Lola. You’re okay.*

I concentrated on the turkey in my mouth. It tasted good and all, and it was nice to be here with my friends, but something still felt… off. It was almost like I felt disconnected, removed, like I was meant to be somewhere else. I looked at Jay, who was busy being Jay. He’d stashed his football under his seat and had barely finished his food before trying to get a game going. Normally, I would’ve been first to join—there was nothing like cracking a few skulls over the pigskin—but for some reason I wasn’t feeling it today.

*Maybe I’m sick?* I swallowed a hunk of turkey, realizing that it had taken me way too long to eat it. It tasted fine, as flavorful and juicy as it looked, but I couldn’t enjoy it. I felt feverish, and my mouth was so dry that the turkey scraped my throat on the way down. I took a large gulp of water, but it didn’t make any difference. No matter how much water or cider I drank, it was like I couldn’t get hydrated.

I turned to Violet, interrupting the giggly, obviously flirtatious conversation she was having with Charlie. “Hey, do I look okay to you?”

Violet gave me a confused look and shrugged. “Yeah, maybe a little pale? But you *are* a vampire, so that’s normal, right?”

“Right,” I said with a little laugh. “Thanks, I just don’t feel right.”

Charlie leaned over. “Do you want me to take you inside so you can lie down?”

I shook my head. “I appreciate that, Charlie, but I’m okay. I’ll let you know if I need you, though. Oh, and FYI, I’m the reason you two are together,” I said with a wink, hoping that joking around a little might trick my body into feeling normal again. I was ready to try anything at this point.

“And because we’re mates,” Violet added.

“That, too,” I agreed.

Charlie and Violet kissed, and I turned away as the kiss grew more intense. *Ah, young love.* I leaned back in my chair, taking a few deep breaths. I looked around for Cali, but she was nowhere to be found. Neither was Xavier. *Hmm. That girl is going to get herself in trouble.* Maybe I should have bought more than one “Baby Be Sure” pregnancy test.

Not to mention that the two Alphas had nearly come to blows over a turkey of all things. We’d all waited with bated breath for them to leap at each other and start fighting on top of the cranberry sauce. There’d been a collective sigh of relief when Xavier had so graciously given the honor to his brother. But the two of them still obviously hated each other, and tensions had been higher than usual today, so who knew what Greyson would do if he caught Xavier and Cali together right now? I shook my head. I didn’t even want to think about it.

I caught a shred of the conversation that Torin and some people were having about pie. *Hmm, maybe a piece of pie would make me feel better.* I stood up from the table, feeling a little woozy, but it did feel better to stand up.

Jay came jogging over, the football tucked under his arm. “Hey, babe, aren’t you going to join us? You’re the best receiver in the entire pack house; we need you.” He stopped and leaned in close. “Are you okay?”

I forced a smile, not wanting to ruin his Thanksgiving by admitting that I felt like shit. “Yeah, super okay. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You sure?” he asked, putting a hand on the small of my back.

“What? You trying to say that I don’t look good or something?”

“Oh, no,” Jay said, backing away and holding up his hands in mock surrender. “Hell no, that’s not what I’m saying at all. You look amazing as always.” He gave me a peck on the cheek, and I leaned into it, hoping to draw some strength from him by osmosis or something. “I hope you don’t mind, but I’m going to go back and play some ball—feel free to join in later if you feel like it. I’ll keep the ball warm for you!” he said, slapping the ball between his hands. Then he kissed me again and jogged off to join the others.

Even in my current state, I couldn’t help but admire how great Jay’s body was. The night was unseasonably warm, so he’d removed his shirt (of course), and his wide, muscular back rippled as he ran. His biceps flexed deliciously as he raised the ball above his head and tossed it to Artemis. I was so lucky to be his mate, and I never, ever got tired of looking at him.

I made my way over to the pie table. My eyes took in the sight of no less than ten pies lined up one after the other, with little index cards in front of them indicating which was which. I didn’t think I’d ever seen so much pie in one place outside of a bakery.

Torin appeared at my side. “You should try the pumpkin pie—I’m especially proud of that one.” He was already grabbing a plate and getting his knife ready.

“Okay, that sounds delicious,” I said, surreptitiously bracing myself on the table as a wave of lightheadedness overtook me.

Torin cut me a huge piece and then held it out to me, but as the hunk of pie got nearer, I almost gagged. The smell was overpowering. It was way too intense—like pumpkin spice on steroids. Trying not to insult Torin, I forced myself to eat a bite.

“Mmm, Torin, this is so damn good,” I said through gritted teeth. It took everything I had not to spit the pie out.

“Oh yay! It’s the nutmeg! It gives it that extra zing!” Torin said, beaming.

“I—I have to go over there,” I said, scuttling away.

When I was out of Torin’s line of sight, I spat the pie out into the trash. I stayed there for a moment, leaning over the trash can as nausea circled in my stomach. For a second I thought I might puke, but thankfully I didn’t. I straightened and looked around, hoping that no one had seen me. I didn’t want to kill the vibe of the party with whatever was going on with me.

Once I was convinced that no one had seen, I returned to the table, where people were lingering over their second and third helpings. I sat down and pressed my hands over my ears. *Why is everyone being so fucking loud?* This was my first pack house Thanksgiving, and I wasn’t sure how it usually was, but whenever I celebrated with my dads, it was a much quieter affair. Was this normal? It didn’t feel normal. I felt like everyone was screaming at the top of their lungs and laughing like hyenas.

Another loud laugh broke out over the table, and I spotted Greyson laughing as he chatted with Mrs. Smith and Big Mac, who was almost smiling. Almost. That was impressive in and of itself. I knew that Mrs. Smith had to make Big Mac really happy, and I was glad for that. Big Mac was a little rough around the edges—and a witch—but she’d come through for the pack more times than I could count, even though she always grumbled about it in the process. She deserved happiness just like everyone else, and Mrs. Smith deserved that happiness, too.

I took another deep, cleansing breath and looked around again. Still no sign of Cali. I got up from the table, deciding to go look for her. Sure, she might be sucking face with Xavier, but I needed her.

Just then, there was a loud cracking sound, and a shock of excruciating pain radiated throughout my entire body. My knees gave out, and I crashed against the table, sending plates and glasses flying.

“Lola! Lola, are you okay?”

I could hear Jay’s voice calling out for me, but it was going in and out. My vision blurred, and everything went dark around the edges as I heard a howl in the distance. I rolled over onto my back as the pain got so bad that I felt like I could pass out at any moment.

*What’s happening to me? Am I the first victim of an attack? No!* I couldn’t believe my luck. Jay and I had just shared such a life-affirming moment today, I couldn’t die now! Vampires were supposed to be immortal!

Then everything went dark.

Seconds later, I opened my eyes to the sight of a dark, forested area. I wasn’t in pain anymore, and I felt normal again for the first time since we’d all sat down to dinner. I looked around, confused and frightened. *Where am I? How the hell did I get here?* I turned at the sound of a twig snapping and came face-to-face with a wolf I recognized. I gasped.

