**Torn Between Alphas**

**Manuscript - Season 18**

**Episodes 1974-2137**

**Episode 1974**

I glanced out at the woods, scowling.

*Ugh, why haven’t Xavier and Greyson brought my father back yet?* I thought, tapping my foot on the ground.

I could tell that my mom was anxious. She was talking with Mrs. Smith about eggnog, but her laughter was a little too high-pitched, definitely worried. She kept glancing into the woods, no matter how interesting Mrs. Smith’s eggnog stories were.

*This is not the time for eggnog!* I thought. *This is the time for stress!*

Naturally, my mind started racing. This was my dad’s first shift—what if something went wrong? What if he got caught by humans? By HUNTERS? What if he got stuck in wolf form like Lola had, unable to shift back? What if he *attacked* someone? And ATE THEM?

*My father the cannibal, oh my GOD!*

Perhaps I was spiraling, just a little. I started pacing, considering my options. Maybe I should go after them, even though that would upset Greyson and Xavier. Not only because I would’ve ventured out into the woods, but also because they would feel that I didn’t trust them. Xavier would throw a fit, and Greyson would be all disappointed, and both of them would be big babies while I was just trying to protect my dad.

*Ugh.*

Maybe they would have a point, but what was I supposed to do? Just stand here and freak out? I’d already eaten way too much pie—in fact, my carb intake only rivaled Lilac’s, and he’d been dead up until a few days ago, so he had a lot of catching up to do.

I was out of control!

“Cali,” my mom said, and I jumped back, flinching before I faced her.

“I’m fine, it’s fine!” I blurted.

My mom pressed her lips together. “I know exactly how you feel.”

“You didn’t find the eggnog joke that funny, did you?” I asked, wincing.

She shook her head. “I’m getting nervous about Tom. Why haven’t your boyfriends brought him back yet?”

I smiled awkwardly and tried to play it off. “Realistically, everything’s fine. We’re just being worrywarts.”

“Who has warts?” Artemis popped up, looking between Mom and me. “Because I know a way to burn them right off.”

Helpful.

“Nobody has warts, Artemis,” I said patiently.

“Oh,” she said. Then she casually added, “Now that that’s settled, should you and I go look for Tom?”

If Artemis, who under normal, non-possessed circumstances was very cool as a person, was starting to worry about my dad, then things were BAD.

“I’m sorry, girls,” Mom started, “but I don’t like that idea. You shouldn’t go out there on your own.”

Artemis frowned. “But it’s not like we’re helpless. We have Fae powers and we know how to use them.”

Also, Artemis had literally captured and murdered a bunch of people as a bounty hunter. But I wasn’t about to say that and give my sister an existential crisis when she was fighting for a good cause.

*Of course we should go find Dad! Even if my mates get mad, they’ll understand eventually*, I thought*. I’ll* make *them understand.*

“I know that you two are powerful,” Mom said, “but if something happened…” She swallowed thickly, looking between us before resting her hands on our shoulders. “I can’t even imagine what it would be like without Tom, or you girls. I don’t want anyone to get hurt.”

Now I really tried to play this off.

“Mom, please,” I said, snorting. “Dad is in the best of hands—Xavier and Greyson know these woods, and they’ll make sure he’s safe.”

“They did promise to take care of him…” Mom trailed off.

“Right?” I said. “And they’re both Alphas. They have literally killed before and been in various wars. They’re the best bodyguards anyone could have, don’t you agree?”

Artemis nodded vehemently, and Mom sighed, looking between us. “I suppose you’re right.”

The moment Mom was gone, though, Artemis cut straight to the chase. “You’re right that the Alphas are powerful, but this is Tom we’re talking about. We need to make sure everything’s fine.”

I winced. “I agree, but…” I looked over at Mom. “She’d be so worried if we left.”

Artemis sighed. “She’s already worried. And we are too! This is Tom’s first shift—nobody really knows what that means.”

I was so moved by Artemis’s concern. We really were a family.

And of course, family members could tell a couple of white lies for each other’s benefit.

“Okay, but Mom shouldn’t know where we’re going,” I said, glancing over at her. “We should make up an excuse, or get someone to cover for us and slip away when nobody’s looking.”

Artemis nodded. “Good thinking.”

“What about Rishika?” I nudged Artemis, nodding toward Rishika, who was a few feet away.

Artemis sighed. “She’s amazing, isn’t she?”

I snorted. “She is, but shouldn’t you tell her what we’re planning on doing right now?”

Artemis laughed. “Rishika already knows—it was her idea, and she’s coming with us.”

I was surprised. “You sure about that?”

“Of course,” Artemis said conspiratorially. “Rishika can protect us if worst comes to worst and our Fae powers fail, and she can sense and scent things that we can’t.”

I nodded seriously. This made sense—Rishika was one of the fiercest fighters I’d ever seen. Only Greyson and Xavier could rival her, so bringing her with us would be a checkmate move.

I made up some excuse for Mom about helping Artemis and Rishika set up something with the internet in their room, and then my sister and I dashed over to Rishika. She was lurking by a tree, checking the blade of her knife like the badass she was.

“You ready?” Rishika asked, looking between us.

Artemis smiled. “Yes. Thank you for coming with us.”

“Of course.” Rishika smiled back at Artemis, and Artemis leaned in for a kiss. I thought it was going to be a quick one, so I didn’t look away, but once it started lasting more than ten seconds, I had regrets.

“Okay,” I said, poking Rishika’s shoulder, “but maybe *don’t* make out right now? My father is in grave danger! Probably!”

Rishika cleared her throat, swatting Artemis away. “Right, your sister’s right,” she told Artemis, who nodded her agreement. Then they both turned to me, putting their game faces on.

“Do you have any idea which direction everyone went?” Rishika asked.

“Over there.” I pointed to the last place I’d seen Xavier and Greyson before they disappeared into the woods.

After we made sure that my mom wasn’t looking, we discreetly made our way over there. As we moved deeper into the forest and the moonlight semi-vanished, I realized that this probably hadn’t been such a good idea.

“Ugh,” I grumbled, “I can barely see anything.”

“Don’t worry,” Artemis said, “Rishika can.”

“She’s right,” Rishika told me. “My eyes see clearly in the dark, so just make sure to stay close to me.”

I was pleased with this development.

“Good idea to bring her with us,” I told Artemis.

I could actually feel the satisfaction and pride rolling off my sister. My god, she had it so *bad*. I loved how happy Artemis seemed, and how much she trusted Rishika. I did too. Smiling to myself, I followed the two of them as we made our way into the forest and the noise from the Thanksgiving party faded away.

“I was thinking—”

“Shh!”

Rishika stopped, and Artemis did too, so I followed suit, shutting up.

“I think I see movement,” Rishika whispered.

“Is it a wolf?” I asked. “Oh, it must be Greyson and Xavier. Or my dad! Dad, are you out—”

Rishika shushed me again, this time loudly. “I’m picking up the scent of a different wolf, Cali. A stranger,” she hissed.

*Well, shit!*

There was a small clearing straight ahead, and Rishika sniffed in that direction. Before I could ask another question, Artemis raised her hand, pointing.

Under the dappled moonlight, a beautiful wolf with white fur that looked like silk materialized from the trees.

All three of us stopped talking, holding our breaths.

A second later, the wolf turned into a stunning young woman. She was statuesque and queenly, with really long, smooth white hair that reached her knees. Her skin was white like the moon.

*Wow*, I thought. *That kind of hair must be a nightmare to maintain! But so pretty, OMG!*

“Hello,” she said in a soft voice, looking at the three of us. She seemed entirely unconcerned over the fact that she was naked in front of strangers, which wasn’t a rarity among werewolves, so I should’ve gotten used to it by now. I couldn’t help but feel a little awestruck, though—she looked like a goddess. *Was she* a goddess? Did we have those?

“My name is Aysel,” she said. “Who are you?”

I spoke up first, clearing my throat. “I—I’m Cali. Hi.”

The woman offered me a dimpled smile. She was a *vision*.

*This whole aesthetic is REALLY working for me…*

Weirdly enough, though, I was clearly the only one who felt this way. Artemis was silent, looking suspicious, and Rishika scowled.

She pinned the newcomer with a fierce stare. “What are you doing in Redwood territory?”

Aysel ignored Rishika entirely. In a gentle tone, she asked, “Do any of you know the wolf with the grey eyes?”

I frowned, confused. “Who? You mean Greyson?”

Aysel flipped her long-ass hair over her shoulder and sighed, closing her eyes.

“*Greyson*.” She repeated his name almost breathlessly, *reverently*. And then she opened her eyes and stared directly at me. “Greyson is going to be my mate.”

**Episode 1975**

VIOLET

I was so full from the delicious meal that Tom and Torin had prepared.

Turkey, four different types of stuffing, cranberry sauce, roasted pumpkin wedges with parmesan cheese, mashed potatoes and gravy, green bean casserole, candied yams, herb-roasted sweet potatoes, a million things more, and just about every kind of pie I could imagine… Pumpkin pie, apple pie, pecan pie, cherry pie, blueberry pie, all the pies—with ice cream and whipped cream on top, a culinary marvel all over!

I needed to stop listing all the foods before I started getting hungry again.

I’d had the best time enjoying our dinner, and now that I was helping with clean-up in the kitchen, I couldn’t help but smile. I hadn’t felt this at ease in a while. My mate was here, my brother was alive, and the pack was all together—one big family.

Though there *was* a tiny cloud hovering over my good mood.

My brother and Marta had seemed kind of tense during dinner, and I needed to get to the bottom of it. What could that have been about? Did they feel awkward about me walking in on them earlier? If that was it, they had nothing to be embarrassed about.

*Okay, scratch that.*

I was still pretty embarrassed, and I wished I’d never seen Lilac and Marta in bed together with my very own eyes. I kind of wanted to drench them in holy water now. But still, we were all adults here, and werewolves—I could handle this. My brother really liked Marta, and Marta really liked him, and them being together was natural.

It was sweet, actually.

The romantic in me was soaring. Who would’ve thought that one, my brother would end up alive again; and two, we would both find people we cared about this much? Going on double dates with my brother and his partner after finding my mate was something that I had literally wanted forever. And we were all part of the same pack, making everything even better, even more homey.

We’d all earned this kind of happiness, and then some.

Humming to myself, I started to load the dishes into the dishwasher after rinsing them off. Just then, Marta walked in. She didn’t run away screaming, so I counted that as a plus.

“Oh, hi,” she said. “Let me help.”

“Thank you,” I said, grinning. *Look at us bonding!* We would be best friends in no time—I could feel it. She started helping out with the dishes, and I noticed her slender wrists, my eyes widening.

“Oh wow, are those new?” I asked, gesturing to the bracelets on her wrists. “They look so pretty!”

Marta flinched away from me, moving her hands back. I winced.

“Crap,” I mumbled. “Sorry—the hand thing, I totally forgot. I didn’t mean to startle you.”

Marta took a deep breath before giving me a small smile. “It’s okay. It shouldn’t be a problem anymore.” She fiddled with one of the bracelets. “These actually cap my magic… It’s kind of a long story.”

I blinked at her. When had that happened? I had so many questions, but I didn’t want to pester her. I wanted to tell her that I’d love to hear that story, that I cared about her and her worries a lot, but she eyed me with such an unreadable look on her face that I chickened out. The silence between us became awkward, though, and I desperately wanted to break it.

“Uh, about earlier,” I said, clearing my throat, “I’m sorry I walked in on you and Lilac.” I glanced at her as she continued with the dishes. She wasn’t even looking at me, but I could see her ears turning red. “All I’m saying is, I’m really glad that you two are together! I’ve never seen Lilac so happy.”

I was trying to be supportive, but Marta’s blush was pretty ambiguous. Avoiding my gaze, she mumbled, “Right. It’s fine.”

I frowned. “Everything okay between you two?”

Marta nodded, still not looking at me, and just then I saw Lilac and Charlie coming in with more dishes. Speak of the devil!

“Hey, you two, perfect timing,” I called, waving them both over. “I actually have an idea.”

“That sounds ominous,” Lilac teased.

I rolled my eyes at him. “All of us”—I pointed at Lilac and Charlie, Marta and me—“should do a double date tonight, now that Thanksgiving is over. We can watch a holiday movie together! Maybe *Love, Actually*?”

Lilac’s eyes widened with joy. “Yes! I mean, I was thinking something more like *The Purge*, but we’ll figure it out.” He turned to Marta. “It’ll be fun!”

Marta’s awkwardness returned tenfold. She cringed. “I mean…”

“Come on, I promise you’ll love it,” Lilac said, gripping her arm happily.

“It’ll be so much fun,” I told her, smiling. “I’m not going to take no for an answer.”

“That’s what I was afraid of,” Marta muttered, shaking her head with a wry smile.

“Let’s go get our pajamas on!” Lilac exclaimed, practically pulling Marta along with him.

Charlie watched them go, smiling from ear to ear. “They make quite the pair, huh? She’s so reserved, and he’s… Well.”

“A tornado?” I asked, wrapping my arms around his torso. He smelled so good.

“Sounds about right,” Charlie said with a chuckle.

I looked up at him, grinning before I brushed my lips over his. “This is a good idea, right?”

He nodded, stroking my arm. “It sounds fun, and I like holiday movies, but maybe later on…” He arched an eyebrow, his gaze playful. “We could do something, just the two of us?”

I blushed profusely while thinking about last night. Did Charlie want to pick up where we’d left off? I couldn’t blame him for that—I felt the same way. I wondered if a double date would ruin the mood, but I doubted it. Charlie wanted me and loved me, just as much as I did him.

“Sounds good,” I said, nuzzling his neck before letting go. “In the meantime, let’s gather all our holiday-themed snacks for the movie date.”

Charlie snorted. “It’s pretty casual, isn’t it? We can just make some microwave popcorn—and we did just have all that food.”

“No, no,” I said seriously. “It has to be amazing! My brother died a few months ago—we need to make up for lost time.”

Charlie gave me a look. “Lilac definitely deserves to have fun…”

I noticed something was off in Charlie’s expression. “But?”

“Nothing.” He shrugged. “I just hope that he doesn’t feel like you’re forcing him to get to know me. That could make things awkward between us.”

I gasped, hurt. “Wait, do *you* feel like I’m forcing you to hang out with him?”

He shook his head. “I never said that!”

“Wait,” I said, sniffling. “Do you hate my brother?”

“Violet, *no*.” Charlie reached out, taking my hands. “Of course not. You love him, and I love you. Besides, he seems like a great guy.”

“You think so?” I asked, looking up at my mate hopefully.

“Definitely,” he said, tenderly tucking a stray hair behind my ear. “I’m sure the two of us will get along once we get to know each other more.”

I nodded, swallowing as I fiddled with his shirt. I was so relieved. “Thank you. Lilac is the only family I have left, and it’s really important to me that the two most important guys in my life get along.”

Charlie wrapped his arms around me, kissing my forehead, then my temple. “I completely understand, and actually…” He faced me. “The conversation we’re having right now makes this the perfect time for me to discuss something I’ve been meaning to bring up.”

I loosened my grip around Charlie, staring up at him. I took in his beautiful face, suddenly feeling a little uneasy. His tone had been cautious, which meant that whatever was gonna come out of his mouth, I wasn’t going to appreciate.

*Oh, no…*

“Go ahead,” I said, eyeing him carefully.

“So, uh,” he started, clearing his throat, “you know that I talked to my mom recently? She’s been really anxious with me at the pack house, especially after everything that happened at hunter camp.”

“You mean everything that the rogue vampires and revenants and hunters caused?” I asked in an even tone.

Charlie swallowed thickly. “It’s just been a lot. And I guess, she worries…”

I hated where this was going. Especially because I felt like asking Charlie if his mother was still keen on murdering him, like she had originally been when she’d learned that he’d been turned into a werewolf. This whole conversation spelled trouble, and it made my stomach clench with anxiety.

Taking in my mate’s gorgeous face, I said, “I worry about you too, Charlie. I don’t want to part from you, ever, and I… I think that you don’t want to part from me either.”

At that, he nodded. I was relieved. He wasn’t going to leave the pack house, was he?

“Exactly,” he said, stroking my cheek tenderly. “I want to be with you all the time. I love you so much, so it feels like I should be honest here and just tell you what’s been on my mind.”

“What?” I asked, my throat going dry.

Charlie swallowed audibly, then winced as he blurted out, “Will you spend Christmas with my family?”

**Episode 1976**

“Greyson is going to be my mate,” the beautiful werewolf woman said, totally seriously, and I…

She…

We…

Bitch, *WHAT?*

I normally would *never* call another girl that horrible word, but honestly, what the fuck?

*Whatthefuck!*

“You can’t—” My voice was shrill. “You—you can’t just decide that, you know!” I stammered. “You can’t decide who’s going to be your mate!”

Aysel raised an eyebrow. Oh my god, was she set on destroying my life? She looked me up and down and said, “Maybe *you* can’t.”

Was that *derision* I detected in her tone? Because if so, I was offended. But I was also confused and annoyed and *worried*. Was there some magical wolf spell that allowed you to choose a mate and claim them? What kind of problematic nonsense—

“What pack are you from?” Rishika asked Aysel, bypassing our entire conversation about Greyson. It had to be fun to be Rishika—I envied her level head.

“Why are you asking?” Aysel asked in that passive aggressive way that only a long-haired goddess could pull off. I wanted to throw a pine cone right in her fucking gorgeous face.

“I asked you a question.” Rishika took a step closer, looking imposing. “More than one, actually. What pack are you from, and what are doing out here, in Redwood territory? This is our land, and you don’t belong here.” She arched an eyebrow. “Wars have been started over a lot less.”

Aysel took a deep breath that sounded a little too long-suffering. She’d finally opened her mouth to answer when there was a howl in the distance.

“Oh, dear,” she said, as if she were Rapunzel or some other Disney princess, “I have to go.”

“You—come back here!” I stomped my feet, but she ignored me, shifting back to her wolf and running away. “You can’t have Greyson, dammit!” I yelled after her. “He’s mine!”

There was absolute silence in the woods. I turned to Rishika and Artemis. “What the hell was that? What was she *talking* about? She wants my Greyson!” Panicking, I stared at Rishika. “Can she randomly just decide to *have* Greyson? Like he’s a slice of pizza?”

Rishika frowned. “I have no idea. I’ve never heard of anyone just… *claiming* a mate. It doesn’t work that way.”

“I’ve never heard anything of the sort, either,” said Artemis.

“Are you sure?” I asked Rishika. “Because you don’t look sure!”

Rishika turned shifty. “I mean. Old werewolf rituals and whatnot aren’t exactly my area of expertise. But it should be fine.”

I choked. “*It* *should be fine*? That woman—” I flailed, gesturing toward where Aysel had vanished. “She wants my man to herself. And she looks like a freaking angel!”

Artemis rolled her eyes. “Who cares what she looks like?”

“She’s literally Greyson’s perfect match, physically,” I told Artemis. “They are both majestic, and I want to throw up. On her hair, to be exact.”

Artemis laughed, nudging me. “Please don’t tell me you bought any of that. Greyson loves you—it’s obvious. He loves you for *you*, not just your looks, and you’re beautiful anyway!”

I huffed awkwardly. “I mean, I know that.”

I did, really. Greyson would never compare me to anyone else, and he adored me, but still. I couldn’t help but feel a geyser of insecurity. How could I possibly compete with a wolf like that? Greyson would say that it wasn’t even a competition, but what if there was a weird wolf ritual that could *make it* a competition? Because it sounded like Aysel was ready for some claiming to go down.

“Let’s forget about her for now,” Rishika told me seriously. “We need to find your dad and the Alphas.”

Rishika’s words snapped me back to reality. She was right—my dad was my number one priority right now. I needed to make sure he was okay.

*And also find Greyson and suck his face just so Aysel knows that he’s MINE.*

This was like Ava all over again, only worse, because Aysel hadn’t killed Greyson’s mom like Ava had killed Xavier’s, which made their getting back together impossible, no matter how hard Ava tried. And if I felt like this at the mere idea of another woman flirting with Greyson, I wondered how the hell the boys managed to share my attention…

This was really rough, actually.

Quiet now, I followed Rishika and Artemis deeper into the woods, these thoughts twisting in my head. When Rishika paused again to sniff the air a few moments later, she smiled.

“Found them.”

We rushed into a tiny clearing lit by moonlight, and I saw Xavier, Greyson, and my dad, all three still in wolf form. I exhaled in relief. I was so glad to see my dad. Even if he was still in wolf form, he seemed okay, alive and well.

*And look at Greyson…*

Greyson stared at me, his grey eyes warm.

*Hello, love. Told you your Dad would be fine, didn’t I?* he said.

My heart raced. He was so sweet.

Aysel had better BACK OFF.

*Cali!* Xavier mind linked me too. His wolf trotted toward me, sniffing me. *What’s going on?* *You smell like a strange wolf.*

“We ran into someone,” I said carefully, glancing at Artemis and Rishika, who nodded.

Xavier looked between all three of us, then shifted back to human. His blue eyes were beautiful, intense on me. He ran his hands down my arms and torso as if to check for injuries. “But you’re okay, right? What happened?”

“I’m okay,” I said quickly. “We just came out here to check on my dad.”

*Tom’s doing well, don’t worry*, Greyson said.

I was glad to see that was true. My dad was literally chasing his tail.

“He seems fine,” I said, looking between Greyson and Xavier.

Greyson looked proud, but Xavier’s eyes darkened. “You shouldn’t have come out here in the dark, Cali.”

Rishika scoffed. “Xavier, please. Her sister and I were with her. I can fight both you Alphas and come on top.”

Xavier gasped in offense, but Greyson’s wolf snorted. My father kept chasing his tail.

*At least he’s having fun.*

I wasn’t worried anymore. I had so many questions for Dad, but I realized I could only ask them when he shifted back to human. The thought made me cringe—shifting back to human meant being naked, and we did not want that.

“Well,” I said, “I think we should get home—my dad should find my mom, and also some pants.”

Dad stopped chasing his tail, turning to look at me.

“Yes—Mom. *Orla*,” I repeated.

Dad woofed happily and nodded his head.

Artemis smiled, waving at him to follow her. “Come on, let’s get going. I’ll take you to Orla!”

The two of them dashed off toward the house, racing each other, my dad letting out excited noises in the process.

*He’s like a puppy*, I thought. *How weird… But also endearing?*

“Cali?” My thoughts were interrupted by Greyson’s deep voice. He had shifted back to human, which meant he was naked… And now I was irrationally thinking that Aysel would just pop up and start salivating over him.

“Greyson,” I said tensely.

He raised an eyebrow. “Are you okay? You seem a little shaken…”

I cleared my throat. “Um. Just a little worried about my dad.”

Greyson paused. “And that’s it?”

Was I really so transparent? Xavier was much easier to lie to!

“We ran into a female werewolf,” Rishika offered.

I shot her a look. Was she going to say anything about the mate thing? Did I want her to?

*I don’t know!*

“What happened?” Greyson asked.

Rishika glanced at me. “Her name was Aysel. She seemed interested—*very* interested—in our pack.”

Greyson frowned. “I guess she’s from the Vanguard pack.”

“Are they going to be a threat?” I asked Greyson.

“We don’t know yet,” Xavier said, coming to stand on my other side.

Greyson nodded. “I haven’t gotten a good measure of them. But maybe we can learn more at the party.”

“Wait, what party?” I asked, confused.

“Their Alpha—”

“*Prince Lucian*,” Xavier added with a sneer.

I almost choked on my spit. *Prince?*

“—invited Xavier and me and our Lunas to a party,” Greyson finished.

I was instantly intrigued. I wondered if he meant me when he said “Luna.” But who else could he mean? I wanted to ask him more questions right now, but my questions sometimes created tension, and I wasn’t sure if I wanted to do that in front of Rishika. If this was about to evolve into yet another drama moment, it wasn’t her problem—she didn’t have to witness our BS.

But then again, Rishika was rarely rattled by anything.

*Here goes…*

“A party, huh?” I said, looking between my mates. “First they harassed us on the road, and now they’re roaming the borders of our territory. They haven’t exactly been warm or welcoming toward us, but now they want to hang out?”

“It’s not really like werewolves to be welcoming,” Greyson said.

Rishika was roaming somewhere behind us, clearly bored by our conversation. Good for her. I wished I could drop it as well, but here we were. Me and my Alphas, and an upcoming celebration hosted by a semi-aggressive pack.

“So what, then?” I asked my mates. “Are we going to this supposed party?”

Greyson said, “*No*,” just as Xavier said, “*Yes*.”

**Episode 1977**

GREYSON

Was I hearing Xavier correctly? *Yes*? He wanted to go? Wasn’t this the guy who was going to bite that Alpha’s head off moments ago?

“Absolutely not,” I said. “I’m putting my foot down. No, we will not be attending anything with the Vanguard pack.”

“That’s not your call,” Xavier said coolly.

“Right now, it is,” I said, not caring how it sounded. “We’re not discussing this here either. We’re going home. Now.”

Luckily, Xavier zipped his lips on the way home. The entire way back to the pack house, he was stewing next to me. He’d had the right idea the first time—killing the Alpha. Declining the party would be the safest option. We had no idea who this pack was or what they were capable of.

“What?” I asked.

“You need to reconsider their invitation,” Xavier said.

I stared at him. “This from the guy who wanted to kill Lucian?”

Xavier huffed. “I get it, I do, but I’m trying to think like an Alpha. Something you could try to be doing too.”

I glared at him. “No, Xavier. We aren’t going to walk right into some trap.”

“Except if you think about it, as an Alpha”—of course he would add that again—“it would be both diplomatic *and* strategic for us to go to the party.”

“Big words from you,” I said, side eyeing him after we arrived at the front porch. “It’s not a good idea. We have no idea what kind of party this would be. We’d be going in without any kind of intel on this pack.”

He scoffed. “And what better way to find out what they’re about than to *go to their fucking house*?”

I sighed, crossing my arms. “It would be suicide for us to go over there without knowing more about them and what they’re up to, Xavier. How can you not see that?”

He rolled his eyes. “It wouldn’t be suicide. Why invite us over if they were only going to kill us? They could’ve done that in the forest.”

“And you have no reservations about a new pack coming out of nowhere?” I asked. “One with an Alpha who calls himself a *prince*?”

Xavier arched an eyebrow. “Of course I do, and he’s a pretentious dick, but that doesn’t mean—”

“If I may interrupt you two,” Cali said, poking my shoulder. “I’m still here, and I want to be part of this conversation.”

“Cali—”

“Why don’t I go with you?” Cali asked, looking between us.

In unison, my brother and I said, “No.”

“Seriously, guys?” Cali scowled. She wasn’t happy, but she was definitely still gorgeous. I caught myself staring as she started ranting and didn’t seem like she would be stopping any time soon. “How many times do I have to remind you that I have Fae magic? And I can use it? We’ve been through wars together, and I’m still here, stronger than ever, and I am not going to let you two walk into a trap! I can protect you!”

I nodded, resting my hand on her shoulder. “I get that, but—”

“She’s right about that last part,” Xavier interrupted.

I looked at him, my jaw dropping in shock. I thought we were in on this together, but the asshole had to go ahead and backstab me. Typical Xavier.

“She can come with us and pretend to be human or something,” Xavier said. “They don’t know about her powers. Cali is a secret weapon.”

I glowered at Xavier. “I know Cali can handle herself, but this is our mate we’re talking about.” I turned to look at her, pleading. “I can’t put you in danger, love. What am I going to tell your parents?”

That last bit made Cali pause, but only for a brief moment.

“I get that you’re worried, but I do get a say in this,” Cali said stubbornly. “I can be a serious asset to this operation, and I’m not letting it go.”

Xavier, the traitor, nodded. “She’s right.”

I was frustrated, even though I tried not to show it for Cali’s sake. It wasn’t that I didn’t trust her—I thought she was brilliant. But this was an unknown threat. And as for my brother, Xavier rarely agreed with Cali when she wanted to get all risky, and yet now he’d decided that it was the right time? I couldn’t understand the man. It wasn’t a good idea to accept Lucian’s invite, and now, with Cali wanting to come along, everything could get out of hand quickly.

“We want to learn more about them, anyway,” Xavier went on. “So going into their house under the guise of a party is the perfect way to figure things out.”

“And there will alcohol and music and food,” Cali noted. “Their guard will come down, and we could learn so many of their secrets.”

I couldn’t believe how excited she looked. It would’ve been adorable if it weren’t so dangerous.

“Exactly,” Xavier said seriously.

“That doesn’t change the fact that it will be many more of them and just three of us,” I said, keeping my voice even. “Escaping will be hard, either way.”

Xavier raised an eyebrow. “We’re both Alphas, aren’t we? We can get out of there without dying.”

“That’s a good strategy when our mate isn’t with us,” I told Xavier wryly. “When she could get gravely injured.”

Cali scowled. “You could get gravely injured too!”

“If it’s not silver, I heal fast,” I said. “Fae don’t have that ability.”

Cali’s face took on a familiar stubborn look. “I still think it’s fine for me to come along. I want to help. And it’s a great opportunity for you guys to practice being co-Alphas.”

I stifled a groan. “I still haven’t agreed to that, Cali,” I said patiently, shooting Xavier a pointed look.

She huffed. “But why not? You’re basically already doing it.”

She was right about that, but I dreaded what could happen if things became official. If I became Alpha in any way, shape, or form, it could kill Cali. It wasn’t something I could risk.

I thought of the three witches. I needed a solid answer from them about whatever spell it was that they’d performed on me. And after that was done, I could be official co-Alpha, do my best, and help nip the Vanguard threat in the bud. Everything was just going so out of order.

“Anyway,” Cali went on, “I know I’ll be safe.” She pointed between me and Xavier. “After all, with both of you by my side, who’s going to dare mess with me?”

She said that last part cheekily, but there was something off about her delivery.

My eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Is there another reason why you want to come, Cali?”

“What do you mean?” she asked innocently. “I just want to help!”

She was lying. I was sure of it now. She could never fool me.

“Did something happen earlier?” I asked. “Because you seemed shaken when we met up in the woods, and you said it was because you were worried, but I’m not sure if I believe that…”

Cali’s eyes widened before she chuckled awkwardly. “What? No, I’m fine. It’s fine!”

I stared at her. “Cali, is there a chance that you saw something in the woods that you didn’t tell us about?”

“No, nope,” she said, shaking her head vehemently.

I wasn’t buying this. At all. I needed to talk to Cali alone.

“I’m going to go check on your dad,” Xavier told Cali, tugging on her arm. “You wanna come with?”

“Sure,” Cali said, but I grabbed her other arm.

“She’ll be there in a second,” I told my brother, then turned to my mate. “I need to talk to you in private for a moment, okay?”

Cali swallowed roughly but still pretended to be cool. “Sure.”

Xavier huffed, glaring at me before walking into the house. I was relieved that he hadn’t made a fuss over me speaking to Cali without him present. The little jerk had finally learned some boundaries.

“Let’s go inside, where it’s warm,” I told Cali, and she followed me in cautiously.

She was most definitely hiding something from me. There was no doubt about it.

I pulled her aside in the hallway and gave her a long, hard stare. “Cali.”

She stared up at me with wide eyes. “What?”

“Cali, I don’t like it when you lie to me,” I said.

Her cheeks flushed. “Lying? How am I lying to you? I never lie to you!”

I raised an eyebrow. “I can always tell when you’re not being truthful.”

She blushed even harder. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

I stopped myself from smiling. “Cali, seriously—did something happen in the woods?”

She groaned, rolling her eyes. “Okay, fine! That werewolf girl Rishika told you about …”

“What?”

Cali shifted on her feet. “She mentioned something about a wolf with grey eyes…” She glanced up at me, our gazes locking. Instantly, I felt the bond between us vibrate, that thrill we shared intensifying like always.

In the meantime, Cali started rambling.

“She said she was going to be that wolf’s mate—and that’s *you*, Greyson!” Cali huffed. “There’s no other wolf with grey eyes in our pack, and she said she was going to be your mate, just like that. Out of the blue! She seemed very sure of herself.” She crossed her arms over her chest, sticking out her lower lip.

She was fucking *adorable*.

I chuckled. “Do you *really* think I would just randomly become that girl’s mate?”

She looked up at me, still annoyed. “*No*. But it rubbed me the wrong way. This pack is coming in here trying to dictate how we do things! I’m not gonna let it slide—that’s why I want to go to the party.”

I smirked. “Ah ha! So you do have another reason why you want to come.”

Cali gave me a sheepish look. “Yeah…”

I arched an eyebrow, tilting my head to the side. “You were jealous?”

She shook her head. “No. No, I *wasn’t*.”

She was protesting a little too much.

I stepped forward and she stepped back, her back brushing the wall. I lowered my head to look into her beautiful eyes, take in her gorgeous scent. “Were you feeling jealous and protective of me?”

She rolled her eyes, dropping her hands to her sides. “*Maybe*.”

I put a hand against the wall behind her, boxing her in. I heard her breathing shift and leaned down closer, my heart starting to beat faster and faster. Her warmth was driving me nuts, her heated gaze making me shiver.

My voice low, I asked, “Do I need to prove that you have nothing to worry about?”

**Episode 1978**

I looked down at the floorboards as heat rushed to my face. “Of course you don’t have to prove anything to me,” I murmured. Then I looked up, right into Greyson’s eyes, and admitted what I was thinking. “But I guess I wouldn’t mind if you tried.”

Greyson’s eyebrows went up in surprise. Then his face broke into a warm smile, and he took a step closer to me. “I have to admit, love, I sort of like seeing you jealous.”

“I’m *not* jealous—” I started hotly.

“It means you’re thinking of me,” he said quietly, his gaze intense. “And I’m a wolf, I don’t mind if my mate gets a little territorial.”

“I-I—” I stammered, without any real idea of what I was going to say. But it suddenly occurred to me how close Greyson was standing, and how many people could see us, and I took a step back, my cheeks still flaming. “What I really want to know is why you’re so opposed to me going to this Vanguard party tomorrow night.”

But Greyson wasn’t fooled. “Cali, am I crazy, or are you trying to change the subject?” he asked, smirking.

Of course I was trying to change the subject, but I wasn’t about to admit it. “I just want you to recognize how useful I could be to you,” I said, shrugging. “You’re always talking about protecting me, but I can protect you, too, you know.”

“I know that, Cali, but—”

“And Xavier agrees with me,” I added quickly.

Greyson frowned at this, and my stomach clenched. *Shit*. What had I just done? I was trying to prove my point, but I hoped I hadn’t just started another stupid argument between my mates.

“I just wish you and Xavier could figure this out,” I said, twisting my hands together nervously. “I wish you two would stop getting into fights about every little thing.”

“Deciding to let you walk into the den of a rival pack is hardly a *little thing*,” Greyson pointed out. “We don’t know anything about the Vanguard pack, Cali. And this Lucian guy sounds like he’s got an agenda. And—like you’ve just brought up—there’s a lot to consider.”

I narrowed my eyes. “If you think I’m going to let you go over there unescorted, knowing that this Aysel person has her heart set on you, you’re dreaming.”

Greyson grinned. “I was right.”

“Right about what?” I demanded.

“You *are* jealous!” he said.

I rolled my eyes with a huff. “Fine, maybe I am. A *little*. But I’m also smart. I’m not helpless, and I can defend myself, as I’ve proven time and time again. You could use a Fae in your corner if things start getting dangerous, Greyson.”

He didn’t look convinced. “I don’t know…”

“You know, the Redwood pack is going to look weak if they show up to this thing without a Luna,” I said warningly.

“Hang on,” Greyson said, his voice suddenly firm. “Let’s get one thing straight, Cali. I’m not going to make you a Luna—which is a *huge* decision—just so I can look tough in front of the Vanguard pack.”

“That’s not what I’m suggesting,” I said, flustered. “I just think you should consider it. For down the road.” I could feel myself blushing again.

Greyson didn’t answer right away. He looked out the window over my shoulder, his eyes on the wide lawn and the trees beyond. “There’s a lot to work out,” he finally said, his gaze still distant. “A lot of things still unresolved. I still haven’t agreed to co-Alpha with Xavier.”

“I know, but—”

“And making you the Luna of this pack has a lot of unknown risks,” he continued quietly. It was almost like he was speaking to himself—like he was reminding himself of certain things. “You’re not a werewolf. You’re half Fae, Cali. There are a lot of variables here. It could be dangerous. We just don’t know. These are risks I’m not willing to take—”

“*Fine!*” I said, frustration bubbling up in my chest. “That’s fine. If you don’t want to make me Luna—whatever. But why aren’t you willing to be co-Alpha?”

“Because I’m not,” he snapped, looking down at me, his eyes flashing.

I stared at him, taken aback by his sudden anger. “Are you not willing,” I started, “or just undecided?”

He shook his head, his jaw flexing. “I don’t want to talk about this right now.”

“Why not?” I demanded.

“Because I’m not.” He tipped his chin toward the other pack members, who were milling about near the kitchen, where Torin had set out a cheese plate for people to nibble on. “Besides, we’re supposed to be celebrating Thanksgiving today.” He gave his head a little shake. “And shouldn’t you be checking on your dad?”

But I wasn’t ready to let the matter drop. I planted my feet, ready to do battle. “Greyson—”

He bent and dropped a kiss on my forehead. “I’m going on patrol. I’ll see you later.”

I watched him as he walked away from me, heading out the door. I kept my eyes on him as he walked toward the edge of the property boundaries. He shifted and started running—sprinting until he was out of sight. What the hell was going on with him? What wasn’t he telling me? It wasn’t that I didn’t have a good argument for my points—I knew I did. But everything always got so complicated and confusing with Greyson. Sometimes it felt like we were having two different conversations.

But he was right about one thing—I really did need to go check on my dad. I just hoped he was dressed.

I found my mom and Xavier in the living room, but I stopped in the doorway, surprised to see that my dad was still in his wolf form.

“Why hasn’t Dad shifted back?” I asked, frowning. I looked around the room. “Is he waiting for clothes? I can go grab something from his room—”

“No, sweetheart, he has clothes,” my mom said, pointing to a small pile of clothes on a chair near the fireplace. Her face was tense and strained, which made fear flutter in my chest.

“What’s the problem, then?” I demanded, stepping into the room. “Is he stuck?”

I could feel my anxiety rising. I thought of Lola, and how she had gotten stuck while shifting. It had been terrible and excruciating. What would that be like for my parents, if my mom had to live with my dad as a wolf? It had been hard enough for my mom to adjust to the idea of him being a werewolf—but an actual wolf? Forever?

But before I could fully spiral into panic, Xavier shook his head.

“No, he’s not stuck, he just doesn’t want to shift back.”

I frowned. “Wait, what?”

Xavier nodded. “Yeah.”

I turned to my dad. “What the hell does that mean? What are you doing?” I asked, though it felt weird addressing my questions to a wolf.

“I’ve been trying to convince him to shift back,” Xavier explained. “But he just… won’t. Your mom’s been trying, too, but nothing we say seems to be working.”

I looked over at my mom. “What should we do?”

My mom looked strained, and when she took a breath, it looked like she was fighting not to cry. “I don’t know what to do, Cali. I’ve asked him to shift back, Xavier’s explained how to do it. I think he can understand us.” She pressed her lips into a thin line and shook her head. “He was so nervous about shifting for the first time. I just never imagined he would want to stay a wolf.”

It broke my heart to see my mom so upset. I turned to Xavier. “Mind link with him. Maybe he’s confused or something. Tell him that we miss him and want him to shift back. Ask him why he won’t,” I urged.

“Just talk to him,” Xavier said, gesturing to my dad. “He can hear you just fine.”

I looked at my dad—a.k.a. the wolf in the center of the living room. “Dad. We miss you. Please come back.”

The room was quiet for a moment. My mom took a shuddering breath. Then my dad whimpered and closed his dark eyes. He was shifting back.

“Oh, thank god,” I breathed. But then it occurred to me what was about to happen, and I closed my eyes, too, and turned away. I had absolutely no interest in seeing my father naked again—ever.

Then, behind me, there was a horrifying snapping, cracking sound, and my dad yelped in pain.

“Oh god, Tom!” my mom screamed, and I heard the sound of her dropping to the floor.

“What happened?” I demanded. I turned around and opened my eyes just a crack to peek.

My dad was on the floor of the living room, partially shifted. He was writhing on the floor, clearly in agony.

“Oh my god,” I gasped out. “He really is stuck!”

**Episode 1979**

CHARLIE

Violet just stared at me, not answering my question. I swallowed hard. I knew asking her to join my family for Christmas was kind of a big ask, but her response—or lack thereof—was making me really nervous.

Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything. I probably shouldn’t have. I was too eager too soon. I felt my ears get hot, the way they always did when I got nervous, and my stomach twisted with embarrassment. “Honestly, it’s not a big deal, I just thought—”

“Have you talked to your mom about this?” Violet asked, cutting me off. She sounded mad. Uh oh.

“Um… yeah. I mean, no, not exactly,” I stammered, feeling even more nervous now. “I mean, it came up.”

“*And?*” Violet pressed.

“And… she’d didn’t disagree. But I guess she didn’t exactly agree, either,” I admitted.

Violet sighed and rubbed the bridge of her nose. “That’s not exactly an encouraging sign, Charlie.”

“I know things between you and my mom aren’t the best, Violet,” I said quickly, “but the holidays will be the perfect time for you two to get to know each other better. And it’ll be my first Christmas as a werewolf. I want to spend it with you.”

Violet thought about this for a moment. “Yeah, I want to spend it with you, too. But there are other ways to do that, ways that don’t involve spending it with your parents. You know, it wasn’t so long ago that your mom literally wanted to kill me, remember?”

“Yeah, of course I remember. I’m not likely to forget that in a hurry. But things are different now,” I insisted. “Since the attack at the hunter camp, my mom has had a chance to see how much you care about me, and how much I care about you.”

Violet looked down at her snack list. “I don’t know, Charlie.” She was quiet for a moment. “Why do you want me there?”

“*What?*” I asked, shocked. “What does that mean?”

She looked up at me. “Do you want me there because you want to spend Christmas with me? Or because you want to prove something to your parents?”  
 “I—” I started, then stopped.

*Was* I being selfish to want her there? *Was* I putting her in danger? She was a werewolf, and my entire family was made up of hunters. Of course I wanted Violet with me, but when I thought about it like that, I had to admit that it did sound risky.

I took her hand. “I would never force you to do anything you weren’t comfortable with, Violet. Not that you’d ever let me,” I added, and she gave a wan smile. “I’m extending the invitation. You don’t have to answer right now. Just think about it, okay?”

Violet hesitated for a moment, then nodded. “Okay. I’ll think about it. But I think you should talk to your mom again. Clarify her position on the subject. I don’t want any Christmas surprises of the crossbow variety.”

“Yeah, I don’t either,” I said, nodding. “I’ll talk to her again.” Though the thought of it filled me with dread. The last time I’d spoken to my mom, she’d left the ball in my court. If I wanted to invite Violet, that was my decision.

I really did want Violet to be with me for Christmas. It wasn’t about proving anything to my parents, but I guess I did want to show them how much she and I meant to each other. And for them to see what an amazing person she was. I’d thought it was a win-win situation, but now that I’d talked about it with her, I was starting to wonder if it was really such a great idea. I wasn’t sure what to do.

Maybe I could talk to my dad about all this. He was a more reasonable presence when my mom and I butted heads… at least in the past. But he was definitely the quicker one to come around to my being a werewolf. Maybe he could convince my mom to just chill out.

Bracing my hands on the cold countertop, I heaved a gusty sigh. If Violet were a normal human girl, I was sure my mom would welcome her with open arms. Violet was just the kind of badass my mom would really like—if she could just give her a real chance.

My mom had always welcomed Sandi. I did a bit of a double take, feeling a little surprised. It had been weeks since I’d even thought of Sandi. I’d had a lot going on, so it wasn’t all that surprising, but she’d been such a big part of my life for so long, and now I barely thought about her. It felt strange. I’d thought I loved Sandi. I’d definitely *liked* her—we’d had a good time. But now I knew that what I felt for her hadn’t really been love. It was nothing like what I had with Violet.

Pulling myself from my thoughts, I looked over at Violet. She was looking up at me, her gaze watchful.

“Where’d you go?” she asked.

I shrugged. “Just thinking.” I reached for her and pulled her into my arms. “I’m sorry. I don’t want to pressure you to do anything you’re not comfortable with. Spending Christmas with my parents was just an idea. It really doesn’t matter. All that matters is being with you. I got a little carried away, but I don’t care where I am, as long as I get to spend the holidays with my mate.”

Violet smiled and wrapped her arms around my neck, hugging me back. “I get it, Charlie. I want that, too.”

We stood for a long moment, just holding each other in the quiet kitchen. It felt good to have her near, and to know she wanted me near, too.

“And you know what?” Violet said, leaning back so she could look up at me. “Christmas is a month away. We’ve got time to figure this out, right?”

“Right.” I nodded. “We’ve got time.”

“But what do you want to do now?” she continued.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Violet smiled. “I mean, it’s our first Thanksgiving together, Charlie. We shouldn’t waste it.”

“You’re right,” I said grinning. “I want it to be special, too. I’ll help you set up movie night. I think I saw a projector in the den.

“Great.” Violet stood on her tiptoes and kissed my cheek. “Thanks, Charlie. I’ll make the popcorn.”

She turned on her heel and headed toward the pantry, so happy she was practically skipping.

I smiled to myself as I watched her go. I loved seeing her so happy. I turned and headed toward the den, where I checked all the cabinets until I found the projector. I was looking forward to movie night—holding Violet in my arms, feeding her popcorn, stealing a kiss in the dark… Nothing too intense, of course. We were going to be there with Lilac and Marta, so we’d have to keep it PG. Especially considering Lilac’s chilly demeanor toward me.

I sighed as I plugged in the projector. Violet might have had some issues with my mom, but it seemed like I had a few issues with Violet’s brother. I guess families were just complicated.

But maybe this date night would help Lilac and me clear the air. It wasn’t like I blamed the guy—he was just being protective of his sister. I understood that. Even if it was getting in my way.

The smell of freshly popped popcorn reached me, and I looked up, sniffing the air expectantly. I was stuffed full of turkey and potatoes and pie, but somehow the smell of that popcorn got my mouth watering again. But… how could that be? I was too far from the kitchen to actually smell it. Was it just my imagination, given I’d been thinking of it since Violet had mentioned it?

Or could I actually smell it? Was that my enhanced werewolf senses kicking in?

I tested out the projector and headed toward the kitchen to find out for sure, but before I got there, I ran into Marta in the hallway.

“Hey,” I said, smiling. “Ready for movie night?”

Marta looked pale but relieved to see me. “Hey, Charlie. I was looking for you. Can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Sure,” I said, surprised. Confused, I followed her back into the den. “What’s up?”  
 Marta looked at the projector, then turned to me, her expression nervous. “Listen, I know Violet is excited about this, and I really don’t want to hurt her feelings or anything…” She trailed off.

I looked at her, feeling awkward. I wasn’t sure what she’d been about to say, or if I was supposed to just infer the rest. I didn’t really know Marta all that well.

“Yeah, of course not,” I said, trying to keep it casual. “So what’s wrong?”

Marta looked up at me, her eyes scared. “I can’t do this.”

“What?” I asked, baffled. “What can’t you do?”

**Episode 1980**

XAVIER

“Okay, okay, everyone needs to just calm down,” I said loudly, talking over Orla’s gasps and Tom’s growls. Cali was looking terrified, and I was starting to feel pretty edgy myself. “Listen, we just have to stay calm. Shifting shouldn’t be a complicated process, but there are clearly some issues happening here. Let’s just try to figure out what they are before anyone freaks out, okay?”

Orla grabbed for Cali’s hands, her face white as a sheet.

Cali nodded, swallowing hard. “Okay,” she whispered.

“Okay.” I looked over at Tom, who was looking around the living room, his hackles raised.

*What’s going on, Tom?* I asked.

Tom shook his shaggy head. His head was still wolf, and so were his torso and legs, but his arms were human. The effect was pretty fucking disturbing. *I don’t know. I’m stuck, Xavier. I—I don’t know what to do*.

Shit. He was stuck? I really hoped I was going to be able to fix this.

I took a deep breath. *Are you okay?* I asked.

*I don’t know. I think so. But it hurts like hell, Xavier.*

*What does?*

*Everything.* Tom looked up, taking in Cali and Orla’s worried faces. *I don’t want them to see me like this. Orla and Cali, I don’t want them here for this.*

When I glanced over, Orla and Cali were watching us closely. Orla’s knuckles were white as she clutched Cali’s hands.

*Gotta be honest, man, I don’t think I’m going to be able to get them to leave until they know you’re okay.*

“Xavier?” Cali asked, her eyes darting between her dad and me. “Is everything okay?”

I didn’t know how to answer her question, so I knelt down next to Tom, looking him right in the eye.

*Do you know how to do it, Tom? Is that what’s going on? Do you not know how to shift back?*

He shook his furry head again.

*Then what? Is it something else?*

He huffed. *I’m scared shitless*, he admitted. *It hurts already. What if I screw it up? What if I do it wrong?*

“Xavier?” Cali asked again, stepping forward to crouch down next to me. “What’s happening? Are you talking to him? What’s going on? What’s my dad saying?”

“Everything’s fine, Cali.” I took her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “It’s going to be okay. Your dad’s just a little nervous. It always happens the first time someone shifts. It’s nothing to worry about.”

Her eyes scanned his half-human, half-wolf form. “This looks like something to worry about.”

“Just trust me, okay?” I said.

She still looked scared, but she nodded. “Okay.”

I turned back to Tom. *Listen, I know it seems weird to you now, but shifting is totally natural for a werewolf. But you do have to get used to it. Your body has to get used to it. That’s why you’re feeling pain. But you will shift back, I promise. If you give it a chance.*

Tom didn’t look convinced. He wouldn’t look at me, but I could see it in his eyes.

I felt a little flare of frustration, but I knew Cali was counting on me, so I took a deep breath, reminding myself to be patient.

*Your wolf is part of you now, Tom. Someday, shifting is going to be like taking a breath—it’ll be so natural, you’ll do it without a single thought. You won’t even remember what it felt like to be nervous about it. And if you ever need a hand, you know I’ll be there. I’ll help you through it.*

Tom looked at me, finally meeting my eyes. *Okay*, he said, and his mental voice sounded calmer. *I’m ready.*

I breathed a sigh of relief. Great.

I looked up at Orla. “He’s ready, but maybe we should give him some cover before he shifts.”

Orla grabbed a blanket from the back of the couch and spread it over Tom.

“Thank you, Xavier,” Cali said quietly.

I nodded at her and leaned closer to Tom. *You’ve got this, Tom. Come on.*

Tom closed his eyes, and I saw his muscles tense beneath the blue fleece blanket. He gave a howl of pain as his body began to writhe. Then, with the sound of snapping bone and the crackle of cartilage, Tom was back, shifted into his human form.

Cali gasped and twisted her hands together, her eyes bright with tears. “Dad!”

Orla dropped to the floor and pulled him into a tight hug. “You’re back! Oh, Tom!” she murmured, pressing her face into his shoulder.

“Okay, up you get,” I said, grasping Tom’s arm and helping him to his feet. “How are you feeling?”

Tom tightened the blanket around his naked chest and took a deep breath. “Honestly, I’m pretty worn out. Is shifting always that exhausting?”

“No,” I said with a smile. “Once you do it a few times, you’ll probably start feeling energized by the process. I always do.”