It was *my* wolf!

**Episode 1968**

Lola was writhing on the ground like a beached squid, and I screeched inside my head.

*Oh my god! WHAT IS IT THIS TIME?*

“What’s happening?” I asked Jay after rushing over to them, panicked.

Jay was shushing Lola as she groaned, stroking her hair. “Where does it hurt? What’s going on?”

Lola, her eyes closed, her body shaking, mumbled something incoherent about… wolves?

*For god’s sake, how does that make any sense?*

“Do you have any idea what’s going on?” I asked Jay. He looked pale and worried.

“No.” His tone was sharp. He picked Lola up in a swift movement, his expression harsh. “I need to bring her inside, keep her warm. We have to take care of her.”

He strode into the house as quickly as possible.

*Why did this have to happen right now?* I wondered, raking my hands through my hair. *How much more drama can we all fucking take? Lola needs—*

Torin.

*Where’s Torin?*

I looked around, spotting him serving food. I raced over and grabbed his arm, hard enough that he almost dropped the bowl he was holding—it was full of cranberry sauce. Now *that* would’ve been a massacre if it had gotten on his clothes.

“Be careful!” Torin huffed, taking a step away from me. Being strict was unlike him, but I knew that he considered food a serious business.

“Lola is sick,” I said. “You have to do something!”

Torin gasped, his annoyance instantly forgotten.

“Healer to the rescue!” he said, and followed me inside. We joined Jay and Lola in the living room, wading through Big Mac, Kira, Greyson, and Xavier.

“Make room for Torin!” I called, shoving people out of my way. “He’s gotta help her!”

“Are you sure healing is what she needs?” Jay asked me, looking queasy as Torin hovered over Lola. She lay on the couch, still shivering, eyes closed.

I flailed. “I don’t know! But we have to do *something*!”

Torin got down on his knees next to Lola, concentrating. A sparkling blue glow escaped his fingertips. His power seeped through the air and into Lola’s body.

But nothing was happening.

*Nothing was happening!*

“It’s not working,” Torin said, both alarmed and perplexed as he looked between Jay and me.

“Baby, talk to me, what’s happening to you?” Jay choked out, stroking Lola’s face, squeezing her shoulder before turning to Big Mac. He was clearly starting to get desperate. “What’s *wrong* with her?”

Big Mac stood over Lola after Torin took a step back, her expression dark. I wrapped my arms around my torso, a sudden shiver running through me. At least Greyson’s touch on my shoulder made me feel steadier.

“Did you see what happened to Lola? How did she end up like this?” he asked me gently, his eyes searching.

“I heard a loud crash,” I started, obviously without mentioning that it had happened when I was kissing Xavier, “and then I saw Lola fall to the ground.”

Greyson scowled, eyeing Lola with a seriousness that didn’t give me much hope.

“You don’t know what’s going on either…” I trailed off, the realization making me ache.

Greyson shook his head, breathing shakily. He squeezed my hand. “No. But both Torin and Big Mac are here. They should be able to help her.”

Greyson’s words were meant to be encouraging, but they didn’t work on me. Minutes passed, and Lola wasn’t getting better. Torin was vibrating with worry, and even Big Mac seemed weirded out.

“This looks like poisoning… She’s got the symptoms of a fever dream, without the fever.” She touched Lola’s forehead. My friend’s eyes were still shut tight, and she was thrashing, as though she was having a seizure. “I have no idea what’s going on.”

I pressed my lips together. “Could this have anything to do with her being a vampire?” I looked around at Greyson and Kira, and then as more worried pack members entered the living room, I added, “Maybe we should get a vampire expert, like Emmett from Tottenville?” I stared at Xavier. “Or should we try to call Mikah or something?”

Xavier nodded and was opening his mouth to reply when Big Mac waved a hand. She spoke up, her voice loud. Dictating.

“Nobody do anything before I give you the go-ahead.” She looked around, barking, “Everyone, get out! Torin and I need space to work!”

The pack members backed out of the room, and I followed, not wanting to cross Big Mac right now. I wouldn’t be helping the situation by hovering and freaking out. My chest was throbbing with worry, and I made a beeline for Xavier.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Are you seriously asking me that?”

He squeezed my shoulder, shaking his head. “I know. Lola’s your ride or die. And Jay…” He glanced over at his best friend, taking a deep breath. “I hate this.”

“We’ll figure everything out, Cali,” Greyson said from behind me. I turned to face him, and he walked up to Xavier and me. He seemed and sounded certain, but worrying wasn’t just a switch that I could turn off.

*I can literally HEAR her squirming and moaning from the next room!*

“Don’t mind me,” I told Greyson and Xavier, leaning against the wall. “I’ll just sit here in the hallway and try not to tear my hair out.”

Xavier scoffed, and Greyson pressed his lips together, the two of them exchanging a look of communication. Christ, *why* did they only get along when there was a serious life-or-death pack crisis? Was this how it was going to be forever?

I suddenly felt claustrophobic.

A loud animal noise came from the living room, startling me.

*Lola!*

“On second thought, I can’t just stand here!” I said, straightening. “I need to be with Lola, she needs me—”

“Cali—” Xavier started, but I cut him off.

“I have to be there for her! And I can’t be there if I’m out here!”

“But—”

I ignored Greyson, breaking out from behind both him and his brother and returning to the living room. Lola’s moans sounded more like growls now. I gasped when I saw Jay trying to hold her down. Her eyes were open now and red, her fangs were out, and she looked like the devil.

*And like she’s trying to EAT Jay!*

“Everyone, stand back!” Big Mac ordered, and both Torin and I took several steps back. I could still remember when my best friend had fanged me, and I didn’t need a repeat.

“Maybe she’s hungry?” I asked unhelpfully. “I could go find some blood for her.”

Lola’s red eyes were fixed on me. She snarled. “*Blood!*”

Both Torin and I flinched back. *Oh my god, she’s terrifying!*

Okay, maybe she did need blood. But the thought of hunting down another deer was too much for me. They were so cute—I couldn’t fucking keep killing Bambi! Maybe I could let Lola have a sip of me? Just to tide her over until we figured this out?

Lola’s hiss changed my mind real quick.

“Everyone get away from me before I latch onto your necks!” she snarled.

“You’d better listen to her,” Big Mac snapped, pinning her ankles down as Jay grabbed Lola’s arms. She seemed so strong, heaving in his powerful grip. I really wanted to help, but the moment I took a step forward, Lola gnashed her teeth at me, and I shrieked.

I had barely managed to finish my thought when Lola snapped at Jay and broke free from his grip.

“Lola, no!” he shouted after she threw him off.

I was horrified, waiting for her to attack someone, but instead she moved like lighting out the door and into the front yard.

“Where is she *going*?” I asked nobody in particular, shocked. My surprise wore off quickly, and I chased after her, brushing past a stunned Greyson and Xavier.