“Oh, Tom. You need to rest.” Orla slipped her shoulder beneath Tom’s arm, supporting him. “Let’s get you upstairs.”

I watched as they hobbled out of the living room, and when I turned around, Cali was looking at me, smiling through her tears. “He’s going to be fine, Cali, there’s no need to worry about him—”

“I know. Thank you, Xavier. You were amazing with my dad. Thank you for staying so calm with all of us. You were incredible.”

I shrugged, trying to look casual, but I felt warmed by her compliments. “I didn’t help him just because he’s your dad, Cali. I’ve got a responsibility to the pack. Helping new werewolves is part of my duty as Alpha.” I ran a hand through my hair. “Or it will be, if I end up as Alpha for real. Or however the hell this all works.”

Cali stepped forward and wrapped her arms around me. I liked hearing her compliments, but I *loved* the way her body felt against mine, and I pulled her even closer.

She smiled up at me. “You can deny it all you want, Xavier, but I know the truth.”

“And what’s the truth?” I asked, looking down at her beautiful face.

“That you *care*,” she said with a smirk.

I rolled my eyes and looked away. “I just did what was right. I was running on instinct.”

“Well.” She reached up on tiptoe so our lips were only millimeters apart. “I think your instincts are incredible.” And she pressed her lips to mine.

It suddenly became very apparent that I was naked.

“I think I might go grab a shower,” I murmured, leaning back just far enough to see Cali blush as she felt me against her. “Maybe get dressed. I want to grab some of that pie before it’s all gone.”

She nodded. “That sounds good.”

I kissed her again, then pulled myself away. “You save me some of that apple pie, okay? I’ll be back down in a second.”

“Okay,” she said, her eyes tracking down my body.

I turned toward the stairs, wishing to hell that she would come with me. But she probably wanted to check on her dad again, so I headed up to my room.

As I stepped into the shower, I realized that I hadn’t thought of anything else besides Tom since we’d gotten back to the house, but now that I had a moment to myself, my thoughts went back to the Vanguard pack.

I closed my eyes against the warm shower spray. Maybe I shouldn’t have agreed to let Cali come to this Vanguard party—but she’d made a strong argument. She did have powerful Fae magic, and it had saved my ass more than once. It could definitely come in handy.

Anyway, it wasn’t as risky as it could be. Both Greyson and I could keep an eye on her if things got out of control.

I scrubbed a bar of soap across my shoulders. Of course, we’d be leaving the pack house vulnerable. With both Greyson and me—the so-called co-Alphas—gone, who was going to be Alpha in our place? I scrubbed the soap across my face. That was going to have to be something Greyson and I discussed—though I wasn’t looking forward to that prospect. Maybe I could leave Rishika in charge. She was probably the most skilled fighter in the pack. And she had some strong leadership qualities. But she did tend to lean toward Greyson, when push came to shove.

Maybe Jay would be a better choice. He was a friend, and I knew I could trust him. And he’d proven himself to be a tough fighter, too.

The water was starting to cool, so I turned up the heat. The bathroom started to fill with steam, and my thoughts were interrupted by the soft chink of the door opening.

I wiped water from my face and looked through the frosted glass of the shower door. Through it, I could see a diffused form. It was a woman with dark hair, and she shut the door behind herself. I squinted at the woman—

Oh shit. Was that Ava? Had she come back?

**Episode 1981**

MARTA

“I’m confused,” Charlie said, scratching his head. “What can’t you do?”

I sighed. “I can’t do movie night.”

Charlie frowned at me, clearly confused. “I don’t understand, Marta. Why can’t you?”

Ugh, how did I explain this? “I just—*can’t*.”

His frown deepened. “You know you don’t actually have to do anything except sit there and watch a movie. It’s pretty easy.”

I shifted uncomfortably. “It’s not the movie. It’s because… because…”

I rubbed a hand across my eyes with a groan. How the hell was I going to explain this?

“Because?” Charlie prompted.

“Because I haven’t been on a date in fifty years!” I exploded. “I don’t know how to act, I don’t know what to say!” I could feel myself blushing. I felt ridiculous even saying all this, but how else was I supposed to explain it?

Charlie ran his hand through his hair, looking a little strained. “I mean, I know you and Lilac have spent a lot of time together already, so is this about being uncomfortable around Violet and me? Because—to be honest with you—I get where you’re coming from. Lilac and I aren’t exactly pals. He caught me trying to buy condoms and things have been kinda tense ever since.” He raised his eyebrows. “Doesn’t get more awkward than that.”

I laughed when he grinned at me. I could see why Violet loved Charlie. He made it easy to like him. “Well, my awkward moment with Violet wasn’t buying condoms, but she did… walk in on us. On Lilac and me… you know.” I could feel my cheeks burning. “Things have been kind of weird between us since. Not that I blame her.”

Charlie laughed. “Okay, okay, that’s worse than my story. But come on, Marta.” He shrugged. “The only way to overcome the awkwardness is to try.”

“I don’t know,” I said, twisting my hands together.

Charlie put a comforting hand on my shoulder. I flinched, but then I remembered I had the bracelets. My magic was capped, and I couldn’t hurt anyone. “Hey, if it’s too weird, you can always pull the old, ‘this movie sucks, I’m going to bed’ excuse. That always works.”

I smiled. “Well, I hope I won’t have to.”

Charlie’s face lit up. “Does that mean you’re in for the movie?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“Excellent,” Charlie said, looking pleased with himself.

“Thanks for the pep talk, coach.”

He grinned. “I’ve played organized sports all my life. Some habits are hard to break. But they come in handy every now and then, right?’

“Absolutely. And thanks again.”

“No problem,” Charlie said, giving my shoulder a gentle punch.

“Do you know what movie we’re watching?” I asked.

He shook his head. “No idea. I was going to leave it up to Violet, since the whole thing was her idea.”

“Maybe we could watch *Barefoot in the Park*. That one’s so romantic,” I said, starting to feel excited for the first time.

Charlie cocked his head with a frown. “Barefoot in the what?”

I rolled my eyes. “*Barefoot in the Park*. It’s a romantic comedy.” There was no spark of recognition. “Jane Fonda is in it. And Robert Redford is pretty handsome,” I said with a sigh. “Paul and Corie get married, and they’re total opposites, but they have this great chemistry and…” I trailed off. “You have no idea what movie I’m talking about, do you?”

“None at all,” Charlie confirmed, shaking his head.

“It came out in 1967, and you were born in…”

“2001,” Charlie supplied.

“Oh my god,” I said, dropping my face into my hands. “Yeah, so that’s probably why you’ve never heard of it. I guess our cultural touchpoints aren’t going to be quite the same.”

Charlie laughed. “I guess not. But movie night isn’t really about the movie.”

“So what’s it about, then?” I asked.

He shrugged. “It’s about being with the person you love.”

I felt my face heat as my thoughts went to Lilac. *Love* was a strong word—and we hadn’t said it to each other yet. Did I love him? I wasn’t sure. I had called him back from the other side of mortality, yeah, but was calling what we had “love” going a step too far?

“Anyway,” Charlie said, looking around, “maybe we can start getting things ready.”

“And how do we do that?” I asked, looking around the den.

Charlie shrugged. “Put some of these pillows from the couch down on the floor, get some blankets. Just make things cozy as hell.”

“—and *I* think we should go with something romantic,” Violet said, stepping into the room, her arms full of a giant bowl of popcorn.

Lilac looked annoyed. “I think we should watch something that has some action.”

“Lilac—”

“At least something scary, then,” he conceded.

“Forget it,” Violet said firmly.

Lilac rolled his eyes and turned to Charlie and me. “Okay, let’s poll the room. Wouldn’t you two rather watch a horror movie than some cheesy rom-com?”

Violet shook her head. “We’ve been through enough horror in real life, Lilac. It would be nice to forget about that for one night and watch something light and funny. Like a rom-com.”

Lilac groaned like he’d just been shot. “Rom-coms *are* horror films, Vi.” He looked over at Charlie. “What do you think, Chuck?”

Charlie looked a little surprised by the question, and he looked quickly to me. “Whatever you want to watch is okay with me,” he said, lobbing the responsibility for the answer in my direction.

I turned to Violet. “Maybe something funny—without the romance. A comedy? *It’s a* *Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* is always good.”

Now I had three blank stares aimed in my direction.

Why was I even trying at this point? “Forget it.”

“Listen,” Violet said, shaking her head, “movie night was *my* idea, so *I* get to choose the movie. We’ll watch *The Devil Wears Prada*. It’s a classic!”

Lilac groaned again. “That’s going to be torture.” He turned to me. “What do you think? Does that sound good to you? Or should we watch literally anything else?”

“Um…” I said hesitantly. I had no idea what movie Violet was talking about, but I was reluctant to take sides—not when things were so weird with Violet.

“How about we start it, but we follow the ten minute rule,” Charlie suggested. “As a compromise.”

“What’s the ten minute rule?” I asked.

“We start a movie, and if after ten minutes, we don’t like it, we’ll try another.” He looked around. “Does that work for everyone?”

Violet and Lilac nodded.

“Great,” he said, rubbing his hands together.

Lilac looked over at me. “Wait, why are you still wearing your clothes, Marta?”

I stared at him in shock. “*What?* I thought we were watching a movie! Am I supposed to *take off my clothes* for this?”

Lilac chuckled. “No.” He gestured at his T-shirt and sweats. “Pajamas. I’m wearing them, you should too. To be comfy.”

“Oh. Sure. Okay,” I said, “I’ll go upstairs to change.”

I turned tail and hurried up the stairs, my face burning with embarrassment. Of course he didn’t expect me to take off my clothes. What was I thinking?

When I got to my room and pulled out my pajamas, I took a deep breath. I was probably overthinking this. Charlie was right—I just had to face this. And thanks to his little pep talk, I was feeling a lot better about the double date.

Back down in the living room, I stopped in the doorway, surprised. The den was dark, and Charlie, Violet, and Lilac were all sitting on the floor at the foot of the sofa, wrapped in blankets and propped up with pillows. I looked at the three of them, confused. Was this how a movie night worked?”

Lilac looked up and smiled, then patted the blanket next to him. There was an empty spot between him and Charlie.

I felt stiff and self-conscious, but I stepped over and slid beneath the blankets that Lilac held open.

“Okay,” Violet said brightly, picking up the remote control. “Let’s do this!”

The cheery notes of the opening credits started, booming through the speakers at the back of the room. I didn’t recognize any of the names of the actors as they flashed up on the screen, but there was something inherently lulling about the start of a movie, and I settled against Lilac as Charlie passed us the popcorn.

The movie was light and funny and nice to look at, and I had to admit that Violet was right—it *was* nice to escape for a while. I was glad we hadn’t decided on a horror movie.

Andy Sachs was just getting the hang of her new job when I felt something rubbing slowly against my foot.

I smiled down at Lilac—but my heart felt like it stopped when I realized that he was asleep. I could feel the blood draining from my face as I shifted my gaze to my other side. Was *Charlie* playing footsie with me?

Wait a second… Whose foot was that?!

**Episode 1982**

The bathroom was hot and steamy when I opened the door, and I was immediately engulfed in the mist as I walked in. As I slipped out of my clothes, I felt strange—like I was having an out-of-body experience or something. I felt… *bad*. Like one of those bad girls I’d always been warned not to turn into. This kind of thing wasn’t something I would normally do. But I needed a shower, too, and why waste water?

Okay, maybe it wasn’t strictly about the water. I cared about water conservation and saving the planet and everything, but it wasn’t like I was about to rob a bank or anything. So maybe I could admit I’d come in here with some ulterior motives. Like looking forward to a steamy kiss… or maybe more.

But when I opened the shower door, I stopped, and felt the smile slide off my face.

Xavier did *not* look happy to see me. He didn’t look excited or aroused. He looked agitated.

Heat rushed to my face as I felt myself blush scarlet. I took a step back, my eyes darting to the bathroom door. Maybe this was a mistake. Maybe I should just get out of here.

But Xavier’s expression suddenly softened. “Cali?” he asked, almost as though he was surprised.

This stopped me. “Were you expecting someone else?”

He shrugged. “I guess I wasn’t expecting anyone.” His eyes tracked down my body. “But since you’re here…” He reached for me and pulled me into the warm shower spray.

“*Hey!*” I protested, closing my eyes against the water.

When I opened them again, wiping the water from my face, his grin was cocky.

“Just couldn’t stay away from me, could you?”  
 “I—I was just out tramping through the woods. I needed a shower,” I spluttered.

Xavier laughed. “I should call Phil in. What with your own shower being broken and everything.”

Even in the warmth of the shower, I could feel my cheeks growing hot. “I didn’t want to… waste water,” I said, but even I could hear how feeble the explanation sounded. “And besides—”

But Xavier covered my mouth with a kiss, silencing me. The kiss was searing, but too short, and he pulled away with a smirk. “I know why you’re here, Cali, and I’m happy about it.”

“Xavier, it’s not what you think—”

“You can throw every excuse in the book at me, Cali, but the truth is obvious,” he said, his gaze drifting down my body.

“And what’s the truth?” I asked, resisting the urge to grab the washcloth to shield myself from his gaze, embarrassed.

He looked at me, his blue eyes laughing. “That I’m completely irresistible.”

I rolled my eyes and turned. “This was a mistake. I should go—”

“Hey, would you help me out?” he said, touching my wrist.

“What?” I sputtered. “With what?”

He put a soapy loofa into my hand with a smile. “My back needs some attention. There’s a spot I just can’t reach,” he said, turning his back on me.

I stared at him, then down at the loofah in my hand. Then my eyes went back to his back. I took in the tan skin and the water slicking over the corded muscles. My eyes followed the path of the water down the canal his spine made, all the way down to the curve of his ass.

Without realizing it, I’d started squeezing the loofah, and I eased my grip. Part of me was annoyed as hell with him. Did he really think it was that easy? That I’d shown up just to be his personal shower attendant? What was next? Shining his shoes?

Xavier cleared his throat and glanced over his shoulder.

“I’m waiting. Just here,” he said, pointing to a spot just below his shoulder blades.

The movement of his arm made the muscles in his back ripple beneath the skin, and I didn’t think I was imagining that he was actively flexing—maybe for emphasis.

I considered smacking him over the head with the loofah. He certainly would’ve deserved it.

But then I thought back to the moments in the living room with my dad. How in control he’d been—how patient and calm he’d been. He’d helped my dad through his first time shifting, and made us all feel better in a scary moment.

“Anytime, now,” Xavier said, his voice teasing.

I smiled. The truth was, I really didn’t mind at all. So I pressed the loofah to his back.

“Yeah, that’s it,” Xavier murmured, his voice low. “And how about there?” he said, flexing another spot at the top of his shoulders. “And don’t forget here,” he said, flexing the trapezius muscles at the sides of his neck.

I smothered a laugh and scrubbed where he flexed. It was like a sexy, soapy version of Whac-A-Mole, and I ruled at that game.

“How about here?” I asked, moving the loofah downward, pushing hard at the small of his back.

Xavier let out a groan of pleasure as I massaged the tight muscles. He braced his hands against the tile wall and closed his eyes as I worked on the knots.

“Feeling better?” I asked.

Instead of answering, Xavier spun around to face me. “Well, there is one spot that still needs attention.”

“Where?” I breathed. Looking into those intense blue eyes always made me feel slightly breathless.

Xavier lifted my chin and pressed his lips to mine. Our bodies were hot and slick, and he pulled me close, sliding his hands up my sides as his tongue slid into my mouth.

The loofah fell to my feet as I leaned into his kiss.

After a fiery moment, Xavier pulled away, his eyes amused as he looked at me. He bent and picked up the loofah from the shower floor, then poured on some more soap. “Okay. Now it’s your turn.”

I was about to speak, but my protests died on my lips as he slid the loofah across my shoulders. He spun me around and worked it in small circles on my back—half washing, half massaging. He moved downward, stopping right at the curve of my lower back, then moved the loofah to my hips.

Between the pressure and the heat and the feel of his hands on my skin, I was dizzy with want, and I opened my eyes to look at him. I wanted to signal to him that I wanted things to go further—and *fast*—but before I could do or say anything, Xavier turned off the water.

He stepped out of the shower, leaving the door open behind him, and I shivered in the cold breeze.

“Hey!” I said, pushing my wet hair from my eyes. “Xavier?”

He laughed as he grabbed for his towel. “Problem, Cali?”

I narrowed my eyes. “It’s abundantly clear that you were just as into that as I was, Xavier, so what’s *your* problem?”

He shrugged as he scrubbed the towel through his hair. “I don’t want you getting the wrong idea.”

“What does that mean?”

“I know what you wanted.” He looked at me with a grin. “But you have to earn it.”

I gaped at him. “Excuse me?”

“You think you can just walk right in here and get all this?” he asked, gesturing down his body.

Without meaning to, my eyes ranged over it—his wide shoulders and chest, tapering down to his flat stomach and six pack… My eyes were just gliding down the muscular indentions on either sides of his hips when he chuckled.

“Exactly,” he said, wrapping his towel around his waist. He handed me a towel with a wink. “You’re going to have to work a little harder than that first.”

I snatched the towel and held it to myself. My body was pulsing with his words, but I wasn’t going to let him get to me so easily. “And what the hell is that supposed to mean? What exactly did you have in mind?”

He cocked his head, clearly thinking. “I don’t know, exactly. I haven’t decided yet.”

I rolled my eyes. “This is absurd.”

He reached for me and pulled me out of the shower and against his body. He bent his head and kissed me.

“How about this?” he murmured, pulling back to look at me. “Either you can go down on me, or I can go down on you, but either way, I want to watch.”

“*Watch?*” I squeaked. My cheeks caught on fire. He couldn’t be serious, could he?

He nodded, his eyes blazing. “In front of the mirror.” He pressed himself harder against me and slid his hand down my naked hip. “I want to watch every move you make.”

I blinked mutely. *This* was what I’d come in here for, but I was already so aroused and so flustered by his proposition, I couldn’t seem to string words together into a sentence.

“Well?” he asked, raising an eyebrow. “You asked how you could work for it. Which is it going to be?”

**Episode 1983**

GREYSON

I dropped my head as I sprinted around the perimeter of the property, letting the cold November air fill up my lungs. We needed a patrol—especially with a new pack showing up in the area—so I’d taken it. It wasn’t my turn, but I wanted to give the others a break. We’d had enough stress recently; they should have a chance to enjoy Thanksgiving without hurrying off to prowl our borders.

Besides, I’d wanted to go. I needed time to think about things. My thoughts were tangled, and seemed to be running even faster than I was. Apart from everything else that was going on, I was troubled by the sudden emergence of the Vanguard pack. For a pack I’d never even heard of before a few days ago, they were suddenly making themselves very prominent. What their endgame was, I had no idea, but I didn’t like it.

Back before Silas had turned the packs against each other, it hadn’t been uncommon for packs to introduce themselves to other packs. It had always been done carefully and in times of peace, but it had been a way of establishing boundaries and mutual respect. But since the pack wars, no one trusted anyone anymore. The wars had changed everything, and unless they had a long history, most packs were suspicious of other packs and defended their territory viciously.

But the Vanguard pack was ignoring all that. Why? I kept thinking about it, turning it over and over in my mind, but I just couldn’t figure out what their agenda could be. I supposed it was possible that Lucian’s invite to this party could be nothing more than a friendly overture… But somehow, I doubted it. It was a just a gut feeling, but whatever Lucian had planned, I wished Cali didn’t have to be part of it.

I leaned left as the path curved toward the dark woods. I knew that whatever happened at the Vanguard party, I wasn’t going to leave Cali’s side. No matter what. Cali was my mate, and I planned on a having a future with her. It was the future that the three witches had dangled in front of me, tantalizing as the proverbial carrot. They’d taunted and teased me with visions of happiness and peace with Cali—a life and a family, far away from the responsibility and anxiety of my duties to the pack. And completely lacking the tension of the *due destini* with Xavier.

But I had to keep reminding myself that the sisters were witches. And like the Vanguard pack, I couldn’t trust them. I narrowed my eyes as a bitter wind whipped across my face, and my thoughts returned to the Vanguard pack. I didn’t know what to do about them, but I had to keep in mind that they’d done nothing overtly threatening to us. Yet. Which made me wonder if I was going to have to try to trust them for the sake of the pack. I didn’t like them, but the last thing I wanted right now was for the pack to get involved in another war.

As I rounded another curve, I pulled up short. Ravi was on the path ahead of me, in his wolf form.

*What are you doing here, man? Shouldn’t you be inside, enjoying Thanksgiving with everyone else?*

Ravi shook his shaggy head. *I guess I got a little greedy in there. Ate so much my jeans started feeling tight. Wanted to come out and run it off a little.*

I looked into his eyes. I had a feeling there was more to finding him out here than just overeating.

*Anything else on your mind?* I asked.

Ravi looked down at the dried grass at our feet. *I guess. Maybe. I’ve been thinking, and there is something that’s been bothering me.*

*Other than you sleeping with Ava?*

Ravi huffed a laugh. *Yeah. But I’m trying to take your advice and stay away from her. I’m doing pretty well. I haven’t seen her all night.*

That might have been good for Ravi—he needed the distance—but I wasn’t crazy about the fact that Ava wasn’t under constant watch.

*But, no, it’s not Ava that’s been on my mind. Actually, I’d rather not talk about her at all.*

*Can’t blame you for that*, I agreed

*It’s the Vanguard pack.*

*Really?* I asked, surprised.

*Yeah. I actually came out here to find you and talk to you about them*.

I narrowed my eyes. *What do you know about the pack?*

He shook his head. *Not much. I don’t know how helpful it is, but I have heard their name before.*

*When?* I asked quickly.

*Back when I was a Rogue. I got into it with some guy in a bar, once, and it was starting to get pretty physical, but this old guy pulled me aside and told me to walk away.*

*Why?*

*I asked around afterward, and it turned out the guy I was about to fight was a member of the Vanguard pack.*

*Did the old guy say anything else?* I asked. *When you talked to him?*

*He told me that I wouldn’t have walked out of the bar alive if I’d have tried fighting him. They’re some like, really old pack? I’d never heard of them. The Vanguard pack closes ranks—if you challenge one pack member, you’re challenging them all. If you fight one, you’re fighting them all. I mean, all packs are loyal, but for the Vanguards it’s like a freaking religion. Or a cult. I’ve heard they treat their Alpha—whatever his name is—*

*Lucian*,I supplied, a sinking feeling in my gut.

*Yeah, Lucian. I hear they treat him like he’s royalty or something.*

I thought back to the interactions we’d had. Lucian had referred to himself as a prince, but I’d just thought that was him being an asshole. Just part of the preening some Alphas tended to do. But Ravi’s information cast that comment in a whole different light.

*Honestly, Greyson, I’m not sure what any of it means*,Ravi said. *Maybe it’s nothing. I’ve just been thinking about it since that guy showed up at the engagement party, and I thought you should know about it.*

*Yeah, thanks*, I said, distractedly. *It’s better for me to know. The more you know about any opponent, the more prepared you can be. You did good, Ravi.*

Ravi nodded. *Okay*. *I’m going to head back inside. See if there’s any pie left.*

I watched him lope up toward the house, but I wasn’t really seeing him. I was trying to process the information he’d given me. It was… a lot. I appreciated that Ravi had told me what he knew, but I was hoping his information was exaggerated. And I hoped to hell the Vanguard pack wouldn’t turn out to be another cult, like the Manus Cruentae.

What if this “Prince” Lucian was another Ryker? That was the last thing I needed right now.

I looked up toward the house. Maybe I should talk to Xavier. Explain all this. Maybe I could convince him not to let Cali go tomorrow night. If we both agreed on that, maybe Cali wouldn’t get too stubborn about it. Maybe we could get her to see our side.

Though… maybe she did have a point. Showing up without her might be a crucial mistake. A pack without a Luna was regarded as weak. But Cali wasn’t the Luna—not really. And she couldn’t be. Putting aside the Luna ceremony—which was a huge question in and of itself—which Alpha would she even be Luna for?

I wasn’t even sure who the Alpha of the pack was right now. I didn’t think anyone else knew, either. I hadn’t agreed to co-Alpha, and Xavier was still claiming the title.

Frustration was starting to build within me, and I started to run again, anxious to release some of the energy gathering in my chest. I’d be damned if I allowed Cali to be Xavier’s Luna. That would happen over my dead body.

As much as I dreaded the thought, I was going to have to talk to Xavier.

I still needed to finish my perimeter check, so I turned toward the trees. After another half mile, I picked up a scent. It was unfamiliar—yet familiar. I sniffed the air again. It was a scent I’d come across before. I’d picked it up when we’d encountered the Vanguard pack.

My senses on high alert, I slowed my pace slightly. My heart was beating fast, but my head stayed clear, and I kept my eyes open, sweeping through the trees. I wasn’t going to take any chances, especially after talking with Ravi.

I followed the scent deeper into the forest, where the trees became denser and the scent became stronger. I stepped into a small clearing, and there, in a patch of moonlight as bright as a spotlight, was a white wolf.

Her coat was the impossible white of fresh-fallen snow, and when I stepped into the clearing, she turned, her gaze fixed on me.

*I’ve been waiting for you.*

**Episode 1984**

LOLA

When Jay and I got back to the pack house, it was hard to ignore the stares we attracted. Sage was sitting at one of the mostly abandoned tables, eating a slice of pie, and when she saw us, she leaned over and whispered to the girl next to her.

I supposed we did look a little… disheveled. We were covered in leaves, and when I put my hand to my hair, I found a few stray twigs. And we were *naked*. But who the hell cared? I loved Jay, and I wasn’t afraid to show it. So I grabbed his hand as we stalked through the tables, my head held high.

Though, when I saw an abandoned hoodie draped over the back of a chair, I snatched it up and pulled it on.

“Hey, look! A drumstick!”

I pulled my head through the sweatshirt just in time to see Jay grab a turkey drumstick from the platter in the middle of the table.