“Lola, wait! Stop!” I shouted behind her, getting out in the front lawn. “If you need to attack someone, attack me! That’s what best friends are for!”

With a snarl, Lola stopped moving.

She slowly turned to face me, her expression twisted, her red eyes full of pure bloodlust.

*Oh. NO.* I swallowed roughly. *That might have been a mistake!*

She hissed at me like a cat and started to move toward me slowly, as if something—hopefully our friendship—was holding her back from eating me.

“Cali!” Greyson shouted from behind me. “What are you *doing*?”

“Come back here!” Xavier screamed.

“She might run off!” I called over my shoulder, my eyes still fixed on a predatory Lola, who was slowly closing the ten feet between us. “She could hurt someone—or herself!”

Lola snapped her teeth at me. There were only five feet between us now, and I just…

*I’m sorry, friend…*

Raising my hands, I felt the energy course through me and out, my body vibrating as I blasted Lola with Fae magic. Lola jolted back, staggering, as if shocked back into the present. Her fangs were still out, but her eyes were more focused now.

“Cali…” she croaked.

“Lola?” I called. “Can you hear me?”

*Did the blast make Lola come back to her senses?*

I ran toward her, hopeful, but then Lola’s eyes changed once more.

No longer red, no longer focused.

They closed as she winced in pain, her mouth opening wide with a roar, and then…

*CRACK!*

My best friend bent over, her limbs quivering, her spine tangled up as she changed and became…

A wolf.

*OH MY GOD!*

Lola’s wolf was… back?

*What the hell is going on?!*

I watched, mouth agape, as Lola shifted into her wolf, only it looked bigger and badder than before. She howled at me, her gleaming eyes sending a chill down my spine.

“Cali!” Xavier grabbed me by the arm, pulling me back. “Get away from her!”

I was panting, fighting to wrap my head around this.

Had the spell we’d done with Big Mac on Halloween really worked?

Was Lola both a vampire *and* a werewolf?

**Episode 1969**

LOLA

The pain was gone. All I felt now was rejuvenated.

*My wolf is back!*

My mind was flooded with memories of the time I’d spent as a hybrid, struggling to shift because I was half werewolf, half human. All the potions I’d taken, how Jay lost his eye because I hadn’t been able to shift back… And finally, the werewolf inversion spell.

It was meant to permanently reunite me with my wolf, and I’d thought that it hadn’t worked, but apparently, IT HAD! Overwhelmed, I sniffed the air, rolled on the grass, ran around in circles. I hadn’t even realized how much I’d missed my wolf until now. Being a vampire had its perks, but it felt *nothing* like this.

“Lola!” Cali called. “Are you okay?”

“I think she’s got the zoomies,” Big Mac said dryly.

I howled up at the rising moon. This was why the shift had come tonight. The full moon was here, and so was my wolf. I felt like I could cry with joy, and I did just that before shifting back to human. It was like breathing—it’d never felt like this before.

“I’ve never felt better!” I shouted, running to Cali with open arms.

She gaped at me, eyes wide. “Well, okay, that’s—umph!”

I wrapped her up in a tight hug that she returned, laughing. “I’m a wolf!”

“I’m so happy for you,” Cali whispered in my ear, sniffling.

We embraced tightly, and I took in my friend’s familiar, comforting scent. I sighed contently before the sound of the Fae blood rushing through her veins entered my ears. *Crap*. Those had to be leftover vampire feelings—I’d felt a huge hunger for blood earlier, but now that I had my wolf back, it would fade.

*Right?*

The tips of my fangs had different ideas.

“Yeah, you’d better be careful,” I said gruffly, pushing Cali back.

“Still want to eat me?” she asked sheepishly.

“Maybe,” I admitted, just as Jay rushed over. He was grinning from ear to ear, looking gorgeous under the moonlight. My mate.

“Welcome back, beautiful.” He stared into my eyes, stroking my cheeks. I looked up at him, feeling like weeping. This man never gave up on me. Ever. When he leaned down to brush his lips over mine, my heart fluttered wildly.

“Can you control the shift?” he asked against my mouth.

I grinned, taking a few steps back. I’d once been told that shifting could kill me, but that didn’t feel possible right now. I didn’t know why, but it was the truth. Like something had fallen into place and I was safe.

“Watch this,” I said.

And then I shifted back to my wolf form and howled at the moon again.

Jay pressed his lips together, hiding a smile. “Don’t forget it could be risky…”

I shook my head and leapt at him, my tail brushing around his torso.

“And now she’s being flirty,” Big Mac said in that same dry tone, and Cali burst out laughing.

Elated, I shifted back to human, looking at Jay, smiling from ear to ear before I ran to him again, gripping him by the arms. “See? I’m fine!”

Jay stared at me. His eyes—eye—was glistening. “You are. You’re fine.”

“Thanks to me,” Big Mac butted in. “The werewolf inversion spell that we did on Halloween worked. The full moon seems to have finally brought about its completion.”

“That’s what I thought! Thanks so much!” I exclaimed and ran up to the witch, grabbing her and hugging her as tightly as I’d hugged Cali. She stiffened like a board, but I didn’t care.

This was the happiest day of my life!

“And we’re sure there won’t be any side effects?” Jay asked from behind me.

“The spell was intended to help Lola change without any of the problems she had before, so she should be able to shift freely without ever risking her life,” Big Mac replied.

I let her go, turning to face Jay. “I told you there’s nothing to worry about!”

Jay let out a shaky laugh, and I ran into his arms, wrapping myself around him as he kissed the top of my head. I felt so safe with him that I felt like crying with relief. The rest of the pack started to roll out into the yard, clapping for me and congratulating me.

This was the most perfect moment I’d experienced in a while.

“What about the fangs and stuff? Is Lola still a vampire?” Cali asked Big Mac.

The witch shrugged. “I suppose. There are a lot of questions here. For example, I’m still not sure why Lola was able to become a vampire in the first place.”

I felt Jay breathing evenly against my temple, his grip around me getting tighter. “What does that mean?” he asked Big Mac.

She arched an eyebrow. “Just that Lola is an exception to what we thought we knew. Like I said, there are a lot of questions going on.”

I beamed up at Jay, winking. “Told you I’m special.”

He laughed again, the sound vibrating through him as he held me. He kissed my forehead, whispering, “I never doubted that.” He tucked my hair behind my ear, his voice heavy with emotion. “You’re amazing, and I love you with all my heart.”

I sniffled. “You’re gonna make me cry.”

Smiling, he leaned down, and I reached up, our lips brushing again. The jolt of electricity between us made me moan, cling onto him, until someone loudly cleared their throat.

“Excuse me?” Big Mac barked. “You are in public!”

I didn’t care that the entire pack was watching us. I grinned against Jay’s mouth, wrapping my arms around his neck—

*Wait!*

With my wolf back, I was part of the pack. Not as a vampire, but as a werewolf too. I broke the kiss, panting.

“Oh my god, I’m a werewolf and a vampire in *one*!” I declared. “I—” I paused, realization settling in. “I was about to attack my best friend with all my abilities combined,” I said, wincing. “Let me apologize to Cali real quick, and I’ll be back with you.”

“Why would you apologize?” Cali asked me a moment later. “*I* should apologize! I tried to blast you, but I didn’t really mean it. I mean, I meant it, but I didn’t know what else to do, so—”

“I get it. I’m glad you defended yourself,” I said, pressing my lips together. “And I’m glad to be back.”

“I’m glad to have you back,” Cali whispered, glancing behind me. “Go. Have fun with your mate. Celebrate!”

I wiped my eyes as I looked over at Jay, who was hanging around in the background with Xavier and a couple more pack members. “I’m really so lucky to have him.”

“I bet he feels lucky to have you, too,” Cali said.

“I want to shift and run through the woods with him!” I breathed. “I want…”

I finally realized that all my excitement was actually a little selfish. Jay still didn’t have his wolf.

*Shit!*

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When Jay and I were alone, walking through the woods and holding hands just to be romantic, I took a deep breath and ripped off the Band-Aid. “I just wanted to say… I’m sorry for, like, frolicking around earlier after I shifted.”

Jay raised an eyebrow. “Seriously?”

“I shouldn’t be so selfish. I know how much you miss your wolf,” I said, cringing.

Jay looked away, scratching his cheek.

“What?” I asked.

“I actually… I have something I’ve been keeping from you,” he said awkwardly. “I didn’t know how to tell you before.”

I gulped, nervous now. “What is it? Did I do something freaky while I was under the vampire haze?”

Jay shook his head. “That’s not it.”

I paused, standing in front of him. “What is it, then?”

He took a few steps away from me. “Best to show you.”

Jay’s whole form shivered and blew up, skin turning into fur, muscles rippling, nose turning into a snout…

“You got your wolf back!” I was full of delight, ready to start the fucking zoomies all over again. Jay did the same, howling at the full moon before he bounded off. I laughed, shifting myself and gleefully chasing after Jay.

*Why didn’t you tell me?!*

*It just happened—my wolf felt yours come back.*

This was exactly what my heart desired, and I’d never thought I would get it again.

But now, here we were.

Jay jumped over a bunch of bushes, and I followed, but when I looked around, he was gone. His scent was all over, so he was here, hiding. Having fun.

*Where are you?* I mind linked in a sing-song voice.

All of a sudden, my mate leapt out from behind a massive rock and crashed into me. I yelped, rolling on the ground with him as we yipped and whined and play-fought, our wolves elated to be together. When our eyes locked, we shifted back to human, lying together on the ground.

“I missed this so much,” he whispered, tucking my hair behind my ear.

“Me too,” I said. “How did it all happen?”

“I got my wolf back this morning, I have no idea why,” he said.

“Why didn’t you tell me straight away?” I asked.

“I guess… I didn’t want to upset you. I knew how much you were missing your wolf.” His eyes flickered on my mouth, his gaze playful. “But now that we both have our wolves back…”

“We should celebrate,” I said, grinning before pulling him in for a hard kiss.

We molded together, our movements hectic, my hands grabbing onto him to pull him on top, to feel my mate and this closeness between us. He reached between my legs, found me so ready for him—and he was ready too, hard and good to go. A kiss was all it took to set us on fire, to lead us to this moment where he slid and moved inside me, hard and fast, the sounds we made pulsating through our bodies, both so relieved to have each other.

To be together.

To be so in love and alive while our wolves danced around us.

He held me close afterward, his perfect scent engulfing me. I felt at peace, so loved… But then suddenly, a sharp thought entered my mind: Big Mac’s serious tone when she’d said that there were still so many questions about me. I needed to continue that conversation ASAP.

*Like, what is* that *supposed to mean?*

Could there… Could there be complications because I was a hybrid?

**Episode 1970**

I couldn’t believe Lola was back. And she’d gotten everything she wanted!

“Why are you crying?” Xavier asked, nuzzling my temple.

“Happy tears,” I said, wiping my cheeks quickly. “I’m so glad for Lola—this was the best outcome she could have hoped for.”

“True,” he murmured. “This is good for the pack, too. It’s one less thing to worry about, and we have a new strong player.”

I looked up at him. “And did you see how I blasted her? I can totally defend myself!”

He arched an eyebrow. “I thought you felt bad about that.”

“I do, but still,” I said, making jazz hands. “I’ve got power and stuff!”

He snorted, brushing me off. He always brushed off the idea that I could protect myself, and it annoyed me. But it was hard to be mad at him when he leaned in and brushed his nose over mine. “I’ll go get food—do you want some?”

“Thank you, but I’m good right now.”

“You always say that and then you steal mine,” Xavier grumbled before heading over to the table. I snickered, watching him as he filled his plate.

I looked around, then—everyone was in such a good mood, having a good time. Even Greyson seemed fine as he talked with Mrs. Smith. This was a moment of peace, and it might’ve been real for Lola, but I couldn’t help but think it was fleeting for me.

I was happy for my best friend, of course, but I had to wonder: when would *I* settle the hell down? Jay and Lola both had their wolves back—Xavier had told me about Jay’s—and they were happy together. But I was still stuck in the *due destini* curse, and I was in love with two headstrong Alphas. I had hoped that they would at least co-Alpha, but I wasn’t sure if that was going to work out—I was starting to think that it had been ridiculous of me to EVER think it would work out. Oh, and while I was driving down the self-pity road, I needed to mention that my loving father was about to become a werewolf.

*Ta-da! Fucking spectacular!*

All in all, yes, I was glad for Lola, but I was still stuck while she was thriving. And then a thought hit me.

*If Lola can be a hybrid werewolf-vampire, then why can’t I be a hybrid human-Fae-werewolf?*

It sounded like an awesome idea! Then, there would be no argument about me being an important member of the pack. My annoying mates would no longer think that I needed to be constantly coddled and protected. They’d let me do all the stuff that was okay for werewolves!

*And then there’s the question of being a Luna…*

There were too many questions for which I had no immediate answer, and I hated that. I was frowning and brooding when I heard Greyson’s voice in my ear, interrupting my thoughts.

“What are you thinking about?”

I flinched, turning to face him. He looked as regal as ever, gazing down at me with a soft smile. His eyes were intense, and I lost my train of thought.

“I… well, hi,” I said awkwardly, squeaking a little, like a fucking dork.

He chuckled, shaking his head. “Hi, love.” He stroked my cheek, and my heart was pounding. “You looked lost in thought there. What’s going on?”

I nodded, refocusing on my existential crisis instead of Greyson and all his swagger. “Right. I was just thinking about how great this is for Lola.”

Greyson gave me a look, taking a step closer. “And for you?”

I half-smiled. “I’m happy for my friend.”

“And?” He nudged me. There was no point in hiding it—he knew me too well, that handsome rascal.

I huffed. “Fine. I’m…” I fiddled with my hands. “I guess I’m a little jealous.”