“Are you still hungry?” I asked incredulously.

“Absolutely,” he said, taking a huge bite. “Want some?” he asked, his mouth full.

I shook my head. “No thanks.”

I looked around, searching the yard for Big Mac. I *had* to find her. I had a million questions now that my wolf was back, and I figured she was the best person to ask. I didn’t see the witch, but Mrs. Smith spied me and walked over.

“Lola, there you are. Where have you been?”

“Um… Around,” I said vaguely.

Mrs. Smith cast a glance at the empty pie plates on the tables. “Have you had any pie? I’m sure there’s some left—”

“No, thanks. I don’t want any pie. I was looking for Big Mac. Do you know where she is?” I asked quickly.

“I think I saw her go inside,” Mrs. Smith said, looking a little confused.

“Great, thanks.” I turned on my heel and headed toward the house, but I stopped when Jacqueline stepped into my path. “Oh, it’s you.”

Jacqueline raised a delicate eyebrow. “So I guess I should apologize about the pregnancy thing, or whatever.”

I rolled my eyes. “You guess? Is that supposed to be the apology? You’re a little off the mark, Jacs.”

Jacqueline huffed, looking irritated. “Fine. I’m sorry. Okay?”

“Yeah, fine. That’ll do.”

“So, what happened?” Jacqueline asked, looking more relaxed. “Did you really think you were pregnant?”

“Would I have bought a test if I didn’t?” I demanded.

“I guess not,” Jacqueline admitted. She gave me an assessing look. “So, what’s it like?”

I rolled my eyes. I had to find Big Mac, and I really didn’t have time for Jacqueline’s games. “What’s what like?”

“You know.” Jacqueline held up her hands like claws. “Now that you’re a werewolf again. Is it different from being a vampire?”

Could this vamp be any weirder?

“I’m *still* a vampire,” I huffed, feeling slightly offended.

Jacqueline gave me a long look, like she was considering this. “You’re weird, you know that?”

“You’re weirder,” I shot back. “You’re a vampire staying with werewolves. In fact”—I narrowed my eyes—“how long are you planning on staying here, anyway?”

Jacqueline shifted on her feet, looking uncomfortable. “What do you mean?”

“What the hell, Jacs? I was pretty clear. How long are you staying here?”

Jacqueline pressed her lips into a thin line. “Well, there’s no way I’m going back to Tottenville.”

“What about your family? Friends?”

A strange expression flashed across Jacqueline’s face. It was fast, so it was hard to tell, but it might have been pain. She looked down. “No. None of those. Not anymore.” She took a breath and looked up at me, her dark eyes flashing with anger. “And if you don’t want me to be a friend, just say so.”

I took a step back. “Hey,” I said, putting my hands up. “I was just curious.”

But—truthfully—*did* I want to be friends with Jacs? The vampire who’d shown romantic interest in Jay on several uncomfortable occasions? Why would I want to live with that kind of angst?

Jacqueline glared at me. “Curiosity kills more than cats, you know.”

I raised my eyebrows in shock. “Did you just *threaten* me, Jacs? Do I have to be the one to remind you that there are werewolves all over this place, and they are a hell of a lot more loyal to me than they are to you? Right now, you’re welcome here. But don’t push it. It wouldn’t take much to change that.”

Jacqueline’s jaw worked, like she was fighting down a sharp comeback. Finally, she rolled her eyes. “Whatever. I mean, if everyone turns on me, big effing deal. It’s not like I like you, or your kind.”

Anger flared in my chest like a struck match.

“You’re not making things easy on yourself,” I snarled.

Jacqueline gave me a long, cool look. It lacked her usual anger or hostility, but it was void of anything else. “Nobody ever makes things easy for me,” she said, her voice hollow. She blinked, then turned. “Nice outfit,” she said over her shoulder. Then she snorted. “Not.”

I felt a strange combination of emotions as I watched her strut away. I was annoyed—like I usually was after speaking with Jacs—but there was something else. I remembered the agonized look on her face when I’d brought up family. What the hell was that all about?

Then I gave my head a hard shake. Whatever it was, it wasn’t my problem. I had plenty of problems of my own.

I turned toward the house, ready to find Big Mac.

I found her in the living room. She was sitting near the fireplace with Tom and Orla, who had their arms around each other, and Torin, who was sitting at Tom’s feet like a loyal spaniel.

“Tom! I totally forgot! This full moon was your werewolf debut!” I said, rushing toward him. “How was it? Isn’t it amazing! It’s unreal, isn’t it? What did you think?!”

Tom looked up, his face pale. “It was… different.”

I frowned, and I must have looked confused, because Orla tried to explain.

“Tom’s still trying to sort out his feelings about the experience, Lola.”

“Oh, of course. I understand,” I said, though that was a lie. I had no idea what he had to “sort out.” I had missed my wolf so damn much, and now that I had her back, I never wanted to let her go again. Which reminded me… “Big Mac, can I talk to you for a second?”

She nodded and went to stand, but Orla stopped her.

“We’re going to go upstairs. Tom’s had a long day, and I think it’s time we head to bed.”

“Let me make you some tea,” Torin said, getting to his feet. “I’ll bring it up to you.”

Alone with Big Mac, I suddenly felt intimidated. I turned to find her giving me a beady stare.

“You wanted to talk to me, so talk,” she said shortly. “Orla was right—it’s been a long day, and I’m getting cranky.”

I raised my eyebrows but didn’t voice what I was thinking—that I was amazed it was possible for Big Mac to get cranki*er*. Instead, I took a deep breath. “You know I got my wolf back—”

“I saw,” Big Mac said, staring moodily into the fire.

“So now I’m a hybrid werewolf-vampire.”

The witch looked at me. “Yeah? So? Why are you telling me what I already know? If you’re bragging, I’m not the right audience.”

I stopped myself from rolling my eyes. “I wanted to talk to you because I want to know if I’m going to have any problems because of this—kind of unusual—combination.”

Big Mac leaned her head back against the chair with a groan. “How the hell should I know? What am I, some kind of fortune teller?”

“I don’t know,” I started uncertainly. “I just thought—”

“Everyone in this crazy pack has problems.” She rolled her eyes. “I’m sure yours will work out.”

She got to her feet, but I stepped in front of her, blocking her path, my heart pounding.

“I’m scared, Big Mac. I’m really, really scared about all this.”

The witch heaved a long-suffering sigh, but she stopped trying to shove past me. “Did you have any problems shifting back?”

“No,” I admitted. Honestly, shifting had felt better than ever. Like breathing. Like I was doing what I was meant to do. “But could I in the future? I have in the past—”

“If you didn’t this time, you should be fine,” Big Mac said, stepping around me.

“But what if I’m not?” I demanded, stepping in front of her again. “I mean, have you ever come across someone like me?”

Big Mac gave me a hard look. “You want me to help you, right?”

I nodded, mutely. I could feel my pulse pounding in my ears.

She narrowed her eyes and leaned close. “Then are you ready to pay me for the inversion spell?”

**Episode 1985**

XAVIER

As I looked down at Cali, waiting for her to answer, I could feel the blood rushing hot through my veins. I was warm and loose from the shower—and Cali’s massage—and I was ready to go. I felt like it had been years since I’d seen Cali—seen her and touched her and held her. My mind had been so consumed with the battle with Letifer, but since it had ended, all I’d been thinking about was Cali. I knew the matter of Alpha wasn’t settled, but I still couldn’t stop thinking about her. I’d been hungry for her, and the kiss we’d shared outside the shed earlier hadn’t been nearly enough. It had just lit my fuse.

“Well?” I asked, tipping her chin up and leaning down, so our lips practically touched as I spoke. “Which is it, tiger? Do you want to choose, or should I?”

Cali swallowed, and I watched as the delicate muscles in her throat moved.

“You choose,” she finally said, her voice a hoarse whisper. Her eyes were wide, and the pupils dilated with desire as they tracked over my face.

I smiled a slow smile as my mind flashed through the possibilities. I imagined lifting her up and carrying her to the bed, laying her down and kissing my way up her legs, then teasing her with my tongue until she screamed with want. I thought about putting my hands on her shoulders and pushing her down to her knees—since she’d left the choice up to me.

But what I really wanted was to watch her come, so I leaned down—closing the space between us—and kissed her. I consumed her mouth, and she let me, sliding her hands into my hair and pulling so hard it hurt, already wild with desire.

I slid my tongue into her mouth, and she opened to me, like a flower. *This* was what I’d been waiting for, and I was tired of waiting, so I yanked the towel she was still holding out of her hands, tossed it to the floor, and pressed her slick, wet, naked body against mine. I spun us both around and backed her up against the bathroom counter, touching every inch of her skin.

*Claiming* her. She was mine, all mine, and I wanted to claim her the way my wolf was howling for me to.

“Xavier,” she murmured as I moved my kisses down to her jaw, and then her neck. “Oh god, Xavier.” Her lips were swollen with the brutality of my kisses, and her dark eyes were unfocused. “This feels so…” She drew in a breath as I cupped her breasts. “Amazing.”

I ripped my towel off and threw it to the floor, then spun Cali around so she was facing the mirror. “Do you like how you look?” I asked, my mouth hot on her ear. “Do you like watching me touch you?” She whimpered as I pinched her nipple, gripping onto the marble countertop so hard her knuckles turned white.

“Yes,” she said, her head falling back against my chest.

“You’re mine,” I grunted, kissing her neck.

She nodded. “Yours,” she repeated, her eyes closed.

“*Mine*,” I swore.

I ran my hands along the curve of her ass, then to her hips. I gripped them hard and pulled her into me. My erection pressed into her back, and I groaned. I wanted to be inside her. Now.

I shifted one hand up to her face. “Open your eyes,” I breathed. “Open them. Look at yourself. Look at us.”

Cali opened her eyes. The mirror over the sink was huge, and gave a good view of *everything*. She looked at herself, her eyes moving from her face—flushed with arousal—to her chest where my hands were squeezing her.

“I want you to watch as I enter you,” I said.

“Xavier,” she breathed. “Please.”

Slowly, I pushed into her wetness from behind her. I watched her eyes try to flutter shut as she moaned. She snaked an arm back and around my neck, holding onto me. Our eyes connected in the mirror, and I couldn’t help myself as I growled, picking up the rhythm. I watched as her breasts bounced with every thrust, and then to me, driving into her deeper and deeper.

“I’m close,” she whispered, looking straight into my eyes.

“Keep your eyes open,” I warned. “Watch yourself come. You hear me?”

She nodded, but I could tell it was all she could do to obey me.

I smirked. I thought I knew how to make it a little harder. I reached around and slid two fingers into her sex, rubbing the golden spot of her clit in a circular motion.

Cali gasped like she’d been stung, and I felt her tighten around my cock. “Oh my god.”

“Come for me,” I demanded. “Come for me, Cali.”

She nodded and rose up on her tiptoes, trying to take every inch of me into her body. I pounded into her, sweat pouring down my back as I fought off my own release. I wanted to watch Cali come first.

And finally, she did. Arching her back, I felt her whole body tense as she lost control of her senses.

“Eyes open,” I said, my voice gruff.

She forced her eyes open and they widened with shock as she watched her face flush. She tightened around my shaft again, and it sent me over the edge. I gripped her hips and drove myself into her as my whole body shuddered like it was about to break into a million pieces. She drove her ass back into me, letting me fill her completely as I came.

“Eyes open,” she murmured, grabbing my hands and bringing them to her breasts as we slowed our rhythm.

I grinned at her in the mirror and squeezed her breasts, then wrapped my arms around her, hugging her tight.

She smiled back, then turned to look at me. “That was… amazing.”

I nodded. “Yeah, for me, too.”

She slid her hands up the sides of my hips to my ribs. I was slick with sweat, and she smiled.

“Want to jump back in?” she asked, nodding toward the shower. “We probably need it more now than before.”

I laughed. “Sure.”

I grabbed fresh towels and flipped the shower back on, then I poured soap onto the loofah and slid it across Cali’s shoulders.

She smiled and pulled her hair up so I could get her neck. “Have you been thinking about this Vanguard party thing?” When I shrugged, she rolled her eyes. “Come on, have you?”

“Of course I have,” I admitted.

“Are you worried?” she asked, looking back at me.

“I don’t know. Some. But this Lucian ass might be all bark and no bite.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, taking the loofah from me and washing my chest.

I grinned down at her. “You might not believe it, but sometimes Alphas can be kinda narcissistic—”

Cali laughed. “You don’t say.”

“This guy might be worse than even that. He thinks he’s a prince or a duke or something.”

Cali’s eyes widened. “What?”

“I know. It’s crazy.”

She looked baffled. “Is that a thing, though?” she asked. “Is there werewolf royalty?”

“No.” I laughed. “Though I’ve met a few who act like they might be. But no.” I shook my head. “I think Lucian’s just a pretty face with a loyal pack. All style, you know. No substance.”

Though he had substance in the physical sense—even I had to admit that. I thought back to when I’d seen him in wolf form. Lucian’s wolf was massive. One of the biggest I’d ever seen. It was something to remember about him, if push came to shove, but I wasn’t too worried. Bigger didn’t always mean stronger or faster. And I’d always found that the bigger they were, the harder they fell.

“Xavier?” Cali asked, looking up at me quizzically. “Are you still with me?”

I smiled down at her. “I’m here. I’m with you.” I grabbed the shower head and aimed it at her back, rinsing the suds from her skin. Then I turned off the shower, and we stepped out.

“So you’re not worried?” Cali asked, reaching for a towel.

I thought about her question as I accepted the fresh towel. “I don’t know if I’d say that,” I admitted. “They do seem to have a large following. We saw that when they surrounded us on the road, and I’m not even convinced that was all of them.”

“Oh god,” Cali whispered, looking worried.

“But tomorrow’s party will clear up a lot of the unknowns,” I said, wrapping the towel around my waist and wiping off a clear spot on the mirror. “We’ll know more when we meet them officially.”

Cali seemed to take this in. She looked thoughtful as she wrapped the towel around herself and brushed through her hair with her fingers.

“So,” she started slowly, “if the Vanguard pack ends up trying to cause trouble with us… Do you think we can win?”

**Episode 1986**

VIOLET

I snuggled tight against Charlie as the movie played, feeling warm and cozy. Movie night had been a *great* idea. Why had we waited so long to do this?

Cozy and relaxed, I felt perfectly at peace with the world. Except there was one worry that itched at the back of my brain: I didn’t like how Charlie and I had left things about Christmas. I felt bad that I’d left it up in the air. When he’d asked me about it, I’d told him the truth—I *did* want to spend Christmas with him. Hell, I wanted to spend every day with Charlie. I loved him. He was my best friend. And my mate. But I didn’t want to spend the holidays with Iris. I hadn’t exactly set out to keep it from him, but I’d never gotten around to telling him how his mom had made it crystal clear that she was out to get me.

Which wasn’t remotely fair. If my parents had still been alive, I was sure they would have loved Charlie. And, as for my brother… I gave Lilac a sideways glance. I just hoped he’d wise up and decide that Charlie was the best.

I supposed that was another worry in my brain. It bothered me that there was friction between my brother and my mate. But at least Lilac was just being chilly to Charlie—he wasn’t chasing him around with a crossbow or threatening to kill him, like Charlie’s mom had done to me.

But maybe I should tell him. Maybe he should know. Maybe I should—

“*Hey!*” Marta jumped to her feet with a start, pulling the blanket with her. She was looking around, wild-eyed and flustered.

“Marta? What’s up?” Lilac asked, blinking up at her blearily. “Are you okay? Is it the crappy movie?”

“No, no,” Marta said quickly. “Someone was rubbing my leg.” She shot a look at Charlie.

I looked over at Charlie, and he looked back at me, his eyes wide.

*You know it wasn’t me*, he insisted.

Lilac smiled and reached for Marta’s hand. “It was me, Marta. Who else would it be?”

“I-I—” Marta looked flummoxed, and her cheeks were bright red. “I thought you were asleep. You looked asleep!”

Lilac laughed and tugged on her hand. “I was just pretending.”

“Oh my god, Lilac,” I groaned, rolling my eyes. “Would you stop acting like a kid?”

“I’m sorry,” Lilac said, still laughing. He looked up at Marta, trying to keep a straight face. “I’m sorry, Marta. Now get back down here already.”

Marta still looked strained, but she let herself be pulled down next to Lilac.

Charlie had paused the projector when Marta jumped up, so there was a moment of awkward silence as we all stared straight ahead at the stationary characters on the screen.

Charlie cleared his throat. “So are we watching this movie or not?”

“Yeah, we are,” I said quickly. I looked around. “Come on, you have to admit it’s good. Lilac, you’re liking it, aren’t you?”

He groaned. “It’s all right,” he conceded. “For a rom-com.”

“Well, I like it,” Charlie said loyally.

“Thank you.” I gave him a smile.

He grinned back and stretched, reaching his arms up into the air as he yawned widely. I took the opportunity and scooted closer into him, snuggling into his side.

He chuckled as he put an arm around me and pulled me close. He was so strong—I could feel the muscle definition of his biceps against my back—and I felt so secure with him. So happy. I sighed with contentment. After all the craziness we’d been through recently—with the hunter camp and the revenants—this was the perfect way to spend the rest of Thanksgiving. I knew I still had to deal with Christmas, and I didn’t have an answer about that yet, but right now, this was all I wanted.

Charlie pulled me close as he turned the movie back on, and I rested my head against his chest. I could hear his heartbeat over the peppy soundtrack of the movie, and I closed my eyes, listening.

“Are you asleep?” he asked quietly, giving my shoulder a little shake.

I shook my head and opened my eyes, trying to force myself to pay attention to the movie, which suddenly seemed a lot less interesting than before. And when Charlie reached down and pressed a kiss to my hair, I stopped paying attention altogether. My stomach filled with butterflies. The guy did that to me every single time. Every moment with him felt like seeing him for the first time—that chance sighting as he crossed the street, all those months ago.

I craned my neck to look up at him, and in the dark of the room, his eyes picked up the light from the projector, making them sparkle like gems. I smiled to myself. *This* was what I had pictured when I imagined the first time Charlie and I would go all the way. This. Together, happy, comfortable, safe. Not because we were high on adrenaline, or because we felt like it was time and we *had* to do it. Not even because we were just turned on—but because there was something so magical about being with him in this moment.

I had just reached for him when, very suddenly, I remembered that there was one big problem. Well, two big problems, to be exact. Their names were Lilac and Marta, and they were sitting about a foot away from us.

So, with a sigh, I turned back to the movie.

A few minutes later, I had gotten back into the storyline when it suddenly occurred to me that someone was whispering. I looked over to see Marta and Lilac speaking quietly to each other, their voices too low for me to hear anything but hissing. But I could hear that they were both talking fast, their voices overlapping.

What was going on? Were they arguing?

Marta heaved a sigh, threw back the blanket, and got to her feet. Then, without a look back at Lilac, she marched out of the room.

I watched her go, then glanced at Lilac. What the hell was I supposed to do? Was I meant to do *anything*?

“Is everything okay?” I asked cautiously.

Lilac didn’t answer. He looked kind of stunned, his eyes on the door Marta had gone through.

“Are you just going to sit there?” Charlie demanded.

Lilac looked over at him, wide-eyed. “Huh?”

Charlie rolled his eyes. “Quit being an idiot, man. Go after her!”

Lilac still looked like he’d just been knocked over the head with something hard. He looked over at me, as if for confirmation. “Should I?”

I had no idea what was going on, but I knew my brother cared about Marta, so gut instinct prevailed.

“Go!” I said, pointing out the door. “Go after her!”

Lilac jumped to his feet and rushed out of the room.

I watched him go, then looked over at Charlie. He was looking at me.

*Oh*. We were alone. I hadn’t planned on us being alone, but here we were. And I couldn’t keep myself from feeling a little excited by the possibilities. It was like there were tiny electrical cables running across my skin—everything tingled.

I breathed deep, and Charlie did the same.

Could this be it? Was this the moment we’d been waiting for?

He put his hand to my face, gently cupping my cheek. He brushed his thumb along my jaw, light as a feather. Even the smallest touch did so much to me. My entire being felt like it was on fire. And it felt amazing.

I stopped breathing. I was pretty sure Charlie did the same.

I closed my eyes as he leaned down, and when he kissed me, all the little cables on my skin flared to life. Heat rushed through me, pooling below my belly. His kiss was soft, but it wasn’t softness that I wanted—not after all this waiting—so I grabbed a handful of his shirt and pulled him close. A moan rumbled through his chest as I pulled him into me, and he pressed me down, laying me down on the floor. We rolled together, tangling ourselves in the blankets.

I arched a little, wanting to feel the weight of him on top of me, but when I yelped, Charlie jumped like he’d been electrocuted.

“Are you okay?” he gasped out, looking around wildly.

“Yeah,” I said, breathing hard. “I’m okay. Sorry. My phone is vibrating. It just surprised me.”

“Yeah,” Charlie breathed, looking pale. “Me, too.”

“Sorry,” I said, and giggled. “Sorry, I’ll put it somewhere else.”

I pulled my phone out of my back pocket, and the screen lit up in the dark room. I paused as I noticed a text from an unknown number.

“Charlie,” I said, my voice a whisper. My blood—on fire a moment before—felt like it had been turned to ice. “Charlie. This message.”

*We’re coming for you.*

**Episode 1987**

GREYSON

I edged around the clearing, keeping my distance from the snow-white wolf who stood in the very center. I knew at a glance that she was from the Vanguard pack—I could smell it on her—and instinct told me to keep my distance.

Eyes trained on me, the wolf moved slowly toward me.

I stopped pacing and braced myself on the frozen ground. If she was looking for a fight, I wanted to be ready. She stopped just inches from me, and in an instant, her scent washed over me—intoxicating as wine. But I breathed through it, fighting to keep my head clear. I had to stay focused if she was about to attack. In fact, I shouldn’t wait for her to make the first move. If something was going to happen, I wanted to be the one to get the party started.

But just as I crouched low, ready to pounce, the wolf shifted back to human, and I was looking up at a naked woman. I glanced at her, but then—against my better judgment—took a longer, lingering look. Her body was perfect, her white skin like silk, and her even paler hair waved softly against her back and shoulders in the night breeze.

“Greyson.” She smiled, almost purring my name. “I’m so glad we’re finally meeting.”

I didn’t answer. I remembered what Cali had told me—that she had met a woman from the Vanguard pack who claimed she was going to make me her mate. Based on the piercing look this woman was giving me, it seemed likely that this was her.

But this could be a trap. The woman in her human form presented slightly less of an immediate threat, so I looked away from her intense gaze and scanned the trees for movement. If this was a trap, there would be other Vanguard pack members nearby, ready to attack. But I didn’t see anyone. The trees around us were still and silent.

Had this woman come alone? For what purpose?

“Are you going to stay a wolf?” the woman asked. She smiled. “You are a beautiful wolf, Greyson, but it would be gratifying to see your human form, too. Unless, of course”—her smile grew—“you’re afraid of me.”

I hesitated, considering this. I took another look around the small clearing, listened hard, and searched for any unfamiliar scents. Before I did anything, I wanted to make sure she was truly alone.

Maybe she guessed at some of what I was doing, because the woman smiled and held out her hands, indicating her naked form. “As you can see, I’m completely exposed to you, Greyson. Unconditionally vulnerable.”

But she didn’t sound vulnerable. She sounded perfectly in control.

I shifted back to human. I didn’t know what her game was—she might have been testing me. I’d show her she had no power over me.

The woman smiled and looked down, her eyes tracking down my body like I was a specimen in a lab, awaiting her assessment.

“*Perfect*,” she purred, as her eyes traced down my stomach and legs. “You look as good in human form as you do in wolf form.” She tipped her head, looking thoughtful. “Though your eyes are more grey than I would have thought. They’re the color of storms. Has anyone ever told you that?”

I felt a strange flood of emotions at her words. It was always nice to hear someone compliment you, but coming from this woman? Everything about this was suspicious.

“You must be Aysel,” I said coolly. “I’ve heard about you.”

Aysel smiled, delighted. “I’m so pleased to hear it. I’m glad you’ve heard my name. What else have you heard about me?”

“Not much,” I said, raising an eyebrow, “other than the fact that you seem to think you have some claim on me.”

Aysel stepped closer, her intense gaze locked onto mine.

“I don’t *think*, Greyson. I *know*,” she whispered, her voice fiery.

Her certainty made me chuckle. “Why don’t we stop playing around and you tell me what it is that you really want? Save us both the trouble.”

Aysel’s eyes were scorching, like they were filled with leaping flames. She leaned toward me.

“I guess we’ll figure that out when you come to the party tomorrow, Alpha,” she whispered, her lips brushing my ear as she spoke. She pulled back just enough to look at me for a moment, then shifted back to her wolf form.

She bounded gracefully across the clearing and—stopping at the trees—cast one last look at me before disappearing into the darkness.

I watched her until she was swallowed up by the night. She certainly was full of confidence about me. I could see why Cali had been jealous. There wasn’t anything to be jealous about though.

But there wasn’t a naïve bone in my body—Aysel was a Vanguard wolf, and whatever she was up to, it couldn’t be good. For a moment, I considered following her scent through the trees—she might lead me to their pack house. I could scout, see what they were like, try to get a read on them.

Then again, having me follow after her could have been her plan all along. This meeting in the woods might not have been a trap, but she might be trying to lure me into one.

And I wasn’t going to take the bait.

With an irritated shake of my head, I shifted back to my wolf form. As a wolf, my senses were heightened once again, and Aysel’s bewitching scent filled my head. It stayed with me as I headed back toward the pack house.

One thing was clear: I had to talk to Xavier.

Unfortunately.

As I ran through the dark woods, I replayed what Aysel had said to me. *We’ll figure that out when you come to the party tomorrow, Alpha*. She’d called me Alpha. I supposed that made sense. Andrei believed me to be Alpha, along with Xavier, and I hadn’t bothered to clarify the situation for him. It would be a hell of a lot easier if we could get rid of all this confusion and it was made clear that I was the one true Alpha for the Redwood pack, but…

I dropped my head as a freezing wind whipped across my face. The temperature was low, but it was the memory of my nightmare that made my blood run cold. In that nightmare, I had been Alpha, and Xavier and Cali had been dead. The thought of it made my heart race with fear.

It had been a dream—but more than that, I couldn’t help but feel that it had been a warning. If I was to return to my role as Alpha, it could cause their deaths.

I leapt over a stream swollen with melted snow. I’d been assuming that if I was co-Alpha, the dream would still come true. But that wasn’t what the nightmare had shown me. There hadn’t been a co-Alpha warning. I’d never even considered the possibility until Cali had brought it up.

Maybe I had it wrong. Maybe I *could* be co-Alpha without risking either my brother or my mate.

By the time I got back to the pack house, I felt like had more questions than I’d started out with, and not nearly enough answers.

I headed inside and straight into the laundry room, where I pulled on jeans and grabbed a clean shirt from the basket on top of the washing machine. I wasn’t sure, but I thought Orla had been doing about six loads of laundry a day since she’d arrived at the pack house. I didn’t know how long she was going to stay, but I’d hate to see her go.

Pulling the T-shirt over my head, I headed into the kitchen for a glass of water.

“Hey,” I said in surprise, seeing Xavier standing at the open fridge.

“Oh, hey,” he said coolly, looking over. He held out the plate in his hand. “You want some pie? I think it’s pumpkin. Or maybe sweet potato.”

“No, thanks,” I said, grabbing a glass from the cupboard next to the sink. “I was actually going to come find you.”

“Yeah? What for?” Xavier asked, shutting the fridge.

“I wanted to talk to you about this Vanguard party,” I said, filling my glass. I drained it quickly and filled it again.

Xavier put the pie down and leaned against the counter. “Okay. I’m listening. What do you want to talk about?”

I drained the glass again and put it in the sink before I turned around to face him. “I wanted to talk to you about trying out what Cali proposed. About us becoming co-Alphas of the pack.”

Xavier rolled his eyes and laughed, but the sound was hollow. “Yeah, right. I’m sure you do—”

“I do,” I insisted. “I’m not joking. What do you say?”

Xavier gave me a long look. “Are you really serious about this, Greyson?”

I nodded. “Are you in or not?”

**Episode 1988**

XAVIER

I stopped chewing. In fact, I was so surprised by my brother’s question that my jaw went slack with shock. Greyson gave me a pointed look, and my mouth snapped shut. I swallowed thickly around my half-chewed mouthful.

I cleared my throat. “Are you serious?”

He nodded. “I am. But I want to make one thing clear: I will co-Alpha, but only for tomorrow night. You and I obviously have a lot to work out around here, but I think it’s more important that we show a united front to the Vanguard pack.”

That approach made sense. The Vanguard pack might not have officially presented itself as a threat just yet, but it didn’t take a tactical genius to see how baring our vulnerabilities to our new neighbors might not be in our best interest.

“And after that?” I couldn’t help asking. It was the question that had been nagging at me since Greyson had refused to fight me for Alpha, but also hadn’t conceded defeat. It honestly felt like he was trying to make things confusing on purpose. The pack didn’t have a clear chain of command, and the Vanguard pack seemed just as confused as everyone else about our dual-Alpha situation. But Greyson still wasn’t ready to fight me, either. Being constantly on edge while I waited for him to man up was getting really old.

“Let’s see how things go before we make any further plans,” he said simply.

*Great. More uncertainty. Just what I wanted to hear.*

I’d told Cali we could defeat the Vanguard pack, but the truth was that I’d been trying to sound more positive than I actually felt. I didn’t know enough about them to make that kind of promise. I hated to admit it, but Greyson was right. If we could put our differences aside and present a united front, the Vanguard pack would have second thoughts about doing anything to antagonize the Redwood pack.

And seeing as how they were likely a bigger threat to the pack than our fucked-up line of succession… Goddammit. Yeah, Greyson was definitely right.

“So?” he pressed, his brows rising. “Are you in or not?”

I wanted nothing more than to wipe that expectant look off his face. But—again—he was right—not that I would tell him. And more than that, Cali wanted us to co-Alpha. She thought it would be the solution to at least some of our problems. All I could see was all the new problems it would create. We could barely share a house and had proven time and time again that we weren’t up to the task of sharing a mate.

How were we supposed to successfully share the running of a pack?

I’d agreed because I wasn’t going to turn down a chance to show Greyson up, and I had been one hundred percent positive he wouldn’t agree to Cali’s idea. But now that he was all in, I had no excuse. Unless I wanted to make an ass of myself—in front of Cali, the pack, and probably the Vanguard pack too.

I nodded. “I’ll do it.”

Greyson clasped my shoulder. “Great. Let’s do our best not to screw this up, huh? There’s a lot riding on it.”

I glared at his hand on my shoulder and then jerked out of his grip. “You think I don’t know that?”

My brother rolled his eyes and turned to leave. He turned back. “One more thing, Xavier?”

“What now?” I snapped.

He pointed at my face. “There’s something stuck in your teeth.”

He walked away, smirking. The bastard. I rolled my eyes but still ducked into the nearby bathroom to check my teeth.

*Goddammit. Greyson was right. Again.*

I was getting real tired of that thought.

I picked the food out of my teeth and rinsed my mouth out with water from the bathroom sink, just in case. I was wiping my mouth on a hand towel when a knock on the doorframe caught my attention.

Artemis was standing behind me. Her reflection in the bathroom mirror showed crossed arms and a frown.

*Awesome. Dealing with my mate’s pissed off sister is just what I need right now.*

I turned to face her. “What now?”

Her eyes narrowed. “Is that how you speak to my sister?”

“What? No.” I blew out a breath. “What are you even talking about?”

“Cali. And how she’s dealing with a very difficult situation right now—trying to please both her mates at the same time. She’s constantly worried she’s going to upset one of you, or that, god forbid, she accidentally does something that the curse registers as a choice and one of you ends up hurt.”

I frowned. “Did you give Greyson a talking-to like this?”

She jabbed a finger at me. “*That* is exactly what I’m talking about. The competition between the two of you is tearing my sister apart!”

I rolled my eyes. *Like I didn’t already know that.* But it didn’t escape my notice that she hadn’t answered my question. It was painfully obvious that Artemis and Rishika both preferred Greyson over me. Their allegiance was to him, not me, and he and Artemis had a camaraderie that she and I had never come close to.

Which was fine. Really.

I hadn’t put myself out there as Alpha so everyone would like me. I just wanted respect—and obedience. As long as they listened to what I said, I didn’t give a damn who they worshipped.

But this little speech from Artemis was bordering on disrespectful, and I really wasn’t interested in participating if all she wanted to do was lecture me.

“What do you want me to do?” I asked.

“I *did* talk to Greyson about this, and he was a lot more receptive to what I had to say, so I might start there.”

*Okay, so I was wrong about that too. What a wonderful day this has been.*

I gritted my teeth. “I’m listening.”

“Cali is always trying to do anything and everything she can to please you. I expect you to treat her the exact same way.”

“Seriously?” I scoffed. “Cali has always been my highest priority. You should remember, I’ve been looking out for Cali longer than anyone else here. Longer than Greyson, and definitely longer than you. And so far, I think I’ve done a pretty damn good job of it.”

Artemis wasn’t cowed by me pulling rank on her. She stepped closer, her eyes narrowed. “Good for you. Now, make sure you keep it up.”

I blinked, and then a begrudging smile tugged at my lips. Artemis was threatening me. Actually threatening the Alpha of the pack. But she was doing it for Cali.

I didn’t know if I was pissed off or proud. Maybe a little of both.

I huffed out a laugh. “Got it.”

“I’m glad we understand each other.” She gave me a pointed, feral smile and walked away.

*Damn. If Artemis were with anyone else but Rishika, they’d have their hands full.*

Still, it was good to know that Artemis was on Cali’s side. If things didn’t work out with the Vanguard pack, I knew I could count on Artemis to take care of her family.

I yawned. What a fucking day. I was ready for bed.

I started toward the stairs and met Jay on the landing. He was gnawing on what was now mostly a bare bone. “Oh, so that’s where the last turkey leg went.”

Jay shrugged. “You snooze, you lose.”

“Greyson, Cali, and I are going to the Vanguard pack’s party tomorrow. Can I count on you to keep an eye on things around here?”

He nodded. “For sure. But do you really think going to a party is a good idea? Any combination of you, Cali, and Greyson sounds like a recipe for disaster.”

*Well, he’s not wrong…*

I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a little worried about that too, but that was why Greyson and I had agreed to co-Alpha for the event. Nobody was happy about it, except maybe Cali, but the alternative—showing inconsistent and perhaps vulnerable leadership to a pack that had been nothing but aggressive since they’d shown up… Yeah, that wasn’t going to happen. We’d just gotten rid of Letifer. We were still healing from that battle. We couldn’t afford another one so soon.

“I mean, I’m not exactly thrilled to be going, but I got the distinct impression that the Vanguard pack isn’t used to hearing the word ‘no.’” I shrugged. “Hopefully going to the party will give us an opportunity to learn more about the pack and their *prince* of a leader.”

Jay snorted. “The guy sounds like a douche.”

“A royal douche.”

The low rumble of a motorcycle engine broke through the night. *Who the hell is coming over at this hour?*

I stepped outside with Jay close behind me as a single headlight cut through the darkness.

A motorcycle screeched to a stop in front of the house, and Andrei cut the engine. “Hey, boys.”

**Episode 1989**

GREYSON

I raced downstairs as soon as I heard the motorcycle rumbling, and I was absolutely stunned to see Xavier and Jay outside with Andrei.

*What the hell? Did my brother invite this bastard here without telling me? So much for our co-Alpha agreement. We made it a whole twenty minutes.*

I leapt off the porch to join them. “What’s going on here?”

Andrei’s brows rose, and he let out a laugh. “So, what is it now? Three Alphas? I’ve never seen a pack with such a *generous* hierarchy. How progressive.”

“Shut it,” I snapped. “Why the hell are you here?”

He grinned. “I thought you just told me to shut it?”

I ground my teeth and had to physically restrain myself from pummeling this guy into the lawn. I was so sick of his cocky attitude—not to mention the way he just showed up and invaded our space and our time whenever he wanted.

“This is the Redwood pack house,” I reminded Andrei, “and I don’t appreciate the disrespect you bring with you every time you visit.”

Andrei’s eyes widened, and he held his hands up in front of him. “Oh, my apologies.” He didn’t look the least bit repentant.

“State your business and then hit the road,” Xavier said shortly. He looked just as sick of this guy as I did. Maybe there was hope for a *brief* alliance after all.

Andrei’s permanent smirk turned dark with menace. “I wonder what will happen if I don’t? Perhaps you’ve got a fourth Alpha in there who’ll come out and introduce himself? I’d love to meet the whole executive team.”

I tensed. As much as I wanted nothing more than to take this motherfucker up on his offer—and rip his throat out in the process—we had too much to lose if this spiraled out of control. We couldn’t afford a pack war. Not now. Maybe not ever. Not after what we’d just been through.

I mind linked with Xavier. *I’d love to rip his throat out, too, but let’s try not to make any messes we’ll have to clean up later.*

Xavier shot me an annoyed look but didn’t reply. He blew out a breath and turned back to Andrei. “Well? What do you want?”

Apparently, we weren’t providing enough fun for him to keep the mind games going, because Andrei sighed in what sounded like disappointment. “I was sent here by the prince.”

Xavier snorted. I agreed with the sentiment. Did these pricks have any idea how pretentious they sounded, calling their Alpha “Prince”?

Andrei paused to give him a glare and then continued. “*Prince* Lucian wants to formally invite you to his party, which will take place at his palace.”

This was apparently too much for Jay, because he burst out into full-belly laughter. “A *palace* out here in the woods? Seriously? We’re supposed to believe that?”

Andrei’s eyes narrowed as he focused on Jay. “I don’t believe we’ve met.”

Jay stopped laughing, and I moved to stand between him and Andrei. Again, we couldn’t afford to give the Vanguard pack an excuse to lash out at us, even if it seemed like this Andrei guy was asking for it.

*Maybe he is. Maybe part of his role is to try to provoke violence so that the Vanguard pack has justification to take us out.*

I pulled in a deep breath, willing myself not to fall victim to any manipulation. “Okay, great. You’ve delivered your master’s formal invitation. You can tell him we accept. Now get out of here.”

Andrei reared back like I’d just hit him. “You need to watch your mouth. Prince Lucian is my pack’s Alpha. He’s not my master, and I’m no slave. If you want to be respected, perhaps you should try offering some respect in return.”

Well, if that wasn’t the biggest case of the pot calling the kettle black I’d ever heard. Not once had this guy shown us anything but contempt. Why should we respect him or his Alpha?

*Don’t give in, Greyson. Stay calm.*

Xavier looked like he was trying—not very hard—to keep from laughing. “So, if your Alpha’s a prince, what does that make you? The court jester?”

I cracked a smile, the most reaction I would allow myself. Jay laughed again.

Andrei didn’t laugh, but he did smile. “I’m glad the Redwood pack has a sense of humor. You might need it to impress the court, because I don’t see what else you have to offer.”

“We don’t need to offer anything,” I said tersely. “We’re not Vanguard, and we don’t owe any of you anything. Now get out of here.”

The bastard finally looked like he was going to go when he turned back and held up his hand. “I almost forgot.” He reached for his saddlebag, and I tensed.

“Hey, go slowly,” I warned with a growl.

Andrei laughed. “Do you really think I’m going to pull out a weapon? I promise, you have no need to worry about that. If I wanted to hurt you, I wouldn’t need a weapon to do it.”

“How comforting,” I deadpanned.

He reached into his saddlebag—at a normal speed—and pulled out a scroll tied shut with a ribbon. He held it out, and in a stupidly instinctive moment, both Xavier and I reached to accept it.

I tensed, then dropped my hand with as much of a casual air as I could. Hopefully our slip-up hadn’t been too much of a tell. There was no need to show Andrei the competition that was tearing the pack apart at the seams.

To Xavier’s credit, he didn’t gloat—either through mind link, or with his stupid face—when he took the scroll.

Andrei climbed onto his bike, kick-started it, then reached into his saddlebag once more. I didn’t flinch this time. Call me naïve, but I believed Andrei’s assertion that he wouldn’t need a weapon to hurt me.

He pulled out an elegantly wrapped, medium-sized gift box and held it out. “For your Luna.”

Since Xavier’s hands were now full, I stepped forward and grabbed it. Andrei winked and then roared off into the dark night.

For a few minutes, we stood there watching until the headlight on his bike disappeared into the darkness.

“Okay, that guy seriously gives me the creeps,” Jay said. “Like, he puts out some very convincing serial killer vibes.”

I looked down at the box in my hands, and then over at the scroll Xavier held. “Guess we’d better go inside.”

He nodded, and we headed back into the house. When we stepped inside the foyer, we were immediately bombarded by curious pack members.

“Who was that guy?” Sage asked. Her eyes dropped down to the “gifts” in our hands. “And what are those?”

Rishika stepped forward. “That was that Vanguard guy again, wasn’t it? What was he doing here? What did he want?”

“It’s nothing—” I began, at the same time Xavier said, “He was here—”

We both stopped and stared at each other. Xavier looked more on edge than I felt. Now that we had an actual audience, it was probably more important to him to be the one making declarations.

Me? I didn’t care. Not right now, anyway. He could be the bearer of bad news if it was so important to him.

I nodded. “Go ahead.”

The corners of his eyes tightened—he must not have liked feeling like he was asking me permission—but he faced the gathered pack members. “That was an emissary from the Vanguard pack. They’ve invited the Redwood Alpha to an event tomorrow night.”

I winced as soon as the words left his lips. *Alpha*. Singular.

Confusion flashed across the pack members’ faces. This was gonna be good.

“Which one of you is going?” Sage asked.

Xavier’s face went a lovely shade of purple. Was he going to announce to the whole pack that we were sharing responsibilities? That he was only *half*-Alpha? I fought back a grin. He might have thought he was taking control of the situation by being the one to speak, but now he’d have to be the one to concede publicly.

Footsteps sounded on the staircase, and then Cali joined the group of pack members. Her hair was wet from a shower, and I could smell her body wash from across the foyer. She locked eyes with us both, just as Xavier cleared his throat and said, “We both are.”

A few pack members gasped, and others murmured to each other in confusion. Cali just smiled. And really, at the end of the day, all I cared about was that my mate was happy. Everyone else could deal with having two Alphas for a little while.

“We’ll explain in greater detail tomorrow,” I added with a reassuring smile. Then I gestured to Xavier. “We need to talk.”

We ducked into one of the studies, and Xavier wasted no time tearing the scroll open. His brows rose as he read it. “It seems we’ve been invited to join Prince Lucian and his sister, Princess Aysel, at the Vanguard Palace.”

I froze. *Aysel. So she’s a princess… Or, at least, a self-declared one.* It made sense, actually. She’d certainly acted like a spoiled princess when I’d met her in the woods.

Xavier read out the address, and I frowned. “I wasn’t aware that anything around those parts could be considered a palace.”

Light footsteps sounded just inside the room, and I realized Cali had followed us in. Her eyes zeroed in on the gift. “What’s in the box?”

“It was a gift from the Vanguard pack,” I explained, looking down at the elegantly wrapped box I held. “For our Luna.”

Cali’s eyes widened. “Is that supposed to be me?”

**Episode 1990**

LOLA

I swallowed roughly. “The inversion spell?”

Big Mac’s brows rose. “Yes, remember that favor I did for you? You still haven’t paid me back. And yet, here you are, asking for more help.” The witch scoffed. “Maybe it’s time you paid up.”

*Right. Pay up…*

Except I’d been kind of hoping that Big Mac had forgotten all about the inversion spell and my pesky little debt. I should have known better. Big Mac was a useful ally, but she never did anything for free.

“S-Sure,” I stammered. “What do you want from me?”

The witch never dealt in money. No, money was too common, too easy to replace once it was spent. Whenever Big Mac did you a service, she asked for something that really cost you. I was almost afraid to hear her answer to my question, because I knew that whatever it was she wanted from me, it wouldn’t be something I was comfortable giving.

*Is she going to take one of my eyes like she did with Jay?*

She watched me with a look I couldn’t identify.

*Is she looking at my eyes? Is she trying to figure out which one wants? I need my eyes! Both of them!*

*Or is she going to take my voice, like Ursula did with Ariel? Is Big Mac going to literally become a sea witch? I don’t want to lose my voice! Doesn’t she know that talking is very important to me? It’s one of my favorite things!*

Then a new, horrifying question hit me.

*Will I still be able to mind link with Jay if I have no voice?*

The witch reached for me, and I froze.

*No, don’t take my—*

A tiny pinprick of pain lanced up my scalp. “Ouch!”

Big Man pulled her hand back, and I saw a single strand of my hair caught between her forefinger and thumb. Confusion, panic, and relief slammed into me in an awkward cocktail of feels. “What are you going to do with that? Is that all you wanted?”

The witch shook her head with a smirk. “No.” Then she pocketed the strand of hair and walked away, pausing to add, “I’ll let you know.”

I slumped. *Why does she always have to be so goddamn cryptic? Like, would it kill her to be forthcoming about her plans just once in her life? To, I don’t know, give a girl a heads up every once in a while?*

But as frustrated as I was with Big Mac, it paled in comparison to how frustrated I was with myself, because my debt to the witch had entirely slipped my mind. How had I managed to forget about something so important? I mean, sure, a lot of stuff had happened since the inversion spell, but the last time I’d owed Big Mac a debt, my mate had ended up losing an eye to pay it.

*I really need to get better about being on top of my own shit.*

Until Big Mac finally told me what she wanted from me, I was going to be in a constant state of uncertainty. What could she possibly want that I could give her? I racked my brain for an obvious answer, but it was impossible to predict her demands. I was a vampire-werewolf hybrid. Somehow. It was likely she’d want something from me that had to do with that rare combo, but it was just as likely that she’d want something random and awful, like, you know, an *eye*.

And when would she call in my debt? The waiting and wondering was almost worse than just paying up… Maybe.

I shuddered. *What a way to finish off Thanksgiving…*

I *had* been feeling thankful—that hook-up with Jay had left me feeling nothing but gratitude—but now… not so much. I knew I should appreciate Big Mac a bit more. After all, the inversion spell had worked. I was a werewolf again. But there was nothing like having an unknown debt to a chaotic neutral witch to cast a dark cloud of uncertainty over everything.

I needed to talk to Jay. He’d know how to comfort me. He always knew exactly what I needed to hear.

I found him in the kitchen, sipping tea. I’d rushed in, ready to spill the news about Big Mac and allow him to take away all my worries, but once I saw him, I stopped short. I couldn’t help but stare at his eyepatch. It was a stark reminder of what Big Mac could take from me, of what she’d *already* taken from Jay.

He’d already done so much for me. Was it even right to expect him to comfort me now? After he’d already paid the price for one of my favors from Big Mac?

Jay, of course, didn’t take long to notice me staring at him. “Is there something wrong with my eyepatch? I didn’t get gravy on it, did I?”

I swallowed, then blurted out, “Would you still love me if I lost my voice? Or my legs? Or… or…” A new, terrifying thought popped into my head. “If all my hair fell out and I was bald forever?”

He blinked. “Why would you ask me that?”

“What if I lost all my teeth? Could you still love me then?”

Jay grabbed me by the shoulders. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing!” An obvious lie. “I just… I was just wondering. No big deal.”

He pulled me into a hug, holding me tight against his chest. “I’d love you no matter what. Always. And nothing will ever change that. You know that, don’t be ridiculous,” he said. “I love you even though you’re a little weirdo. Now, tell me what’s gotten into you this time.”

I might’ve been a weirdo, but I was his little weirdo.

I sank into his embrace, finally relaxing the way I so desperately needed to. This was the comfort I’d wanted, the comfort I’d needed to finally think straight. “Big Mac told me she wants to collect on the inversion spell, and I’m scared of what she’s going to ask for.”

His arms tightened around me. “You did the spell because you wanted to, right?”

I nodded.

“And you got what you wanted. You’ve been reunited with your wolf. You should be celebrating, babe.”

“I know that.” I pulled back so I could look at his face. “But the reality of that payment is staring me in the face, and I don’t know what to do. What if she asks for something I don’t want to give her? Something so important that even getting my wolf back isn’t worth it?”

He considered my question for a moment. “Then I have a simple solution—I’ll talk to Big Mac and offer to take on your debt.”

The horror his words evoked was so visceral, I pushed him back, breaking our connection. “Excuse me? There’s no way I’m going to allow you to do that! What if she wants to take your other eye?” I continued before he could reply. “No. Absolutely not. I didn’t want you to take on my debt the first time, and there’s no way in hell I’m going to allow you to do that again.”

“Come on, Lola. Wouldn’t you have done the same for me, if the situation were reversed?”

I sighed. So what if he was right? That didn’t mean I was going to let him go through with this. “That’s not what we’re talking about. I made a deal with Big Mac, and I’m going to be the one to pay the price. And I will *not* allow any more talk about you taking on my debt. Do you understand?”

He shrugged. “I don’t want to fight with you. Why don’t we talk about it in the morning? I’m sure it can wait till then. It’s not like Big Mac is going to sneak into our room in the middle of the night and demand payment.”

Honestly, I wasn’t so sure about that. But his suggestion was too reasonable to refuse. “Okay. We’ll table it till morning.”

As we prepared for bed, my mind ran wild with worst-case scenarios. What if Big Mac asked for a decade of my life? Or my firstborn? Or… what if she took away my ability to stay in the sunlight? Could she do that? I was pretty sure that was maybe my werewolf side…

My heart hammered in my chest, and I curled up tight against Jay, trying to calm myself. But he’d already fallen asleep, and I was left staring up at the ceiling.

Even though Jay was sure Big Mac wouldn’t come collect in the middle of the night, every little sound in the pack house caught my attention.

The floorboards in the hallway creaked, and I froze. Was that Big Mac? Was she coming to collect?

I sat upright. There was no way I was going to be able to sleep like this. The waiting was going to kill me.

I had to do something.

Was there a way for me to get out of the bargain?

**Episode 1991**

Neither Xavier nor Greyson answered me. They just stared at each other blankly, like I’d just asked a question in a language neither of them knew how to speak.

*Are they mind linking right now or something? Or are they just in shock?*

For my part, I couldn’t take my eyes off the box. It was thin and rectangular, like a clothing box from a department store. It was wrapped in an iridescent, pearl-colored paper, with an understated silver ribbon.

If the box was this beautiful, then what the heck was inside it?

“Guys,” I pressed. “Is that for me? Does the Vanguard pack think I’m your Luna?”

I’d come downstairs just in time to hear Xavier tell the pack that he and Greyson were going to share the mantle of Alpha, at least for now. That was a huge relief—even if the Vanguard pack turned out to be a dangerous problem, at least we wouldn’t have to deal with my two mates infighting and trying to out-Alpha each other the entire time.

But we’d never really discussed the Luna situation. At least, not in this context.

Both my mates had assured me multiple times that when they were Alpha, I would be their Luna. But that had always been spoken about in faraway terms, like a distantly imagined future. For right now, and for quite a while now, there simply hadn’t been a Luna. Not since Joss.

But now that question was rearing its head, and it demanded an answer. My mind spun with questions of its own.

*If Xavier and Greyson are sharing Alpha, and they’re sharing me… could I be the Luna? Even just temporarily, for the Vanguard pack’s benefit? If so, how would that even work?*

Greyson and Xavier still hadn’t responded.

“Let’s see what’s in the box.” I took it from Greyson before he could argue and tugged on the ribbon. Up close, I could see the silver color was woven through with the same iridescent quality as the wrapping paper. It looked like the box was being held shut with beautiful, ornate magic.