Greyson arched his eyebrows in surprise. “Why? Both Jay and Lola have been through hell—they really deserve a break. They’re our friends, so we should be—”

“Of course I’m happy for them, I’m not trying to say anything against them,” I said, a little frustrated. I looked away, down at my shifting feet.

Greyson moved closer to me, his warmth always welcome. He lifted my chin, made me look up at him. “Love, what is it? You know you can tell me anything.”

I stared into Greyson’s silver eyes and knew it was true. It *did* feel like I could tell him anything. He’d listen and not throw a tantrum and would always respect whatever came out of my mouth, even if he disagreed with it.

I blurted, “Would you love me more if I were a wolf?”

Greyson looked a little surprised, but then he smiled. “Of course not.” Then he added, “I would love you yes, but not *more*. I love you as you are now, Cali.”

I eyed him suspiciously. “Are you being honest right now? Because I’m not a wolf, I’m a Fae. And if it weren’t for the *due destini*, would you even look at me?”

He chuckled incredulously. “What are you saying?”

“It’s like—” I waved between us, a little frustrated now. “We’re mates! We’re basically forced to be together, no free will, it’s all fate. Would we even be together if it weren’t for the curse?”

Greyson absorbed my words. Slowly, he rested his hands on my shoulders as he stared deep into my eyes. “Cali, it doesn’t matter what you are—Fae, wolf, human, even if you were a leprechaun—”

“I’d make a great leprechaun. I actually look awesome in green.”

“You look great in everything, and in nothing,” he said, looking deep into my eyes, “and it would be impossible for me to love you any more than I already do.”

My knees went weak.

“As for *due destini* and us being mates,” he continued, “I believe that even without that bond, we would come together.” He brushed his thumb over my cheek. “I’ve never doubted that, and I hope you don’t either.”

I slid closer, taking in his clean scent as I wrapped my arms around his torso. “I don’t. Never,” I said quietly. “I know you feel this way, but it still feels good to hear you say it.”

He kissed the top of my head, nuzzling my forehead. “I don’t want you to stress over anything.”

I paused.

*But there are so many things to stress about!* I thought. And then I said, “Do you think I could survive a Luna ceremony? Since I’m Fae and all?”

The question made Greyson flinch back. “I think you should slow down.”

I stared at him. “Why?”

“Why are you thinking about that?” Greyson asked carefully.

I took a deep breath. “If you and Xavier co-Alpha, wouldn’t you need a Luna? And wouldn’t I have to be Luna to both of you?”

Greyson fell silent. He studied my face for a moment, his jaw set, his gaze searching. He was serious when he asked, “Do you want to be Luna to both of us?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “If it weren’t for the *due destini*, I wouldn't even have to bring it up. Being Luna to only one of you would constitute a choice, and we know that could cost someone his life.”

Even saying it made my stomach clench.

Greyson paused. “So that means…”

“I’d consider becoming Luna to both of you if it would solve some of our current problems,” I said.

Greyson nodded slowly. “I get that. Though you can’t be Luna to both of us. I might not know the answer to our predicament right now, but I promise we will cross that bridge together when we get to it. Okay?”

I looked up at him, my heart racing at the sight of his expression. He seemed so in love, so devoted, that I couldn’t help but think how lucky I was to have him, despite everything.

I could tell he wanted to kiss me.

*I want him to kiss me*...

I really wanted it, so much so that my lips tingled at the thought. But Xavier was probably watching us, and I didn’t want to stir up more trouble between the two brothers.

*Cue awkward silence…*

I cleared my throat, reaching out to squeeze Greyson’s hand. “Thank you, Greyson.”

He swallowed, glancing at my lips. He intertwined his fingers with mine. “I’m always here when you want to talk. Even when it’s about something that’s troubling you. I love listening to your thoughts.”

*God*, this man was smooth. My cheeks were on fucking fire.

“Thanks. Right back atcha. Uh,” I said, swallowing roughly, looking around. “Maybe I should go check on my dad.”

Greyson didn’t let go of my hand, so I had to literally pull it free, albeit gently. His eyes flashed with something that made my throat dry, and I quickly turned around to save myself before I lunged at him and licked his face or something equally horny and ridiculous.

Thankfully, my parents were nearby. I smiled awkwardly, waving as I approached.

“Cali, over here!” Dad called. He pointed at all the food. “You should try the—”

He didn’t finish his sentence. His cheerful expression turned into a grimace, and he groaned, reaching for his back.

“Tom?” Mom said, gasping.

“Dad!” I called, rushing toward him.

Not even a second passed, and then—

*CRACK!*

Before my very eyes, my dad started to shift into a wolf.

**Episode 1971**

GREYSON

Tom’s bones cracked, his whole body heaving before he fell to the ground, twisting and shifting into a very large brown wolf.

This was happening, then.

I had expected it, of course, but I would have preferred to finish my dinner first. Tough times. Putting my game face on, I rushed over to stand between Tom and Cali—I’d told both of them that I would help Tom through this, and I wasn’t about to fuck it up. This was important to Cali, so it was important to me too.

Meanwhile, Tom howled at me like I was the enemy.

“Your father will be all right,” Orla was telling Cali, hugging her tight after Cali rushed to her.

“That’s my line!” Cali protested, looking panicked and indignant too.

*It’ll be okay*, I mind linked to my mate. *Tell your mother we’ll take care of your dad.*

Cali nodded, telling Orla, “Greyson will deal with this. He knows what he’s doing.”

“Thank you,” Orla whispered, looking between Cali and me. “Just, please, keep Tom calm…”

Right on cue, Tom howled at me again.

*Don’t be afraid*, I mind linked to Tom’s wolf.

He froze for a long moment, staring into my eyes, breathing heavily, as if he were more animal than man.

*Don’t be afraid*, I continued. *This is just going to take some getting used to.*

“Greyson!” Xavier’s voice made Tom’s wolf snap out of its reverie. He growled at both me and my brother.

I glared at Xavier. “Do you mind? I had this!”

Xavier shook his head. “You know new wolves are unpredictable. We should bring Tom into the woods—it’s safer there.”

I hated to admit it, but my annoying little brother had a point. I begrudgingly agreed, even though I would have preferred to handle Tom on my own. Everyone reacted differently when they went through the shift, and I didn’t want to risk Tom feeling threatened by two Alphas and lashing out without thinking. At the same time, though, two Alphas were better than one when it came to stopping Tom without using violence. For his sake, and Cali’s, I needed to make this as safe as possible for everyone.

I accepted defeat, and Xavier’s help, and stared at Tom.

*We’re going to help you, me and my brother*, I mind linked.

Tom snarled at me. Okay, then.

“Is he ever going to be himself again?” Torin squealed.

Tom turned to the Fae and snapped his teeth.

“Stay back, Torin,” I said before shifting to my wolf.

Xavier followed, but neither of us approached Tom—we didn’t want him to feel threatened, just accepted.

*Follow us to the forest*, I told Tom. *Let’s go for a run.*

Something seemed to register in Tom’s brain, his eyes turning more human.

*Greyson…* His voice was confused in my head. *How can you talk to me? Help!*

*We talked about this, remember?* I said. *In wolf form, all werewolves can mind link with each other to communicate*.

Tom’s wolf was panting, but at least he wasn’t snarling anymore.

*We can answer all your questions later*, I said. *Right now, you need to gain control of your wolf body, learn to live within it, burn some energy after the shift.*

Tom paused, his eyes flickering to Xavier’s black wolf.

*Follow Xavier. You’ll be fine*, I said.

Tom nodded slightly, then followed as Xavier wagged his tail in greeting. Before we vanished into the woods, I looked over my shoulder at Cali. She and her mother were still holding each other, but they seemed less freaked out.

*We’re just going for a run, love*, I told her. *We’ll have your father back safely in no time*.

She offered a grateful nod before I dashed into the forest after the other two wolves.

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*Better take it slow at first*, I told Xavier. *Let Tom get used to the power and speed gradually.*

Xavier scoffed. *I’m fully aware of what Tom is going through, and I can do without your lectures.*

I rolled my eyes but let Xavier’s tone slide. I wasn’t going to get into an argument with him and risk hurting Tom in the process.

*In fact, you should go back*, Xavier continued, making it harder for me not to throttle him. *I’ve got this.*

*We do this together or not at all*, I said seriously.

I didn’t tell him that I’d talked to Cali about this. That Cali expected me to do this. That I was her favorite, and also much better in bed than he was. Like, miles better. Highways. Continents.

It felt like I was getting a little off topic, but anyway.

*This is so insane!* Tom said then, running around us like an excited dog, unleashed for the first time.

At least someone was having a semi-good time.

*I told Cali I would take care of her father, so you can go back and do whatever it is that you do*,Xavier added then, pulling the Cali card in a way that I, being the bigger person and far better human being, had refused to do.

*Don’t bring Cali into this*, I snapped, bristling.

*Why not?* Xavier taunted. *We could definitely settle our differences out here—there’s so much room!*

I was tempted, but I had to be the fucking adult here while Xavier was acting like a brat. I hated this role, and if he kept pushing, I could see myself hating him too, the asshole.

*This isn’t about our differences*, I declared. *This is about you acting immature when Cali’s safety is on the line, not to mention her father’s!*

*Are you seriously calling me selfish right now?* Xavier scoffed.

*Obviously! You don’t fucking know when to stop!* My wolf huffed. *Tom needs to adjust, and he’s—*

I looked around, freezing. Fuck. Where was Tom?

*He’s gone!* Xavier said. He had the decency to sound panicked, the moron. *He can’t have gone that far…*

I shook my head, sniffing the air. *He’s running on adrenaline, probably not thinking rationally—he could be a mile away by now!*

Xavier fell silent, no more words necessary, and we both picked up Tom’s scent and raced off after him. I was annoyed, of course—this was exactly why I hadn’t wanted Xavier to come along. This should have been an easy thing to take care of, and I would have done it perfectly without my younger brother. It was an honor to help someone through their first shift, especially my mate’s father, but now… I had no idea what I was supposed to say to Cali if we didn’t bring Tom back safe and sound.

My thoughts were interrupted by a loud howl in the distance. Tom—and he sounded panicked. We raced in that direction, and I mind linked to him, *Calm down, we’re here!*

Tom didn’t seem to be listening when we reached the small clearing, framed by trees. He was jumping around, clearly overwhelmed by all the new scents and sounds. I couldn’t tell if he was still enjoying himself or if he was completely freaking out. Judging by the way Tom’s eyes had gone unfocused again, I was leaning toward the latter.

*Don’t fuck this up again*, I said to Xavier before turning to Tom.

*Slow down, Tom*, I said*. Everything’s okay*. *We’re here for you.*

Tom’s wolf was trembling. *Do you smell that? I can smell everything, see everything, hear everything! Do you have any idea how much noise a leaf makes when you step on it?*

*It’s all normal for a werewolf*, I replied. *Remember how we talked about all your senses being enhanced? It takes a lot of getting used to.*

Tom nodded, still panting.

*Take a moment to stop*, I said. *Breathe deeply, try to focus on one or two things. It will help you gain control. Okay?*

Tom looked at Xavier, who nodded and thankfully didn’t ruin everything. Cali’s father paused, raising his nose in the air. The action seemed to settle him down. But then something changed.

The wind shifted.

All of a sudden, I was aware of another scent, mingling with Tom’s and my brother’s.

*What is that?* Tom asked, fidgeting.

*I’ve smelled it before*, Xavier told us. *It belongs to Andrei, the Vanguard prick.*

I knew my brother was right. It could’ve been residual, from Andrei’s last visit, but the scent was too strong, too fresh.

*Be ready for anything*, I warned Xavier. *Tom, you stay with me.*

Tom whined slightly. Just then, I saw movement beyond Cali’s father. I instantly put myself in front of Tom.

*Crouch down and be still*, I told him.

Tom followed my instructions, but I didn’t have the time to be happy with our newfound connection. Cali’s father, right along with Xavier, stared straight ahead, through the threes, where Andrei’s wolf emerged, large and menacing.

He wasn’t alone.

The forest was quiet, all living creatures scared away by the sight and scent of so many predators showing up at once. Andrei was followed by a group of Vanguard wolves, walking in a procession—almost as if they were ready for battle.

And then, behind the beta wolves, another beast emerged.

It was the biggest, fiercest-looking wolf I’d ever seen.

**Episode 1972**

MARTA

Lilac had told me not to talk that way, but I couldn’t shake my thoughts.

Being a medium had been more harm than help. Yes, I had brought Lilac back, but aside from that, my power hadn’t exactly been a blessing. The only reason Bert had kept me trapped for fifty years was because he could use my powers. Fifty years was a long time, and if I’d been anyone other than myself, Bert would’ve ignored me.

The same went for Letifer.

My medium powers had repeatedly made me a target for monstrous men, and everybody wanted to use me. I’d even thought that Lilac wanted to manipulate me, but thankfully I was now certain that that wasn’t true. Lilac was with me for me, and I wanted to cherish that, to forget all my worries. But still, carrying such a heavy supernatural weight for so long…

It was exhausting.

If I could somehow be stripped of my powers, I would be able to live a normal life—or at least as normal as it could be while I was hanging out with a bunch of werewolves. But at least I wouldn’t have to worry about anyone trying to suck the magic out of me, or use my magic, or pretend to like me because of it.

“Look what I brought!” Lilac was back, looking as cute as ever. My heart pounded at the sight of him. He sat down on the bench next to me, presenting me with a plate overflowing with all kinds of different slices of pie. He held out a fork. “We should try them all.”

I shook my head. “I’m not really hungry.”

“Aw, come on,” he said, nudging me. “After all, it’s our first Thanksgiving together.”

“Are you trying to guilt me into eating pie?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes,” he said shamelessly. “Is it working?”

I rolled my eyes, laughing. He could always make me laugh, make me feel so good all the time, especially when…

I glanced at his mouth and blushed.