“Be careful,” Xavier warned.

“It’s a gift box. How dangerous could it be?”

Greyson groaned. “Now you’re tempting fate.”

I rolled my eyes. *Men. So dramatic.*

Slowly, careful not to damage the wrapping paper, I opened the box. My eyes went wide when I saw what was inside. “Wow.”

Both Greyson and Xavier moved in to peek over my shoulder as I gently lifted the slinky silver gown and held it out for inspection. It was absolutely gorgeous. It looked like it was made of spun moonlight.

*But it sure doesn’t leave much to the imagination*, I realized when I saw the long, vertical cut in the skirt*.* It would expose my shoulders, and part of my thigh. *Will my tiger marks be visible if I wear this?*

The thought of it made my cheeks heat, and not in a good way.

“Do they realize it’s nearly December?” I asked with a breathy laugh. “I’ll freeze in this!”

I dropped the gown back into the box and noticed a small, folded note. I picked it up.

“To the Redwood Luna,” I read out loud. “Please accept this token of our appreciation. We look forward to seeing you tomorrow evening.”

The note was signed with a fancy “L” with at least four loops, and was written on thick, expensive parchment paper. I looked up at my mates.

“What am I supposed to do? Am I supposed to wear this?” And then I realized they still hadn’t answered my initial question. “Wait, *is* this for me?”

Xavier snatched the note from my hand, scanned it, and then balled it up with a scowl. “Who the hell does this asshole think he is? Sending a sexy thing like that to Cali?”

I glanced down at the dress. I liked it the same way I liked looking at pretty dresses in department store windows. It was exquisite and had probably cost a fortune. But imagining myself in that, shivering and exposed, my own body nowhere near as perfect as the dress it was wrapped in? With the Vanguard pack watching?

*No, thank you!*

Greyson eyed me apologetically. “I supposed Lucian thinks he really is a prince and can do anything he wants.”

“A *prince*?” I repeated. “This guy thinks he’s a prince? Wait—am I being invited to a royal ball? Like Cinderella?”

Xavier scoffed. “If he’s a prince, then his royal lineage is just as fake as any fairytale.”

I looked back down at the dress. It made more sense now, sort of, now that I knew the Vanguard pack’s Alpha had delusions of grandeur. *Will he stick to the theme and send me a pumpkin carriage? Hopefully he doesn’t ask me to wear glass slippers. They look so painful.*

I skimmed the note again. “The gown is supposed to be for the Redwood Luna, and as we all know, there *is* no Redwood Luna right now.”

Greyson grabbed the lid and shoved it over the box. “You shouldn’t go.”

I blinked. “What?”

“I agree,” Xavier said. “The idea of that royal wannabe telling my mate what to wear? Fuck what I said before. This changes things. Cali, you’re not going.”

My jaw dropped. Trust my mates to team up and agree when I didn’t actually want them to. What happened to trying to one-up each other in order to win my favor? “Stop. I’m not backing out. If you two are going as the Alphas of the pack, then I’m not letting you go alone. The Vanguard pack is expecting a Luna, and they’re going to get one.”

“It’s not safe,” Greyson began.

I shoved the top off the box and grabbed the gown. “Why? Because they sent me a sexy dress? I’ve got magic, in case you forgot, and I know how to use it. So allow me to remind you that you both agreed I should go. As far as I can tell, nothing has changed except your petty jealousy. Don’t you see that if I don’t go, we’ll look weak? And if I do go, but don’t wear their gift, that will only make us look afraid, or even like we think we’re better than them.”

I frowned. *Wait, did I just talk myself into wearing this thing? Oh god. I’d rather face a hostile werewolf pack than wear this gown into enemy territory.*

But I wasn’t going to back off now. “I’m going to try on the gown.”

“Cali, don’t,” Xavier said.

“You don’t have to wear it,” Greyson said. “We’ll find something else.”

But I was already pulling my shirt over my head. I stopped myself when it was halfway up my belly. *Wait. What am I doing? I don’t need to undress in front of both of them!*

My cheeks hot, I marched out of the room and ducked into the bathroom next door. I shut the door and held up the dress. It looked like it’d fit.

*How the hell do they know my dress size?* I looked around the bathroom. *Are they spying on me?*

I felt like a hundred pairs of eyes were on me as I undressed and slipped into the gown. The cool material slipped over my bare skin, and I had to hold back a moan. It was easily the softest material I’d ever felt.

I had no idea what material this gown was made of. It was a luminescent, silvery fabric I’d never seen before, but the gown fit like a glove and was so comfortable it felt like I was wearing nothing at all.

I stared at myself in the mirror. The gown hit me in all the right places, and it shimmered every time I moved.

*No offense to Cinderella, but this gown is in a league of its own.*

*All right. Showtime.*

I stepped back into the room, watching as Greyson’s and Xavier’s jaws dropped.

*I guess I look pretty good.*

Their eyes glazed over. The looks that they were giving me were ones that were more reserved for the bedroom… But knowing I was giving them that reaction was more than an ego boost.

*I look better than good, I guess?*

I did a little twirl, feeling like a model on the catwalk. I’d been worried about feeling uncomfortable and self-conscious in this dress, but all I felt now was beautiful and powerful, like a real Luna. Suddenly, the thought of wearing this into enemy territory didn’t sound terrible at all. In fact, right about now, I couldn’t think of a better kind of armor.

I grinned. “So, it’s settled?”

Xavier turned to his brother, and they shared a look of resignation. He stepped forward and placed his hands on my bare shoulders. “You look beautiful, Cali.”

Greyson followed suit. His gaze dragged over me in appreciation, but when he met my eyes, there was a slight frown. “But there’s one problem—they’ll notice that you don’t have a Luna mark.”

**Episode 1992**

MARTA

My cheeks hot and flushed, I marched down the hallway. I really wanted to run, to get to my room as fast as possible, lock the door, and hide in there for another fifty years, but I didn’t want to embarrass myself even more than I already had.

So, marching with my head held high it was. And if I vaguely resembled a tomato as I marched away, then so be it.

“Marta!” Lilac called from behind me. “Please come back! I want to watch the end of the movie with you!”

His voice was getting closer. He was moving faster than I was, and unless I wanted to break my self-imposed ban on running away with my tail between my legs, then it looked like Lilac and I were going to talk. Now. When I’d never wanted to talk to another human being less.

I sighed. *Best to make it on my terms, I guess.*

I rounded on him. “And here I thought you didn’t like romantic movies. You just wanted to cuddle with me… while watching a horror film!”

He winced. “Actually, I didn’t think the romantic one was so bad. Now I’m invested! I want to see if Andy stays with her jerk boyfriend or gets with the hot fashion guy.”

“You should go back and find out then. But let me warn you now—not every movie has a happy ending.” I turned around and started toward the stairs. I was *so* close to being home free.

Lilac jumped in front of me, blocking my escape route. “Why are you acting like this?” His eyes were wide, and he looked genuinely confused, which only pissed me off more. How could he even ask that? Wasn’t it obvious?

I thought back to how he’d teased me by rubbing me with his foot when he was pretending to be asleep. The whole thing had freaked me out, and then my reaction to what had turned out to be just a fun, affectionate joke had made the whole thing even worse.

Lilac clearly thought it wasn’t a big deal, but it was a big deal to me. “You were trying to play footsie with me when I thought you were asleep! And then you wanted to kiss me—in front of everybody!”

His brows raised. “So?”

“So, it’s embarrassing!”

He looked at me like I’d just hit him. “You’re embarrassed to kiss me?”

I groaned. “No, it’s not about kissing.”

“Then what is it about?”

Was he seriously that dense? “Your sister and her boyfriend were watching!”

He laughed. Actually laughed, like this was some kind of joke. Like my very real concerns were silly to him.

I fumed. “You know what? Forget I said anything.”

I tried to brush past him, but he caught my hand. “Marta, wait.” He schooled his expression into something sincere, though I could tell he was trying not to smile.

*Does this guy ever take anything seriously? Anything at all?*

“Do you really think Violet and Charlie were watching us?” he asked.

Suddenly, I was so angry I couldn’t see straight. No matter where I looked, all I saw was *red*. Of course I’d thought they were watching! Why else would I have raced out? And, okay, sure, maybe they hadn’t actually been watching, but that wasn’t the point. The point was, they *could have*, if they’d wanted to, because Lilac was apparently totally fine with all these public displays of affection.

And… I didn’t know if I wanted anyone to see us like that.

I shook my head, pushed past him, and stomped up the stairs to my room.

“Marta, come on! Talk to me!”

I ignored him. I didn’t stop until I reached my bedroom and slammed the door shut behind me.

Once I was alone in my bedroom—finally alone—I was surprised to discover tears burning my eyes. Pulling in a deep breath, I wiped them away.

*What’s wrong with you, Marta? Why are you getting so upset about this? Pull yourself together.*

Lilac wanted to kiss me. So what? That was actually a good thing. It should have made me happy that he wanted to kiss me, that he valued me enough to treat me like I was someone special in front of his sister and her mate.

Besides, it wasn’t like we hadn’t kissed before. But acknowledging that in front of Violet felt too much like making a statement—one I wasn’t sure I was ready to make, honestly. Violet had said she was fine with me and Lilac being together, but she could have just said that to be nice. And hell, even if she *was* okay with it, that didn’t mean I was.

Making out with Lilac, and all those more innocent but still emotionally intimate touches… they were supposed to be a private thing. It wasn’t that I was ashamed to be with him, or that I didn’t enjoy the way he kissed me, the way he touched me, or how naturally affectionate he was. When we were alone, I felt safe and comfortable with him. I *loved* the intimacy—all kinds of intimacy—when it happened behind closed doors. But when we were in mixed company… I don’t know. I felt embarrassed. Ashamed, even. Like we were crossing a line.

I hated feeling that way with someone who meant as much to me as Lilac did, but if I was being honest with myself, I just didn’t have the same level of comfort he did with public displays of affection.

Maybe it was old-fashioned. Just my upbringing from fifty years ago coming out and making me feel like even more of a freak. Maybe it was that I just didn’t feel comfortable in my own skin right now—but how could I be?

I looked down at the bracelets. Simultaneously a gift and a curse. Thanks to the bronze bands, I wasn’t a danger to those around me, but they were a constant reminder of the toxic power inside me, of yet another way I just didn’t belong.

*Everything is such a mess right now.*

A soft knock on my door pulled me out of my ruminations. “Marta? It’s Lilac. I want to talk.” His voice was soft, hesitant. “You might not realize this, but you should be impressed. How many guys ever want to talk?”

Despite my still-simmering frustration, I smiled. Right. *That* was why it was so hard to stay mad at him.

I let him in and closed the door behind him. He stayed close to the door, and I took a few steps back. He didn’t try to encroach on the space between us.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to make you feel uncomfortable. I thought playing footsie with you would be cute. Romantic, you know? I didn’t know it would upset you, and I promise I won’t do it again.”

I sighed. “It wasn’t your feet that upset me. It was… everything.”

He frowned. “I thought you liked the movie?”

He wasn’t getting it. “I did like the movie.”

There was a confused pause, and then, “You don’t like *Violet*?”

I rolled my eyes. “Of course I like Violet! She’s intense, but I like her.”

He visibly relaxed. “Understatement. She’s on the high end of intense, but in a good way. Though she can really be annoying. One time, when we were celebrating our birthday, she decided—”

I cut him off. “Are you happy?”

“Huh?”

I held up my arms to show off my new bracelets. “I used my magic to bring you back to life. But… I think I failed you.”

He shook his head. “What are you talking about? How can you possibly feel like a failure? You just said it yourself: you brought me back from the dead! You gave me a new chance at a real life! I will never be able to repay you for what you’ve done for me, even if I spend every day of the rest of my new life trying to thank you properly. You gave me the ultimate gift. Who else has the power to do that?”

“I only brought part of you back. I didn’t reunite you with your wolf, Plum.”

“Okay… But that doesn’t matter,” he said firmly. “It’s not like Plum’s gone. He’s still around. I get to run with him, to be with him.”

I blew out a breath. “But wouldn’t you rather be like the other werewolves and have your wolf inside you?”

He caught my wrist and pulled me in close. “You bringing me back was more than I ever could have hoped for. I know you risked a lot to do it, and you have nothing to apologize for.” He smiled softly. “You’re the best girlfriend in the world.”

I froze, then pulled my arm back.

I knew his words were probably meant to reassure me, but now I felt a whole new kind of dread. We’d never talked about this, and I honestly didn’t know how I felt about him throwing around that title when we hadn’t actually defined our relationship.

I looked up at him. “*Am* I your girlfriend?”

**Episode 1993**

*Greyson’s right. There’s no way I can wear this dress without revealing that I’m not a Luna.*

I twisted and turned in front of the mirror on the wall, then looked down at myself, taking in every angle of my exposed skin. There definitely wasn’t enough dress to hide my tiger marks—or anything else—but the gown was beautiful, and I looked damn good in it, even though it gave new meaning to the phrase “barely there.” Not only would the Vanguard pack be able to tell that I didn’t bear the Luna mark, but they’d also be able to tell whether I was wearing any underwear, and with this clingy fabric, the answer would probably be no.

“Maybe I could wear a sweater or something over it?” I said. “So they won’t notice?”

Greyson raised an eyebrow. “A sweater? With that gown?” Even as he spoke, his eyes dragged over me slowly, drinking me in. I could tell that he liked the dress, and that he couldn’t care less about a Luna mark. My skin warmed under Greyson’s gaze. I loved it when he looked at me like that.

“Yeah, I don’t think a sweater quite… goes with the look. If you ask me, it’s simple—just don’t wear the gown,” Xavier said with a shrug. “I’ve seen your closet, Cali. You have so many clothes. Just wear something else.”

“Xavier, we’ve been over this. Me not wearing the dress would make it seem like we were threatened, or afraid,” I reminded him. I backed up so I could see more of myself in the mirror. Then I twisted around so that my back was to the mirror and admired the subtle slope of my ass and how the dress made my legs look a mile long. Where had this gown been all my life? “Are Luna marks always on the shoulder? Like, couldn’t we pretend it’s somewhere else less visible?”

“That dress doesn’t leave much to the imagination. The only place would be your butt,” Xavier deadpanned. “Or lower back.”

“Listen, we are not putting a Luna mark, fake or not, on her butt or lower back, so that’s out of the question,” Greyson cut in, rolling his eyes at Xavier.

I groaned. “What about if you made me co-Luna?”

“Absolutely not!” Greyson and Xavier said in unison before exchanging an angry look.

I cut my eyes at both of them, annoyed that they were working together to shoot down one of my ideas. “Hear me out! If you’ve both agreed to co-Alpha—”

“For the party only,” Greyson said quickly, casting a glance at Xavier, who shrugged in agreement.

“Whatever. If you’ve agreed to co-Alpha—even just for the night—why can’t I be your co-Luna? It makes perfect sense.” I could see it now, me entering the Vanguard palace escorted by Xavier on one arm and Greyson on the other. All eyes would be on us as we appeared at the top of a grand staircase. I would mesmerize and stun in my shimmering silver gown, and my Luna mark would be visible for all to see. Or… would it be marks, plural? *Do I need two?*

“No, out of the question. Period!” Greyson barked. “Becoming Luna isn’t just some frivolous ceremony, and for a half-Fae like you, Cali, it could be dangerous.”

“Add to that, we’re already sharing enough. I don’t want to share my mate *and* my Luna,” Xavier said. “And to be honest, I’m not so keen to have those Vanguard bozos ogling you, which they will if you wear that dress.”

“Who cares if they stare? You’ll both be with me!”

“Cali, it’s not that simple,” Greyson said.

“Well I’m glad the both of you are so adamant. What’s the solution? Because the way I see it, we don’t really have a choice.”

“The solution is that you don’t go,” Greyson said. “Simple as that. Why make it complicated? We’ll just give them some excuse for why you’re not with us. Who cares what they think, anyway?”

“You’re the one making it complicated, Greyson! Remember that Eden pack I told you about? The one that not only had two Alphas, but a co-Luna, too? It brought harmony and peace to their pack. Why are you both making such a big deal out of this?” I asked.

“Cali—” Xavier started, but I didn’t let him continue.

“Besides, I like the idea that after causing so much friction between you two and causing trouble within the pack, I could be the one who brings everyone back together. It would be the fairytale ending we deserve! Better than Cinderella!” I couldn’t shake that image of me walking into the party bookended between my two hunky mates. It would be the highlight of my holiday season. I peeled my eyes away from my reflection and turned to face them, thinking that they’d see the bright side of this, too, but instead they just stared at me like nothing I was saying was making any sense. “What? You don’t agree?”

“No, I don’t agree. This is serious, Cali. This isn’t some fairytale,” Greyson said.

“I hate to say it, but I’m with Greyson on this,” Xavier said. “This isn’t something to take lightly.”

Typical! Agreeing to shoot my vision down once again. Why couldn’t they see that doing this just to get through the party and make the right impression wasn’t such a big deal? Too bad there was no way for me to become a Luna on my own; then my mates would have to be on board with it—and it was becoming crystal clear that they had no intention of making it happen. I wished that I could just do it myself. Then I got an idea.

“Can I just get a Luna mark tattoo?” And what a meaningful tattoo it would be! A symbol that linked me to my two mates, forever, and would remind me of them whenever I looked at it.

“What?” They spoke in unison once again. They both stared at me, looking more alike than usual with their furrowed brows and strong arms crossed over their wide chests—they even had eerily similar exasperated looks on their faces.

“I know that tattoos can be kind of painful, but it wouldn’t be nearly as painful as getting a real Luna mark, I’m sure,” I added. A little pain was a small price to pay in my opinion.

“Terrible idea, Cali,” Xavier began. “Tattoos take time to heal—and where the hell are we going to find a tattoo artist on such short notice? And also, just, no.”

“Maybe Torin could heal the tattoo after I get it? Make it look like I’ve had it for a while?”

Greyson shook his head. “Even if Torin could heal you, even if we somehow tracked down a tattoo artist who could draw the mark right, it still wouldn’t be right. The Luna mark is nothing like a tattoo, it’s part of a sacred tradition—it creates a magic bond, and any werewolf worth their salt will be able to tell if its real or not. If you walk into the Vanguard pack house with a fake Luna mark, it won’t go over well. It’s way too risky.”

Deflated, I shrugged and turned back to the mirror. *Why won’t they work with me on this?* “It seemed like a good idea to me. Now we’re back to square one.”

“Forget about it for now,” Xavier said. “Go to bed, we’ll talk about it tomorrow.”

“But what if we don’t figure it out in time?”

“You wanted Xavier and me to co-Alpha, right? So let us co-Alpha,” Greyson shot a glance at Xavier, who stared back at him, expressionless. “Let us work together to figure something out. It’ll be fine.”

“If you say so,” I said, heading toward the bathroom to change. I turned at the sound of a shrill wolf-whistle.

“Whoa, what’s the occasion?” It was Kira. She had a smirk on her face as she leaned against the doorjamb, admiring the gown.

“Oh… thanks. This was a gift from the Vanguard Alpha.”

“So you’re going to the party, too? And wearing that? You’ll be beating wolves off with a stick.” Kira laughed. “Or your two mates will be,” she said, casting a glance at Xavier and Greyson.

“That’s part of the problem,” Greyson growled. “If one of those Vanguard weirdos even looks at her wrong…” Greyson gritted his teeth, not even bothering to finish his sentence. I didn’t even want to picture them getting into an all-out brawl at the party because of some leering Vanguard asshole. “Anyway—Cali—we’re not going to figure this out tonight. It’s late. Go to bed, we’ll revisit this tomorrow.”

Greyson turned to go, and Xavier followed after him, both nodding at Kira as they left.

“Looks like the party is already wreaking havoc on you and your mates, and it hasn’t even happened yet. Are you still planning to go?”

“Yes, I was hoping to—but it’s looking like it might not happen.” Then I remembered what Greyson had said about the mark—about how it formed a magic bond. If all we needed was magic, then maybe a witch could help. “Kira, do you think you could give me a Luna mark?”

**Episode 1994**

Kira stared at me. “Give you a Luna mark?” A slight smile played across her lips, and her brow was furrowed with confusion. “Why would you possibly want that?”

“Well… because I want to show that I’m the Luna of the Redwood pack—just so the Vanguards don’t—”

Kira held up a hand, cutting me off. “I’m sorry, what even is a Luna mark?”

That’s right, she wasn’t a big fan of werewolves until, well, now I supposed.

“It’s a symbol of an Alpha’s partner,” I explained.

“And you want one of those,” she said slowly, “from me?”

“Yes, but I’m not asking for a real one. Just a fake one. Couldn’t you just do some sort of spell to create something that looks like a Luna mark? Something that will pass muster with the Vanguards?” I didn’t know much about the Vanguards so far, but after the run-in with them chasing us down with the motorcycles and from what I could read of Andrei, I didn’t think that they were the type to pay too much attention to the details. I could probably trick them pretty easily if I had magic backing me up.

“I don’t know,” Kira said thoughtfully. “I’ve never tried something as crazy as that. Can’t you just use a magic marker, or something?”

“A *magic marker*? No. It has to have some real magic in it—that’s the only way the Vanguards will think it’s real.”

Kira shook her head. “I don’t know, this sounds like it’s getting way too complicated. What do your mates think about it?”

“They don’t know that I’m asking you.” *And they’d probably be pissed off if they found out and would forbid me from doing it.*

“Let me get this straight—you want me to create a fake yet convincing magical Luna mark so you can fool a werewolf pack into believing you’re the Luna of the Redwood pack. Is that it?” Kira’s smile was wider now, and she was looking at me like this was the most amusing thing she’d come across in a long time.

I smirked a little and gave her a sheepish nod. “When you put it that way it doesn’t make me feel too confident.”

Kira arched her eyebrows and cocked her head to the side as if to say, “no shit.” She shifted a bit on her feet and looked behind her into the dining room, like she was itching to be anywhere but here, having this conversation.

“Look, I know it’s a strange request, but I know that you’re a powerful witch and that something like this would be a piece of cake for you.” Witches were definitely difficult to read, but I figured that flattery would work on her same as anyone else.

Kira shook her head. “Thanks for the compliment, but I’m not interested in getting caught up in any werewolf intrigue. I’ve dealt with enough werewolf politics recently to last me a lifetime. You’re smart and resourceful, Cali. I’m sure you can work it out.” Kira smiled at me. “Goodnight!” She gave me a slight wave as she turned on her heel and left.

I watched her go, considering pleading with her, but something in her tone suggested that I wouldn’t be able to change her mind. Her comment about “werewolf intrigue” had definitely struck a chord—her husband had been killed by a werewolf, after all—so it was understandable that she wasn’t crazy about werewolves and wasn’t interested in getting mixed up in their drama. *Yet, here she is, living in a werewolf pack house. Makes no sense.*

I ran upstairs to my bedroom and lay face down on my bed, feeling defeated. If I couldn’t get a Luna mark, how was I going to go to the party in this dress? I was feeling hopeless when a voice inside me piped up. *Don’t give up, Cali, you’re a Fae! We don’t give up that easily!*

I hopped up from the bed and left my room, heading for my parent’s bedroom. I peeked inside and was startled by the sound of what sounded like a wolf howl before I realized that it was my father’s snoring. I wasn’t sure if I should be relieved or worried. After the day he’d had, it was great that he was able to get some sleep, but… *Did his snoring always sound like wolf howls, even before he became a werewolf?* I couldn’t remember. Either way, they were both asleep, and I didn’t want to disturb them. I would talk to my mom in the morning.

I returned to my room, catching sight of myself in the mirror. I admired the dress for a few moments before I twisted around to look at my shoulders. *How hard could it be to draw a Luna mark?* Maybe just a glimpse of it would be enough for the Vanguards—it wasn’t like they’d invited me to the party just to see if I had a Luna mark. Maybe, just maybe, I could get by with a drawing of one—I could just make sure that they didn’t get too close.

I opened my desk drawer and found a Sharpie. I remembered seeing Joss’s Luna mark—it had featured a crescent. I’d seen a million crescent moons in my lifetime, so how hard could it be to draw one? I could probably just draw it in such a way that just the tip showed above the strap. I slipped the strap down and uncapped the marker. I contorted myself into various positions as I struggled to keep my hand steady enough to draw the crescent on my back. It was a lot more difficult than I’d thought it would be.

When I was finished, I studied my handiwork and let out a big sigh. It looked awful—like a child had been doodling on my back. *Good thing I didn’t pursue a career as a tattoo artist… or any kind of artist, for that matter.* I was still twisting around in the mirror with the dress draped down around my waist, trying my hardest to correct the messy scribble, when the door opened and Greyson walked in. I dropped the marker and watched, embarrassed, as it rolled to Greyson’s feet. Adding to the embarrassment, I was topless, and there was no doubt that I looked like I’d been caught red-handed—though it looked like Greyson was still trying to figure out what I was doing.

Greyson cocked an eyebrow and looked down at the marker and then back up at me as I rushed to pull the dress up to cover my breasts. “Cali, what are you doing?” He leaned in close to get a better look. “And what the hell is that on your back?”

“I—uh—it’s nothing. Just an itch that I couldn’t reach. You know how it is!”

Greyson smiled. “Let me do the honors.” He walked over to me, and I backed away.

“What are you doing here, anyway?” I asked, realizing then that I was a little out of breath from anxiety—and the effort of trying to draw on my own back.

Greyson held up my clothes. “You left these downstairs when you changed into the gown. Thought I’d better deliver them to you.”

“Thanks,” I said, reaching for them as Greyson burst into laughter. “What?” I followed his gaze and realized that he was staring at my back’s reflection in the mirror.

“What the hell…?” Greyson began, still laughing. He cocked his head to the side as if trying to determine exactly what the scrawl of black marker was supposed to be.