“Well?” he pressed, pointing at the plate.

“Fine,” I grumbled. “Let’s try them.”

I took a bite of each, and Lilac took many bites more, looking at me the entire time, smiling. His eyes were so bright, his attention so incredible that for a brief moment I forgot all my concerns.

“I think the pumpkin one was the best,” I said.

He hummed. “I’m not so sure. I should try them all again.”

I grinned, shaking my head. He leaned in, kissing my temple, then my cheek. My stomach fluttered.

“I’ll go get more,” he said. “Do you need anything else?”

*Just you*, I thought, but didn’t say.

“I’m good.”

“Be right back!” He kissed my cheek one last time before heading off to the buffet to load up his plate. I watched him for a moment, eyeing his broad shoulders and back, and the way he’d rolled up his sleeves so that his forearms showed.

*Damn…*

There was a loud burst of laughter, then, dragging my attention away. I turned to see Big Mac sitting by the fire, rolling her eyes at something Sage and Zainab had done. I decided to talk to her, approaching nervously.

“Marta,” she said in greeting.

Clearing my throat, I sat down on the bench next to her. “How’s Thanksgiving for you so far?”

Big Mac’s tone was as dry as ever. “Other than Lola regaining her wolf and Cali’s father turning into a wolf, it’s been great.”

I blinked, taking in Big Mac’s deadpan expression. I had no idea if she was joking or not.

“How are you?” she asked, then.

I started rambling awkwardly. “Lilac wanted to try all the pies, and I think the pumpkin one was the best, because—”

“I didn’t ask about the pie,” Big Mac cut me off. “I asked about you.”

I paused. “I’m fine.” I paused again, trying to figure out how to tell her the real reason I’d approached her. “I…”

Big Mac stared, waiting.

And then I ripped off the Band-Aid.

“Is it possible to take away my medium powers?”

Big Mac arched an eyebrow. “Why would you want to do a thing like that?”

The witch was peering at me, all intense and judgmental, and now I was wishing I hadn’t said anything.

“I—” I stammered. “I was just wondering, since they seem to be more trouble than they’re worth.”

Big Mac frowned. “You shouldn’t talk like that—magic is a precious gift. If you’re fortunate enough to have it, you should do all you can to embrace it, understand it. Use it in positive ways.”

I snorted bitterly. “Well, in my case, it hasn’t exactly been a fortunate gift. It feels more like a curse.”

Big Mac stared at me, scrutinizing my face in a way I hadn’t seen from her before. She slid closer then, startling me a little. When I felt her put an arm around me to comfort—albeit awkwardly, and like she had no idea how to do this—I was stunned.

“I can help you adjust to your magic,” she said, squeezing my shoulder. “I’m here for you.”

When I spoke, my throat felt tight. “I’m not sure if it’s possible. After all, I’ve had my magic for so long…”

Big Mac nodded. “You were forced to use it. You had to learn about it on your own, and that must’ve been very daunting. Scary. But with some guidance, you might come to treasure your special gift. Because it *is* special, Marta.”

I knew that Big Mac would never, *ever* say things like that without meaning them.

But still.

“I don’t know…” I shook my head, and she let me go.

She shrugged. “You know, even if I agreed with your plan, I don’t know enough about taking away your magic. That’s a very serious thing to mess with, and there could be unintended and very dangerous consequences.”

I frowned. “I thought you would’ve been more encouraging about this.”

Big Mac scoffed. “Then you don’t know me well enough.”

Apparently not.

“Marta!” Lilac waved from a few feet away. I had to laugh—he was stuffing pie into his mouth, looking excited. At least he seemed happy, even if he didn’t have his wolf. Could there be some sort of magic that could reunite Lilac with Plum, though? That would be wonderful for Lilac, and I wanted him to have everything he desired.

After what felt like eons of unhappiness, Lilac made me feel content, and I wanted to return that feeling. I wanted to use this damn magic that had been mostly a curse to me to do something good. Something great, for someone I cared about.

“Could we figure out a way to reunite Lilac with his wolf?” I asked Big Mac.

In an instant, she grabbed both my hands, nodding down at the bracelets on my wrists. “Don’t even *think* about using magic like that right now. The council has made it very clear that they don’t approve of what you did, and you need to remember that.”

“But—”

“Trying to reunite Lilac with Plum would be powerful, overwhelming magic, and it’s definitely not the kind that you could control right now,” Big Mac said strictly. “I’m sorry, Marta, but you shouldn’t even consider it.”

My ears felt hot with shame. It was incredible how this witch could make me feel secure and then scolded a moment later. Like a mom or something. *Jeez*.

“I was just hoping you’d be able to help me do a spell or something,” I said defensively.

Big Mac shook her head. “You should be careful doing magic for others freely—there’s a reason witches always ask for something in return.”

I frowned. I could never ask Lilac for anything in return. And what was that even supposed to mean, anyway? Payment for services rendered?

Before I could ask Big Mac, Lilac came over, using a napkin to wipe whipped cream from his face. “You were right!” he exclaimed, planting himself right next to me. “The pumpkin pie was the best; there was something about the way the filling and the crust complimented each other that…” He trailed off, looking between Big Mac and me, arching his eyebrows. “Wait, did I just interrupt something important?”

Big Mac rolled her eyes. She gave me a look. “Remember what I said, Marta.”

She stood up, dusting off her clothes, and made a beeline for Mrs. Smith, who was refilling her drink.

Lilac nudged me, tilting his head curiously to the side. “What was that all about? Big Mac being cryptic again?”

I pressed my lips together. “It was nothing. We were just talking about the summons and the council, stuff like that.”

Lilac nodded, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. His warmth felt amazing. He brushed his lips over my temple, his tenderness making my heart soar. The intimacy was incredible, newfound, unique to me. I’d do anything to make him happy, just like he seemed to want to make *me* happy. And I didn’t want to ask for stuff in return, not like Big Mac said witches should do.

I recalled her words about the magic that would be required to rejoin Lilac with his wolf. It sounded like there *was* a way to do it, so I had to wonder…

Once I had my powers back, would I be capable of doing it myself?

**Episode 1973**

XAVIER

This wolf was massive. I’d always found it funny—well, more endearingly annoying than anything—that Cali called us “wolf-bears” because of our size. But this wolf was huge, even by our standards.

I’d never seen anything like it.

Was this the Vanguard’s Alpha?

This was not the kind of guy we wanted to fuck with, but if worst came to worst and the Vanguard pack kept challenging us, I would be more than able to take him on. I knew how to deal with opponents who were bigger than me—I’d spent years as a mercenary pulling off a huge variety of missions, so I had experience with this kind of bullshit.

I had to admit, though, that I was impressed by how disciplined these guys seemed. They were marching in sync, with Spartan soldier vibes—except this wasn’t fucking Sparta. This was the border to my property, and I wasn’t gonna let anyone get in my business.

*Have you ever seen this guy before?* I asked Greyson. He knew which one I was talking about.