“Let me explain! Like I said, my back was itching, and then I got to thinking that since I could reach back there so easily with the Sharpie, I might as well try—”

Greyson reached down and picked up the marker. “Try what? Drawing the Luna mark yourself? I really hope you didn’t think that would fool anyone.”

“No—but I thought that if I kept my distance—”

“Cali, stop, no need to explain. I appreciate what you’re doing. You’re trying to solve this problem for us so that we can have an uneventful visit to the Vanguard’s pack house—but like I said earlier, Xavier and I will figure something out. You don’t need to try to draw the mark on with a Sharpie!” He burst into a fresh wave of laughter. “I’m sorry, but that looks like a spilled bowl of spaghetti! No—a ball of yarn after a cat got done with it!”

I faltered, my cheeks burning with pure embarrassment. “I was just trying to help.”

“I know that, and if you weren’t wearing a dress gifted to you by some other man, I might even say that you look beautiful.”

“Are you saying that I’m not?” I asked, flustered. I wrapped my arms over myself as if to shield myself from his stare.

Greyson stepped close, his eyes riveted to mine as he peeled my arms away from my body and took my hands in his. He wasn’t laughing anymore. “There’s only one way to be sure.”

I leaned into Greyson as my heartbeat quickened. He reached around behind me and slid his hands down my back until they came to rest on the zipper. “Let me help you out of that dress…”

**Episode 1995**

XAVIER

Pacing back in forth in my room, I wished I was still with Cali. She’d looked so amazing in that gown, and I had to admit that I wouldn’t mind showing up at the Vanguard palace with her on my arm—everyone with a pulse would be jealous. Of course, Greyson would be there, too.

*Ugh. What I wouldn’t give to spend a night out with Cali—alone. And not at some stupid Vanguard event, either, but at a fancy restaurant or a movie or something, like a normal couple.*

I wished that Greyson hadn’t agreed to co-Alpha for the evening. If he hadn’t and just let me attend as the Alpha—which was the way it should be, as far as I was concerned—I could’ve spent tomorrow night with Cali only, dancing with her, showing her off to all those Vanguard assholes. Instead, it was going to be another night of me and Greyson trying to get along, which meant that neither of us would have Cali to ourselves. I sighed. *If that’s the game, I have to play it. So be it.* It was only one night, after all, and I planned on being with Cali for the rest of my life.

I glanced at my reflection in the mirror. It had been a long day, and I looked tired. Though things were pretty calm right now, the appearance of the Vanguards had thrown me into a state of unease that I hadn’t been able to shake. I sighed and took off my shirt and was headed for the bathroom when I heard a soft knock on my door. I grinned, imagining that it was Cali coming back for more. I pictured her standing there in that dress that left absolutely nothing to imagination, and vivid memories of how soft her lips were and how sweet she tasted drifted through my mind… followed by fantasies of throwing her onto my bed and showing her just how turned on I’d been by seeing her in that gown. Forcing myself to calm down, I tossed my shirt onto the bed and swung the door open. It was Kira.

“Oh—wow—I’m really sorry—did I wake you? It looks like I woke you. Maybe I should go?” Kira quickly averted her gaze, looking down at the floor as if the gleaming hardwood was the most engaging thing she’d seen all day.

*What’s she doing here?* “Hey, no worries, I wasn’t in bed yet—but what brings you to my door this time of night?” I peeked over her shoulder, trying to see if Cali’s bedroom light was still on, but it was no use—I couldn’t see that far down the hall from this angle.

“I just wanted to talk to you about Cali,” Kira said.

I leaned against the doorframe, my interest piqued. “Cali?”

Kira nodded. “Yeah, do you think we could talk in private?” Kira glanced over her shoulder at the empty hallway. Everyone’s doors were shut as far as I could see, but I also saw light leaking out from under more than one of them, and in a pack house, anyone could emerge at any moment.

I pushed away from the doorjamb and stepped backward to allow her entry. “Sure, come on in.”

“Cool, thanks!” Kira walked in, nodding slightly as she took in the room. She glanced at the sparkling chandelier hanging in the center of the room, the heavy rugs under her feet, and the paintings on the walls, but she stopped short when her gaze landed on the bed. As if caught by surprise, she backed away from it and ran into a chair sitting against the opposite wall. “Oops,” she said awkwardly, smoothing her long hair behind her ear as she lowered her gaze to the floor again.

“So, what about Cali? What has she done now?” It was funny how far Kira and I had come—from her helping Iñigo keep me hostage to her standing here in my bedroom as a real, true ally. I’d developed a real fondness for the witch, and I was curious about what she had to say about Cali—and about why she was so obviously nervous.

*What could Cali have gotten into? I only left her a few minutes ago.*

I shut the door and approached Kira.

“Um, could you put your shirt back on?” Kira asked after an awkward silence.

I arched a brow. “My shirt?” I looked at it where it sat in a heap on the bed. Maybe that was what had shocked her about the bed? *Is she a neat freak or something?*

“Yes, it’s—distracting.”

I stared at her. *Is she blushing right now? Kira?* I wasn’t sure what was going on, exactly, but I picked up my shirt and slid it on. “That better?”

“Much,” Kira answered, already seeming much more at ease.

“Good. So what’s up?” I sat down on the bed, and immediately, Kira stiffened. *What the hell is up with her tonight? Does she have something against beds?* Witches were strange creatures, so really there was no telling what was going on with her.

“Um, I just wanted to let you know that Cali asked me to create a Luna mark for her. Of course, I wouldn’t even consider doing such a thing until I talked to you first.”

I stifled a laugh. “Of course Cali would ask you to do that. I’d say I was surprised, but that would be a lie.” I leaned back on the bed, thinking about it. “Well, *could* you conjure some sort of Luna mark? Maybe cast a spell that would fool the Vanguard pack into thinking that Cali is the Luna?” It was a much better idea than getting a tattoo of one.

Kira’s eyes widened, and she started pacing back and forth a little, reminding me of myself only a few minutes earlier. “Uh, I don’t know. Would you really want me to do that?”

“I’m not sure.” I cocked my head, taking a minute to really think about it. I wasn’t one to play hard and fast with werewolf customs, especially one as sacred as the Luna mark, but the idea that Kira could create a passable enough mark to trick the Vanguards was interesting, to say the least. Putting something over on the Vanguards sounded like an exciting idea to me after all the little stunts they’d pulled so far. “I guess it would depend on how well it worked.”

“I can’t guarantee anything, but why would you want to risk it?” Kira huffed, her hands on her hips.

“If it would physically hurt Cali to do it, I wouldn’t consider it for even a second. But if it were painless for her and it managed to fool those Vanguard asshats, then that’s different. We need to go to that party so we can figure out what the Vanguards are up to, and the only way we can do that is by accepting their invitation in full and not rocking the boat—which means that Cali really should attend, and she needs a Luna mark to do it. You helped us defeat Letifer, and something like this is way less dangerous than that. So, would you do it?”

Kira paused for a moment, looking everywhere in the room but at me—or the bed. She shrugged. “If you think that it would help, I’m willing to try.”

“Awesome, but what about Cali? Would she be hurt by all this? The Luna process is painful. Dangerous, really. Would Cali be hurt by it, even though it won’t be the real deal?” Cali was tough, but I’d seen more than a few powerful wolves brought to their knees by the Luna mark ceremony. If Kira’s magic substitute caused even a fraction of that pain, it wasn’t going to work.

Kira looked off into the distance, thinking. “No, I don’t think so… Unless of course the Vanguard pack finds out. If that happens, there won’t be anything I can do to help.”

I thought it over, realizing that that very risk was something I needed to talk to Cali about. And Greyson, unfortunately. While it would be great to trick those bastards, if the Vanguards caught wind of it and things got hairy, I didn’t want Cali in the crossfire.

“Thanks, Kira. I’m going to take a bit to think it over. I’ll let you know.”

“Sure, sounds good.”

I escorted Kira to the door and opened it. “Thanks for even considering this.”

“Oh, you’re welcome, Xavier,” Kira said quickly before rushing out.

I stepped out into the hallway, watching her walk quickly away—almost like she was trying to get away from me as fast as she could without breaking into a literal jog. *Okay, she’s definitely acting weird.* I stepped back into my room, shutting the door behind me and peeling off my shirt again, feeling even more tired after that conversation. It would be amazing if Kira could help us, but it was a dangerous game to play with a pack that we didn’t know much about.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I pulled it out, yawning as I made my way to the bathroom. It was a text from Ava. *Hey X… Will I see you tomorrow night?*

**Episode 1996**

GREYSON

I slowly pulled the zipper down Cali’s back, using my other hand to hold her soft, warm body tightly against mine. I could feel her responding to me; her breath quickened, and a gasp escaped her lips. All I could think was that as beautiful as she looked in the dress, she was going to look a million times more beautiful out of it.

Cali looked up at me, her long eyelashes fluttering as she caught my gaze. “What are you doing?”

I smiled down at her, thinking about the other night. I’d wanted her then, but for a different reason. I’d just come out of a horrifying nightmare, and I’d needed her to bring me back to reality, to calm my nerves and make me feel like I wasn’t losing my mind. I wanted to be with her again right now, but not like that. This time, I just wanted to be near her because I loved her so much and she was my mate—and because it was so damn difficult to keep my hands off her.

“I’m helping you change into your clothes,” I replied.

Flustered, Cali looked away from me. “I can do that myself.” Her cheeks reddened.

*Wow, is she blushing?* I pulled away a little. “Are you being shy right now? After everything that we’ve been through?”

Cali’s blush deepened. “I’m sorry,” she began, still failing to meet my gaze.

“No, don’t apologize, love. I love that about you. It does something to me, knowing that I can still make you feel that way.” I wanted to kiss her deeply, wanted to take her right then and there, but I knew I wouldn’t. I released the zipper and dropped my hands lower to caress the small of her back. She shuddered under my touch and leaned into me, pressing her glorious, soft breasts against my chest. I leaned in and kissed the top of her head. “Goodnight, Cali.”

Cali looked up at me suddenly, as if surprised that I was leaving—and as if she didn’t want me to go—but I forced myself to turn and walk away.

“Thank you,” she said softly as I hesitated at the door, wondering if I was really strong enough to walk away and leave her there.

I turned back to face her, my heart hammering away in my chest as I watched her pull on a T-shirt. “No, thank *you*, Cali. This is the first Thanksgiving that I’ve spent with friends and family that I care about—at least that I can remember.”

Cali smiled at me. “It was nice, wasn’t it?”

I nodded, warmth spreading through my body. “Yes, it was.”

Then she laughed. “Except for the exploding turkey fryer.”

“Yeah, except for that,” I said, chuckling as I remembered the moments of pure shock and chaos that had followed. “Goodnight, Cali.”

“Goodnight, Greyson.”

I left the room, clicking the door shut behind me just as Xavier stepped out of his room and into the hallway. We locked eyes for a few uncomfortable moments before I smiled, breaking the tension. “Relax. I was just tucking Cali into bed.”

Xavier’s lips twitched like he was about to say something biting but thought better of it. Instead, he pressed his mouth into a straight line, and I could see the slight pulse at his jawline that indicated he was gritting his teeth.

“We need to talk,” he barked.

He went back into his room, and I followed.

“I mean it, Xavier. I really was just checking in on Cali. Nothing happened, all right?” It felt weird to be defending myself like that, but with our need to present a united front at the party tomorrow, I didn’t want us to fall into any undue conflict.

“It’s not about that,” Xavier said, though he looked more relaxed after my assurances. “I just heard from Ava. It appears we’re not the only Alphas who’ve been invited to attend the Vanguard party tomorrow.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said. They’ve invited Mace, and because Ava is Nolan’s sister and Nolan was the Alpha of the Samara pack, they’ve extended an invite to her as well.”

I considered what Xavier just told me, wondering what all of it meant. “Well, you seem pretty upset about it.”

Xavier nodded. “I am. Putting aside the fact that Ava will be there, this is all sounding more and more like a trap straight out of some mafia movie—invite a bunch of the heads of the rival families and kill them all in one fell swoop. If I were trying to eliminate all competition, I’d do the same thing.”

“You could be right,” I agreed. “We’ll just have to be vigilant.”

“And what about Cali and bringing her into all this?”

“We just have to make sure that nothing happens to her.”

“That’s a good idea, but there’s still one big problem: Ava. She knows that Cali isn’t the Luna.”

“Shit, you’re right,” I said, slamming my fist into my palm in frustration. Ava was still a thorn in our sides, even after we’d finally managed to get her out of the pack house. “She’s such a wild card, and we can’t afford a wild card right now.”

“I know, and she’s got to be majorly sour about us ousting her from the pack house. It would be nothing for her to set us up or put us in a bad position with the Vanguards.”

“It seems like it’s going to be up to you to keep Ava’s mouth shut. You know she’s still head over heels for you and will do whatever you ask.”

Xavier arched his eyebrows, like he wasn’t quite sure that was the case. “I tried that once before, and she came back from the dead.”

I smiled, despite myself. “True. Let’s hope this time will be different.”

“It’ll have to be—there’s no way I’m going to let her put Cali in any sort of danger.”

“Same here. I’m glad we’re on the same page,” I said as I turned to leave.

“Wait, there’s something else.”

“What now?” I turned back to face him, bracing myself.

“It’s about the whole Luna mark thing. Cali went to Kira and asked if she could cast some sort of spell and create one for her—something enchanted, so the Vanguards can’t tell that it’s fake.”

I laughed, remembering how I’d caught Cali in the act. “Yeah, I caught her trying to draw one on.”

Xavier smiled and shook his head. “Even after we told her… Wow, she’s stubborn.”

“That’s an understatement. So, what do we do?”

“I’m not sure, but we have to do something, right? We both know that showing up without a Luna is bad, especially since they made a big deal of sending that gown over for Cali. We don’t need to do anything that will draw the wrong type of attention to our pack.”

“You’re right.” I paused, thinking about the prospect of Kira creating a mark for Cali. I didn’t like it, but it seemed like it could be our only choice. “Kira’s spell—there’s no way that it’ll hurt Cali, right? Because of there’s even a sliver of a chance that it might hurt her, we can’t do it.”

“I feel exactly the same, and I asked Kira about that very thing. Granted, she’s never done anything like this before—and she made sure to let me know that—but she says she doesn’t think it’ll hurt Cali.”

“Okay, that’s good. Well, let’s plan to talk to Cali about it in the morning. But for now, let’s get some sleep—tomorrow’s already shaping up to be a rough day.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” Xavier said. “See you tomorrow.”

I left Xavier’s room, feeling a little off-kilter at how calm and agreeable our conversation had been. It was rare for us to spend that much time together without wanting to rip each other’s heads off. I had to admit, it was kind of refreshing to talk to my brother without it turning into a sparring match.

I walked into my room, suddenly feeling so exhausted that I could barely keep my eyes open. I hadn’t realized how much the day had drained me. I fell back onto my bed and rubbed my hands over my face, yawning. I closed my eyes and tried to calm my brain. I burrowed under the covers and pulled them over my head. I tried to count sheep.

Nothing was working. I couldn’t sleep. I couldn’t stop thinking about bringing Cali to the Vanguard party—especially after the news Xavier had just shared. *Are we making a mistake? Even with Xavier there, will we be able to protect her?* I would have to trust that Kira’s Luna mark spell wouldn’t harm Cali, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was somehow putting Cali in danger.

I groaned as a blinding pain struck me right in the center of the chest. I got up, clutching at my chest and trying to catch my breath. I hurried to the bathroom to splash water on my face, and then I looked in the mirror and nearly shouted in surprise at what I saw.

The veins had spread.

**Episode 1997**

I’d just descended the grand staircase and placed one foot on the gleaming ballroom floor when both Greyson and Xavier approached, asking for a dance. Both men looked absolutely stunning in their eighteenth century style silk suits as they bowed before me and offered their hands. At the far end of the ballroom, a quartet began to play a waltz, and I was immediately swept off my feet as Greyson and Xavier guided me expertly around the dance floor, my gown flowing behind me with every move.

I felt beautiful and safe in my mates’ arms, and I stared into their eyes as their warm hands twisted me this way and that, dipping me at all right moments. I could feel all the other fabulously dressed women watching me with envy while every man in the room cast jealous stares at my handsome mates.

*How did I learn to dance so well? Was it from watching all those episodes of* Dancing with the Stars *with my dad? Who said television shows don’t teach you anything?* I felt like a ballroom pro as I spun away from my mates to do a little dance on my own. I smiled at Greyson and Xavier as they watched me, adoration in their eyes as I commanded the dance floor with graceful, languid movements that I hadn’t realized I was capable of performing. I closed my eyes, enjoying the sensation of the gown billowing against my skin as I twirled this way and that, my hands lifted gracefully in the air.

I was still twirling around when I felt a cold, wet drop hit my face. I opened my eyes, shocked to see that it had started to snow. *How is that possible? We’re indoors and there’s a huge chandelier above us! What’s going on?* I spun faster and faster, and was drifting back toward where Xavier and Greyson stood waiting for me when I heard a loud clap.

The music ended abruptly, and I came to a halt. All the dancers around me parted, and a chorus of *ooh*s and *ahh*s and impressed gasps rose up from the crowd as a large, well-dressed man came strutting toward me. He carried a gold scepter in one hand, and his eyes stared right at me from behind an ornate mask that looked like it was made of solid gold.

“You must be the Luna I’ve heard so much about,” the man said, his deep voice echoing so loudly that it seemed to envelop the room.

More cold snow drops fell, and I gasped as the snowflakes turned to blood the moment they hit my skin. I watched in horror as more and more snowflakes fell until I was nearly covered in blood, and my beautiful gown was ruined. I looked up just as the masked man reached for me, and I screamed.

I woke up in a cold sweat and screamed again when I realized that I was staring into a pair of eyes. Torin screamed and jumped back, nearly toppling backward off the bed.

“What are you doing?” I gasped, my heart beating a mile a minute as I scooted back against the headboard.

“You scared me!” Torin gasped, righting himself on the bed.

“I scared *you*?” I took a deep breath, trying to orient myself. “What time is it?”

“I’m glad you’re finally awake, Cali!”

I picked up my phone. “Finally awake? Torin, it’s six in the morning!”

“Exactly! We have to beat them!”

“Beat who?”

“Everyone else! We have to get the best deals, so we need to get there before everyone else does!”

“Hold on, slow down, what are you talking about?” I was still recovering from the shock of finding Torin in my room after that strange dream.

“Black Friday, of course! I saw a commercial about it—and it was kind of confusing because it’s not black at all, but apparently it’s when the best deals are! And you have to get to the stores early so you can be first in line—that’s the only way to get all the good stuff. So, do you know what a doorbuster is and how we can get one?” Torin was beaming from ear to ear and was already dressed—he even had his coat on.

I took a deep breath and pressed my fingers to my temples, still trying to slow my breathing. “Torin, I’m not taking you shopping.”

Torin’s smile faded. “You’re not?”

“No, sorry—I don’t have time. I have to go to a ball tonight.” Not to mention that there was no way I was in the mood to brave Black Friday crowds—that sounded like even more of a nightmare than being covered in snow-blood.

Torin’s smile returned along with a twinkle in his eye. “Hold on, did you say that you’re going to a ball? A *real* ball?”

I shook my head, trying to correct myself—I was getting reality twisted up with my dream. “It’s not a ball, exactly, it’s some party being thrown by some prince.”

Torin looked like he was about to explode. “A royal? You’re going to a ball thrown by a royal? Please, Cali, can I go with you?” I could tell by the faraway look in his eyes that he was already thinking about what he was going to wear.

“Torin, I wish that were possible, but I don’t think it’s a good idea. The prince is from a rival pack, and it could be dangerous.”

Torin’s smile vanished, and he looked disappointed. “I’ve always wanted to go to a ball.” He crossed his arms, a slight pout on his face.

“It’s a party,” I corrected him.

“I respectfully disagree, Cali. When a prince has a party, it most certainly will be a ball,” he said, lifting his chin in indignation.

I gave him a tired smile. “Whatever you say, Torin. By the way, have you asked Lola about Black Friday? She might be willing to go.” I fought back a yawn.

Torin’s eyes brightened. “Oh my gosh, you’re right! She’s a shopaholic!”

With that, he leapt from my bed and skipped out of my room, shutting the door behind him.

I fell back and pulled the covers up almost over my head. I just wanted to go back to sleep and forget about that dream—and Black Friday. I closed my eyes and was drifting off when I heard the door open and close. Seconds later, someone jumped on my bed, landing right on my ankle.

“Ow!” I flung the covers off. “What the hell?”

“Let’s go, soldier!” It was Artemis, all decked out in her exercise clothes and looking like she’d already been up for hours.

“Artemis, come on! Not you, too! Why won’t anyone let me sleep?” I moved to pull my covers back up.

“Sleep? Sleep is for the lazy! Haven’t you heard about the early snake getting the worm? Come on!” She yanked my covers off. “Move it!”

*The early snake?* “Artemis, I think you meant to say that the early *bird* gets the worm.”

“No, that doesn’t sound right. Anyway, up and at ‘em! Let’s go!”

I was about to correct her again but decided to let it pass. I rolled my eyes, holding my ground and crossing my arms. “Go where? I already told Torin that I’m not interested in shopping any Black Friday sales, and—”

“Shopping? You wish. Remember the other night when you said that you were ready to train? Well I’m here to whip your ass into shape! On your feet, soldier!”

“Yes, I remember, but right at this minute? At this hour?” I craned around to look out the window. Pitch black. “The sun hasn’t even thought about coming up yet!”

“Just because the sun’s a slacker doesn’t mean you get to be. And let’s not forget that you agreed to train with me—four times, no less. When you agree to train with me, Cali, you agree to my rules, and my regimen! A regimen that includes getting an early start… But if you aren’t interested in taking all this seriously, well, you should have said so in the beginning.”

I gazed longingly at my comforter, lying on the floor. “But I told Xavier and Greyson that I would—”

“Stop, no excuses! You already spend too much time negotiating around your mates. Time for you to do something else, for a change.”

I started to protest, but then I thought about it. Maybe Artemis had a point.

“Uh huh, your silence tells me that you agree—and that’s exactly why I had a few words with Greyson and Xavier the other night.”

“*What?*” I asked, horrified. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am,” she said, sticking her chin out.

I grabbed Artemis by the collar of her trendy warm-up shirt and pulled her close, noticing that it was like pulling a boulder uphill. I wondered how Artemis had gotten this strong. Embarrassed, exhausted, and vaguely pissed that Artemis would overstep like that, I asked, “Why would you do that?”

**Episode 1998**

I knew nothing should surprise me anymore, but as I looked over at Artemis, I had to admit that there were some things that could still shock me.

And her speaking to both of my mates—about *me*—was definitely one of them.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Artemis asked, her brow crinkling in annoyance.

“I need to know exactly what you told them.” I heard the words tumble out of my mouth almost faster than I could form them. “Every word, exactly as you said it. And *how* you said it, too. What was your tone like? Was there an edge to your voice? You know how you can sound, sometimes.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Artemis asked with a glare.

I opened my mouth to reply and explain that maybe it was normal to sound a little hostile when you were a Fae bounty hunter ordering a perp around, but when you’re asking someone to pass the salt at dinner you don’t need to *growl at them*… But then I immediately thought better of it. That was a fight for another time. Preferably on the phone, when we were on opposite sides of the country.

“It doesn’t matter.” I waved her glare away. “What does matter is what the hell did you say to Greyson and Xavier?”

I reached out for her hands, clasping them as tightly as I could. I knew she must have been able to feel how slick my palms were, and yeah, it was embarrassing to be this worried about whatever Artemis had said to them, but things had actually been going well between the three of us. I couldn’t bear for them to get messed up again.

Artemis sighed wearily. Like I was the one who’d charged into *her* bedroom at the crack of dawn and given her startling news rather than the other way around.

“It’s really not all that dramatic, Cali,” Artemis offered with a shrug. “I just told each of them the truth in plain terms. That I’m a bounty hunter, and if they don’t treat you right, there will be consequences. That’s all.”

Oh, naturally, when she put it like that—

“That’s ALL?” I screeched. “Did you actually use the word consequences? Like you’re a mobster or something? Oh my god, why is this my life?”

I could feel my heart pounding and wondered if everyone in the house could feel it too. I tried to take deep breaths, but none of my mindfulness exercises were really going to help me out here.

Artemis was a lot of things. She loved fiercely, acted first, and thought second, but… I’d never expected her to turn into one of those overprotective older sisters. She wasn’t even that much older than me. How did this happen?

“How much damage control do you think I’ll have to do?” I asked, forcing myself not to screech at her and remember that she’d done this out of love.

“They’re big, strong men,” Artemis reminded me sarcastically. “I guarantee that I wasn’t the first person to lightly threaten them that day. They can handle it.”

“That’s not what I’m afraid of,” I grumbled into my comforter as I let myself flop back down onto my bed, willing the blankets to swallow me whole. “I’m worried my mates think I sent my sister to talk to them, to fight my battles for me. But that’s not the case at all. For once, nothing is wrong—unless you count the Vanguard pack, my lack of Luna marks, and the fact that we’re living in an Alpha-less pack.”

Artemis reached into my tangle of blankets and grabbed me by the arm so she could wrench me out of bed.

“Forget about that,” Artemis urged, tugging hard on my arm. “It’s done now. If you spent half as much time worrying about your fighting form as your mates, you’d be in great shape. Maybe you’d even be fun to spar with.”

“Get out,” I grumbled weakly. “I’ll meet you downstairs.”

“You’d better,” she threatened, wagging a finger at me. “Five minutes, okay? Don’t forget—I was a bounty hunter. I’ll find you.”

“How could I forget?” I snapped, scowling at her. But Artemis just grinned as she practically skipped out the door, entirely too pleased with herself.

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Four and a half minutes later, I was shivering out on the porch, wishing I’d grabbed a sweatshirt because it was *cold* out here. November wasn’t messing around. But before I could muse for long on whether I’d lost all my Minnesota-ness already, Artemis called out to me from the yard.