*No. I’d remember*,he said darkly.

No kidding.

*What’s happening? Why is that werewolf so large?* Tom asked me.

*It’s fine. We’ll be okay*, I replied. *Make sure you stay back, Tom.*

Just as I finished my sentence, the procession stopped. The Alpha werewolf, the big motherfucker, turned toward Greyson and me. He set his different-colored eyes—one blue and the other gold—upon us. And then I received a mind link from a deep, scratchy voice that I’d never heard before.

*Good evening*, the Alpha told me and Greyson. *I am Prince Lucian of the Vanguard pack.*

I shot Greyson a look. *Prince? Is this guy for real?*

Greyson shot me a glare. *Seriously, Xavier, don’t cause a scene.*

Meanwhile, Lucian added, *I know the sight of the Vanguard pack can be overwhelming. There is no need to fear us if you show the proper respect.*

Greyson did *not* like that last bit. *Respect? This guy literally just called himself a prince!*

*Right?* I scoffed.

*Do werewolves have royalty?* Tom piped up. *How interesting, it’s—*

*Not the time to ask questions*, I told Tom firmly, and he got the hint.

I stepped forward, staring at this dingus who called himself a prince before glancing at Andrei. I wished I could tear his throat out, just for bringing the rest of the pack here. I knew we had to tread lightly at the moment, though, because Tom was with us. If anything happened to her father, Cali would never forgive me or Greyson.

*Prince Lucian*, I said, trying not to sound as sarcastic as I felt. *I think you’re confused. This is Redwood territory. I believe you should be showing the Redwood pack some respect by going back to wherever you and your pack came from*.

Andrei and the others growled menacingly.

Perhaps I’d gotten a little snarky there and pushed too hard too soon.

*What my brother means to say is that you shouldn’t be roaming around these parts*, Greyson spoke up, looking at Lucian and his wolves. *Your party has not received permission to cross into our land*.

Lucian’s wolf stared at Greyson thoughtfully*. Is that so?*

*It is*, Greyson said.

*I have to respectfully disagree*, Lucian said.

*I’m afraid that isn’t an option*, Greyson replied.

I couldn’t believe that my brother could talk like that—like both he and Lucian had been transported back in time and only spoke with an icy aggression that made me think of British nobility.

*Do you know the way back to the pack house?* I asked Tom.

He perked up. *Why? Is something wrong?*

You had to love Tom for not realizing that something was wrong. Greyson shot me a look, and I was about to respond when Lucian spoke up again.

*You*. He stared at Tom.

Tom blinked. *Me?*

There was a *vibe* in Lucian’s tone. *Yes, you. You’re a new wolf, aren’t you?*

My whole body tensed. Marking Tom as a new pack member would make him vulnerable.

*Be ready*, Greyson told me. *If they attack, I’ll deal with them, and you take Tom back to the house safely.*

*No*, I snapped. *You should take Tom back!*

Meanwhile, Tom told Lucian, *Yes, I’m new here. Hi!*

Self-preservation was clearly not Tom’s strong suit.

*Ah*, Lucian said. *I would like to welcome the new wolf—it is always a blessing when a pack brings in new members. It is good for my kingdom.*

What.

*Is this guy insane?* I asked Greyson. *First the motherfucker calls himself a prince, and now he’s talking about kingdoms?*

*This would be funny if it weren’t so serious*, Greyson said gravely. *I should keep talking to him—you step back.*

I narrowed my eyes at him. *Why should I step back?*

Greyson shook his head. *I don’t think you’re smooth enough to deal with his brand of crazy.*

*What?* I huffed. *I’m totally smooth!*

Just to prove it, I turned to Lucian and said, *So what does the good prince want? Why are you and your posse here—shouldn’t you be presiding over your kingdom, in your palace or whatever, far away from here?*

I thought I’d done a pretty good job of being diplomatic, but Lucian suddenly growled.

Now he was angry, which probably did not bode well.

*Which one of you is the Alpha?* he sniped.

Greyson and I both stepped forward.

Lucian’s wolf laughed and snarled at once. *Is the Redwood pack so powerful, so large, that it requires the leadership of two Alphas?*

*It is, indeed*, Greyson said. *We have decimated countless threats over the past few months. Ask around, if you don’t believe me. Every battle makes us stronger.*

Lucian made a sound that was more appreciative than angry. It was like Greyson had written a marketing brochure that the Alpha had just bought into. I was trying to wrap my head around this bullshit—and the fact that my brother had decided he would *indulge* this massive, delusional asshole.

I, on the other hand, did not want to explain anything to this jerk. This was *none* of his business. Greyson and I had promised we’d bring Tom back, and we were taking too long. Cali was probably already worried, and it was time for this madness to end.

*You and your little parade*, I told Lucian, gesturing at his wolves, *should march back to wherever your kingdom is. Like my brother said, this is and has always been Redwood territory, and like any self-respecting pack, we don’t like uninvited guests.* I sharply shifted my gaze to Andrei. *Ever.*

Andrei growled in response, the bastard. At the same time, the other pack members stepped toward me, and Greyson’s wolf made a low, guttural sound.

*What’s happening?* Tom asked in a squeak. How could he not have realized the danger yet? It was literally staring him dead in the eye. This man was gonna get mauled if he stuck around here, and then Cali would maul *me*. Even worse, she’d stop loving me.

Better to die here today.

*You should go back to the pack house*, I told Tom. *Greyson and I can handle this.*

My brother gave me a sharp look*. I told you to take Tom back.*

I scowled. *But—*

*I should be the one to deal with this, Xavier*, Greyson snapped. *I should do the fucking talking. You just made things worse!*

My brother was basically yelling at me while Andrei and his dogs snarled, but outwardly, Greyson looked serious and severe. I watched as Lucian pinned both me and my brother with his bi-colored eyes, and then he growled and snapped at his own people.

In an instant, his wolves, Andrei included, shut the fuck up.

*I understand that the Redwood pack is just being protective*, Lucian said.

Greyson replied before I could. *Do you? Or are you just saying that to appease us after making the mistake of invading our territory?*

Lucian chuckled.

I hated how good Greyson was at this diplomatic nonsense.

*I appreciate your candor and power, Alpha*,Lucian said. *And for those reasons alone, for the strength and dignity of your brood, I would like the opportunity to learn more about the Redwood pack.*

I had to stop myself from gaping. What the fuck was this pretentious jerk on about?

*And perhaps*, Lucian went on, *I will allow you and your pack to learn more about the Vanguard pack. After all, we will be seeing a lot of each other.*

I bristled. What the hell was that supposed to mean? Who on earth had told this huge asshole that I would be seeing him again, ever? If Tom weren’t here, I would’ve been going straight for his eyes. It wouldn’t take much to incapacitate him—his blindness would be swift and painful, and then—

Lucian cut off my thoughts with another mind link, his tone steady as he nodded between Greyson and me. *Why don’t you—both of you, and your respective Lunas—come join me for a party tomorrow?*