“You’re thirty seconds early,” Artemis teased, elbowing Rishika in the ribs like this was the funniest thing in the world.

“See?” Rishika grinned at Artemis. “Told you she’d show.”

“Can we just get started?” I grumbled. “The sooner we start, the sooner we finish.”

But then it hit me—I should be thinking about tonight. We still didn’t have a plan for the party. And sure, I had my magic to protect me—plus my mates—but if I’d learned one thing since meeting Xavier, it was that werewolves loved a good fight. Being unprepared for one was never a good idea.

“Can we start with some defensive moves?” I asked, hoping I could learn something this morning that would give me confidence tonight. I punched the air, trying to imitate a boxer I’d seen in a movie once.

Artemis and Rishika both winced.

“Okay, first of all,” Artemis said, snatching one of my hands, “you don’t tuck your thumb inside your fist when you’re punching someone. Unless your goal is to break your thumb, in which case… keep doing that.”

Rishika snorted a laugh but quickly schooled her expression into a more neutral one for my benefit. But the damage was done. I felt like an idiot.

“Why don’t we show you how to get out of a headlock?” Rishika asked brightly. “That’s always useful to know.”

“Are you sure that’s not biting off a little more than I can chew?” I asked, feeling my palms start to sweat once more.

“Not at all,” Rishika promised. And then, before anyone could say anything else, she sprang to the side, looped her arm around Artemis’s neck, and pulled her head tight to her own body, squeezing hard and effectively creating a vise. “Let’s get started.”

Rishika and Artemis walked through it a few times, taking turns locking each other up and then wiggling out before they started asking me to try it out myself. But I couldn’t make myself move as fluidly as Rishika, or generate the raw power Artemis did when she thrashed around.

“Come on, Cali,” Artemis growled at me as she held my head in the crook of her elbow. “No cutting corners. I’ve got you, but you *can* get out.”

“I’m trying,” I whimpered, barely able to get a sound out thanks to my sister’s forearm pressing on my windpipe. But no matter what I did—dropping my weight to throw Artemis off, or trying to wedge an arm inside her hold to give myself more time to breathe and fight her off—nothing seemed to work. Artemis was prepared for every attempt.

I felt anger and guilt mix inside me. I didn’t want to be dead weight for Xavier and Greyson to look out for. I knew they were reluctant to bring me along tonight, partly out of fear that they’d have to watch over me every second.

They saw me as a damsel in distress, a flighty Fae. But I wanted more. I wanted to be their equal in all regards. But my body didn’t care about what I wanted. It was already exhausting itself trying to get out of a simple headlock. At this rate I’d barely be up for a backyard tussle, let alone an all-out werewolf brawl.

“Maybe we should try again from the beginning, go over the forms some more?” Artemis suggested, releasing me.

“I don’t know.” I shook my head. “Maybe this isn’t where my strengths lie.”

“But that’s why we practice, to *get* strong,” Artemis insisted.

“I think your sister means that this isn’t what she’s most talented at,” Rishika explained.

“Exactly.” I nodded, relieved someone understood. “You guys make this whole fighting thing look easy. Everyone does—Charlie’s been here for like five minutes, and he can already fight because of his whole hunter thing. Even *Torin* is better in a fight than me. I’m the only one who sucks at this, and no matter what we try I don’t seem to be getting any better.”

“Then why are we here?” Artemis snapped, frustration clearly getting to her. “Practice is the only way to get better, Cali. And that’s what we’re trying to do here. We didn’t all wake up one day as expert fighters. We worked at it.”

“Also,” Rishika interjected once more, with a kind smile, “it’s only been, like, twenty minutes. There’s no reason for you to be this hard on yourself, Cali.”

And although Rishika said my name, she looked right at Artemis.

“Right,” Artemis nodded, taking the hint. “Cali, I just want you to be safe. I know you don’t think you can do this, but I know you can. You have to accept that you won’t be great at it right away.”

Before I could thank Artemis for the uncharacteristically gentle words, I heard a mechanical roar in the distance, along with a few voices. Rishika and Artemis immediately straightened up, squaring their shoulders.

“Cali, stay here,” Artemis ordered.

“You told me I could do this,” I reminded her. “I can’t let other people tell me what I’m capable of.”

Artemis nodded, giving me a flicker of a smile before leading the way toward the noise. As we got closer, the voices started to sound more familiar. Jay and Ravi. I felt myself relax. If it was just them, then there probably wasn’t any danger.

A loud cracking noise split the air, and I felt my heart leap into my throat. Both guys were standing next to a tree with a chainsaw, and they turned to stare at us in horror.

“WATCH OUT!” they screamed.

And that was when I realized a tree was starting to fall, right where Artemis, Rishika, and I were standing.

**Episode 1999**

GREYSON

Running felt good.

Maybe that wasn’t quite the right word, but running felt better than standing still. And infinitely better than staring at my ceiling, too wired to sleep. I was still full of adrenaline from the sight of the veins spreading.

Panic wasn’t something I could afford to have. And a wolf dealing with a heightened fight-or-flight mode made for a tense pack. I thought I could trick all the worry and anxiety in my heart by telling it I was running away from what it was afraid of. That was how I’d dealt with basically every threat I’d ever encountered. I usually fought, and sometimes—when I was younger, or when it was the smart decision—I fled.

But how were you supposed to fight *or* flee something *inside* you?

Maybe I couldn’t fight or flee—but I could hunt. I could try and figure out why the veins had started to spread again. Was it my agreement to act as co-Alpha with Xavier tonight at the Vanguard’s party? Did that count as a compromise?

All of the factors at play swirled around in my mind. What if this hurt Cali? If so, I’d have to back out. But that would mean leaving Xavier by himself to face Lucian. The pack would look weak.

And even though so many things had changed, my dedication to the Redwood pack had not. And that settled it. Because it didn’t matter if I *wanted* to go tonight. Being an Alpha wasn’t about getting what you wanted. It was about protecting your pack.

When I’d first taken over, I’d struggled with the responsibility. With everyone looking to me for guidance, relying on me to keep them safe. But now, the obligation felt like a part of me. An unshakable fact of life. The pack came first.

But if Cali were to get hurt…

I ran faster, pushing myself to my limit. The forest was a blur around me, a kaleidoscope of green. Until I heard something that stopped me dead in my tracks.

A scream.

Cali’s scream.

Without thinking, I changed direction, running toward her. I didn’t have to focus on pushing myself—the sound of her scream was a shot of adrenaline in my veins. I flew through the forest. More thoughts crowded into my brain replacing all the what-ifs from earlier. Cali was in real danger now; the Vanguard issue would have to wait. I felt a pang in my chest that had nothing to do with the veins at the thought that something might have hurt her.

I reached a break in the trees and saw her up ahead with Artemis and Rishika. She was looking up at something, mouth agape in shock, Artemis and Rishika scrambling for cover. I followed Cali’s gaze and was horrified to find that a fifteen-foot pine tree was falling toward them.

I hurled myself toward the group of them, tackling them out of the tree’s path. The momentum carried me forward as they all hit the ground and I tumbled to the side.

*Are you okay?* I asked, locking eyes with Cali as I spoke to her through the mind link.

But she shook her head furiously and opened her mouth to scream, “Greyson, get out of the way!”

I heard the thud before I felt it. The cool breeze against my fur accompanied by the shaking of the earth where the tree had fallen just a foot away from me. It had barely missed me. But I didn’t care. She was all right. They all were.

The breath left my body for an instant at the force of Cali burrowing against my neck. She buried her face in my fur, and I felt the intense desire to be covered in her scent. To be marked. To be hers.

“Are you okay?” she murmured softly, holding me tighter than was entirely comfortable. But I didn’t ask her to loosen her grip. Because why would I ever want that?

What I *wanted* was to shift back, to wrap my arms around her and hold her back just as tightly. But that would mean Cali seeing the veins on my chest. And I didn’t want to worry her when things were already so tense. She had enough to worry about. And besides, it wasn’t like I’d have an answer to any of her questions.

*I’m fine*,I assured her through the mind link. *Just relieved I reached you in time. What happened?*

I looked up, careful not to break Cali’s hold around my neck, and saw Jay and Ravi standing there, frozen, twin looks of shock on their faces. It would’ve been funny if Ravi hadn’t had a chainsaw and Jay hadn’t been holding a huge axe. Both thudded to the ground as they felt my eyes on them.

“We can explain!” Jay cried out, taking a reflexive step back.

“Oh, I can’t wait to hear it. What the hell were you two idiots doing?” Artemis growled, closing the distance between them with a few angry paces.

“And why the hell were you doing it?” Rishika joined in, her voice stern and cold.

Jay’s and Ravi’s gazes darted between the two equally terrifying women. Then Cali joined in, as fierce as either of them. Her cheeks were pink from the cold in the air, making me wish someone had told her to grab a sweatshirt.

“You could have seriously hurt someone!” Cali shouted. “What were you thinking?”

I growled, letting the guys know just how displeased I was. Both Jay and Ravi grimaced, knowing they were truly in for it.

“You know, when you put it like that, maybe we don’t have the best explanation…” Jay said.

“Try me,” Rishika snapped.

“It’s for Torin,” Ravi blurted out. “He asked for a Christmas tree, and we wanted to surprise him by setting it up in the living room so it would be there when he got back from Black Friday shopping.”

*Whatever happened to pancakes?* I grumbled to Cali through the mind link. *That’s a nice surprise. Pancakes have never hurt anyone.*

“Are you drunk?” Rishika barked. “The tree you cut down is two times the size of a Christmas tree!”

Cali bit the inside of her lip to keep from laughing. She crossed her arms, clearly exasperated as she looked at Jay and Ravi.

“It’s nice of you to want to do something for Torin,” Cali admitted with obvious difficulty. “I know he’ll appreciate it. But I think he’ll appreciate a tree that can actually fit inside the house a lot more.”

“Yeah, we did get a little too enthusiastic about that…” Ravi admitted. “What was it you said, Jay?”

Jay grumbled that whatever he had said didn’t matter.

“No, no, Jay—what did you say? We all want to hear it.” Artemis said.

“… Go big, or go home…”

“That’s officially the stupidest human phrase I’ve ever heard,” Artemis snorted.

“I’m sorry, but is it smart to use an axe when you only have one eye?” Rishika piped up. “Not trying to poke holes in your genius plan or anything, but—”

“Hey!” Jay cried at the exact moment that Ravi murmured, “Told you so, dude.”

Before the situation could devolve into further chaos, I let out another growl and flashed my teeth.

Everyone quieted down, and after a beat of tense silence, Rishika asked, “How did you even plan on getting this back to the house?”

Jay and Ravi look at me hopefully, and all I could think was *hell no.*

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There were pine needles stuck between my *teeth.* I was an Alpha. A leader of men—well, wolves. And I had been dragging a Christmas tree home to impress a Fae for half an hour. I couldn’t believe I’d agreed to do it.

But Cali had asked. She’d said please, and it had melted my heart. How could anyone say to no to her? Especially about Christmas. I had agreed to drag a tree back on the condition that the two would-be lumberjacks found a more suitably sized one. It hadn’t been too hard with all of us. And I guess it was the season to be more generous and all…

Plus, Torin was a nice guy. This was the least I could do for him after all the healing he’d done for us.

*Go in and clear a corner*, I grumbled to Cali through mind link. She grinned at me and pressed a kiss to my snout before bounding inside, leaving me free to shift back.

“Never,” I began, glaring at Ravi and Jay, who had helped drag the tree, “pull shit like that ever again. There are places that sell these things. What the hell were you thinking?”

“A few mochas in, it sounded like a good idea,” Ravi admitted, looking down at the ground.

“Jesus,” I groaned.

Jay cleared his throat, his eyebrows raised. “Did something happen?”

“Yeah,” I answered him, rolling my eyes. “I feel like I ate a Christmas tree-flavored candle because the two of you are dumbasses.”

“Besides that,” Ravi challenged me with a sigh.

And that was when I realized that both of them were looking right at my chest. At the web of dark veins that had started to grow again.

“There are more of them now, aren’t there?” Jay asked, looking concerned.

“I’ve got it handled,” I told them through gritted teeth. “You should both be more worried about how you’re going to get that tree inside.”

And with that, I turned on my heel and headed into the house. If Jay and Ravi had noticed that the veins were spreading, Cali most certainly would too. Shit. I crept through the pack house, careful to avoid the living room so I could get some clothes on quickly.

Once I’d dressed, I headed back downstairs to find Jay and Ravi trying to shove the tree through the front door. Cali bounded into my arms, hugging me tightly around the neck.

“Are you okay?” she asked softly, her lips brushing against my collarbone through my shirt—an area recently conquered by the spread of the black veins. I did everything I could not to tense up.

“Yeah,” I told her, planting a kiss on the crown of her head.

I heard the sound of a throat being cleared behind me and turned to see Xavier, his brow furrowed. But while that was very normal, the fact that he had Kira with him wasn’t.

“Sorry to interrupt,” he said in a tone of voice that meant exactly the opposite. “But if you want a Luna mark from each of your mates, we need to do it now.”

**Episode 2000**

I reluctantly stepped out of Greyson’s embrace. Goosebumps sprang up on my arms as my body cried out in annoyance at the loss of his heat. I’d been enjoying that hug.

Watching that tree hurtle down to the ground and nearly crush him had rattled me. I just needed to hold him right now. To make sure he was real and whole and here. I’d been so scared in that moment of uncertainty, and it was hard to shake.

But then I saw the look on Xavier’s face. Cold and unreadable. I knew him well enough to know that he was trying not to react to seeing me wrapped around Greyson. I tried not to feel guilty, but I couldn’t help it. I hated hurting either of them.

“Wait,” I interjected, stepping away from my shame spiral and trying to play catch up. “What’s going on? I thought Kira wasn’t going to do it? I haven’t even been able to talk about it with Greyson.”

“It’s okay,” Greyson assured me warmly—but not *too* warmly, now that we were in the presence of his brother. “I talked to Xavier already.”

*When did they do that?* I found myself wondering. But before I could voice this, Kira looked over at Xavier like she was prompting him to say something.

“There’s actually been a change of plan,” he explained, ceding the floor to Kira. As I watched the looks exchanged between the two of them, I couldn’t help but wonder how Xavier had convinced Kira do go through with the spell. But I knew now wasn’t the time to be asking. Something about looking gift horses in the mouth, or whatever that saying was.

“Shouldn’t we do the spell right before the party?” I asked. “So it’s, you know, fresh?”

“No,” Kira replied. “If we’re going to fake a Luna mark, it’s imperative that we get started now. It’ll take a few hours for the mark to show up on your skin. The spell I have in mind is very intricate—too much to do right before you walk out the door.”

I looked between Xavier and Greyson, the reality sinking in. I’d wanted this for so long. To bear their mark on my skin. I felt my cheeks heat up at the thought of carrying their imprint—even if it was fake.

I’d been willing to draw it on myself, or try getting one of those fake tattoos I was always getting targeted ads for on Instagram. But apparently I didn’t have to. Soon enough, I’d be able to see it. This was real.

And so were the consequences that could come after tonight.

If we managed to pull this off, we would have fooled the Vanguard pack entirely. I wondered what they’d do if they ever found out we’d tricked them. Would this be seen as an act of aggression? Of war? Because that was the last thing any of us needed.

I took a deep breath, trying to keep my worries from snowballing into a giant *Indiana Jones*-sized boulder. I had to hold true to my decision. Mine, and no one else’s. I knew we had to do this.

“Let’s go somewhere with a little less foot traffic,” I suggested to Kira. “Then we can start, just you and me.”

But Kira shook her head.

“I need all three of you to do it,” she explained. “The mark will need their essence to pass muster.”

“Right,” I murmured, looking between my two mates and swallowing. Hard. “Well, I’m ready if you are.”

It was funny how I was almost waiting for Greyson and Xavier to protest. To come up with some reason why it *wasn’t safe.* But neither of them did. Instead, Greyson nodded, and Xavier told Kira to lead the way.

Kira led us all to one of the pack house studies, where she’d spread out her supplies on every possible surface. I felt my stomach turn at the sight of all the jars full of herbs and petrified squirrel eyes, or whatever the hell it was witches used.

“What exactly is this spell going to involve?” Xavier asked, seeming to hold the same concerns as me.

“This looks like the setup for the real thing,” Greyson noted. “And I’d know.”

I wished hearing him say that didn’t sting. But it did. I remembered how I’d felt watching Greyson choose Joss as his Luna. In retrospect, I understood that it had been something he’d done for the pack. To protect not only them, but me as well.

But it still set my teeth on edge to think about. It still made the possessive part of me want to scream *MINE.* But why should that still bother me? Especially given that when Joss had died, she’d loved Ravi—not Greyson.

“It looks like the real thing because it has to.” Kira’s words interrupted my thoughts. “We’re trying to replicate as much of the magic that goes into a real Luna mark as possible. The Luna ceremony involves magic that bonds wolves together—at least according to my research.”

Xavier grinned at her, apparently proud of the work she’d done.

“Becoming quite the werewolf scholar, huh?” he teased.

Kira fiddled with a mortar and pestle on the corner of the table and glared at him.

“The ceremony bonds an Alpha and Luna together with magic,” she continued with an eyeroll. “The spell I’m going to perform will bind the three of you together with magic as well.”

“But isn’t the purpose only to give Cali a mark?” Greyson asked, clearly confused.

“It is,” Kira admitted. “But my plan is to link the marks and the strength of the illusion that creates them to the three of you. As long as you keep up the ruse, the marks will be strong. The magic will be powered by your will, and how well you can play the part.”

I nodded. It was like Astrid’s glamour—creating an illusion that could only last for so long, and only under certain parameters.

“But,” Kira continued, making something in my stomach sink because *why did there always have to be a but?* “If one of you spills the beans and admits that the mark is a fake or exposes your pack’s… *situation*, then the illusion will fall.”

So basically, if we let it slip that I wasn’t a real Luna, or that our pack was currently without an Alpha, everything would be ruined. I looked between Xavier and Greyson, wondering if trying this was worth the mess a potential failure would cause. Neither of them was looking particularly confident in this plan.

“Could we have a moment to talk about it?” I asked Kira. “Just the three of us?”

Kira shrugged. “I can give you a few minutes,” she said, heading for the door. “But make it as quick as you can.”

“What do you think?” I asked my mates as soon as the door closed behind Kira. I knew that I wanted to do it, but this was a decision that we all needed to agree on.

“I was on board before I knew it was a spell that involved all three of us,” Xavier admitted.

“If we’re going to the party, Cali has to have the mark, right?” Greyson countered, not unkindly. “If there’s no chance the spell will hurt her, I think we have to do it.”

“Even if it did hurt a little, I’d be fine,” I offered. I wanted them to know that I wasn’t scared. That I could be as brave as the two of them. “I’m more concerned about the rules.”

“The rules?” Greyson asked, confused.

“You know,” I mumbled, finding it harder to look at either of my mates. “I just… This isn’t a criticism—but um, in the past…”

“Cali,” Xavier interrupted, his voice impatient but not harsh. “Kira said we didn’t have a lot of time, remember?”

“Right.” I nodded. “You guys can just get a little… *competitive.* You know? What if something goes wrong and our cover is blown?”

The boys stared back at me blankly. As if they couldn’t possibly know what I was talking about. And all my shyness about bringing up the issue evaporated.

“Tell me I’ve got nothing to worry about,” I prodded. “But let’s say that this spell works—that means we’ll all be responsible for convincing Lucian that I’m Luna to both of you. Are you guys down for what faking that might entail?”

Xavier and Greyson both shifted their gazes from me to each other. I waited on pins and needles, watching their staring contest. I knew it was naïve to hope, but if I could get them to agree to this…

Maybe there was a chance that I’d carry their real Luna mark someday. That Xavier and Greyson could put the past behind them and learn to co-Alpha the Redwood pack and lead it in total harmony. Tonight was actually a chance to take my dream life for a test drive.

If only they’d give it a shot.

Xavier broke the silence first. “I’m in.”

“Me too.” Greyson gave his brother a curt nod, and I felt the urge to jump up and down. What was this feeling, making me feel lighter than I had in weeks? Was it optimism? If so, I really liked it.

“So, we’re all in agreement?” I asked, trying to keep my smile from hurting my cheeks. “We’re going to do the spell?”

**Episode 2001**

XAVIER

The earnestness in Cali’s eyes killed me. I knew this was what she wanted. To help both us and the pack. And that was why I’d agreed.

But also… how could I ever say no to her when she was giving me *that* look and was obviously seconds away from bouncing up and down and possibly saying “pretty please”? There wasn’t a thing on this earth I wouldn’t do for her. A scene I’d seen once in old movie popped in my head. A guy trying to lasso the moon for a girl. I knew I’d find a way to pluck the damn thing out of the sky if that was what Cali wanted.

“I’m ready to do whatever it takes,” I told her, hoping she knew I meant those words with everything in me. “Are you?”

I turned to my brother for that second part. Greyson held my gaze for a moment, his eyes steely and unreadable, an unspoken challenge. I stared right back, refusing to break under the pressure.

I wondered if Greyson was going to change his mind and go back on what we’d agreed about before. It wouldn’t be the first time he’d inexplicably done a one-eighty. With Greyson, I always tried to only believe what I could see. It was easier that way. Less disappointment for everyone.

But instead of backing out like I had been worried about, he nodded.

“We’ll do it, then,” Greyson said. “But before we leave, we have to make sure we’re all on the same page about how to handle this. You both heard what Kira said—the magic depends on us, on our ability to create the illusion. We don’t have room for error here.”

Cali and I both murmured in agreement, and I held my tongue about him re-explaining what we already knew. We didn’t have time for dick measuring. Even though I had a pretty good idea of how that would go.

“I’ll grab Kira,” I offered, walking over to the door and looking out into the hall.

Kira had her back to the door. She looked quiet and contemplative. Maybe she was as worried as I was feeling about the whole situation. Either way, we had to do this. I put a hand on her shoulder.

“We’re ready for you,” I told her softly, but she still jumped and scurried a few steps away from me as if I’d shouted.

“That’s great,” she said, her cheeks bursting with color as she hustled back into the study, clearly embarrassed to be caught off guard.

I sighed, following her. I wondered if I’d done something wrong. I knew that I wasn’t always the warmest, cuddliest guy, but I’d tried hard not to startle her.

But maybe it wasn’t me. Maybe something bigger was going on. After all, Kira had been weird last night, too. I knew better than to offend a witch, and I resolved to watch myself as carefully as I knew how. I didn’t want to lose an eye like Jay.

When I closed the door behind me, I noticed Kira fussing over all the ingredients on the table, her back to me once more.

“Thanks again,” I told her. “Big Mac probably wouldn’t have done this for us. She’s so fickle, you know? We just… we appreciate it.”

But Kira didn’t even glance up at me as she replied in a shaky voice, “Don’t mention it. We’re good to go, but first things first—you’re all going to have to strip down.”

“What?” Greyson asked, his voice jumping up an octave. “No.”

“No?” I echoed harshly before I could stop myself. “You’re a werewolf. Dude, we’re naked like seventy-five percent of the time.”

“More like ninety percent,” Kira mumbled.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “What gives?”

“I mean,” Cali piped up, her cheeks pink. “Is it super necessary that we get naked? Like… is there a version of the spell you can do if I keep my leggings on?”

“It *is* necessary,” Kira insisted, focusing her gaze on the herbs she was tossing into her mortar.

Cali groaned, and I couldn’t help but smile at how cute she looked blushing and peeking through her eyelashes to watch Kira grind up the relevant ingredients. I could see the gears turning in her head as she tried to find another loophole. But with magic, you usually had to follow the rules or face the consequences.

“The spell I’m doing is going to link you all together,” Kira explained, starting to sound more confident. “Meaning there cannot be barriers between you if you want the magic to work. Clothes count as a barrier.”

“Fine,” I replied with a shrug, shucking off my jeans. “I don’t need to be told twice. Nothing you haven’t all seen before.”

I watched Cali wriggle shyly out of her leggings. You’d have thought that after all this time with werewolves she would have learned to undress with quick, fluid movements. But no. She was just as awkward untangling herself from fabric as she had been when we’d first met.

Not that I minded. It was so perfectly Cali, the way she reluctantly tugged her sweater over her head, rumpling her hair.

“This had better work,” I told Kira, but she didn’t meet my eyes. Maybe she—like Cali—was embarrassed by our nakedness.

I looked over to Greyson, who was still fully clothed, his lips pressed together into a thin line. I threw my hands out to the side, giving him a “what the hell?” gesture, and he sighed before reluctantly pulling his shirt over his head.

I heard Cali gasp when his shirt hit the floor. The sound made me tense. She hadn’t made a sound when I’d taken off *my* shirt, and I had a much better body than Greyson.

But then I saw what she was reacting to.

The dark veins on Greyson’s chest has spread. Now, they crisscrossed and spidered out over his shoulders and his upper arms. I reflexively looked down at my chest to see if my own had grown, but they hadn’t. Like always, they started from my heart and were confined to my chest. If mine hadn’t gotten worse, why had Greyson’s? Had something happened to change things for him?

“I’m fine,” Greyson murmured to Cali. “We can talk after the spell, okay?”

I wondered how fine he could be if the curse was spreading. Greyson had been acting strange lately—could this be why?

“We need to get moving,” Kira reminded us all. “We’ve already delayed too long. Step together and hold hands.”

Greyson and I obeyed, stepping forward and each taking one of Cali’s hands.

“You need to hold hands too,” Kira told us.

I looked up at Greyson, whose furrowed brow matched my own. Neither of us were too jazzed about being naked and holding hands. But whatever. He offered his hand, and I took it. At least his hand wasn’t sweaty. This was still one of the more awkward situations we had found ourselves in, for sure.

So, I tried to focus on the feeling of Cali’s hand in mine. So small and delicate and soft…

Kira began to circle around us, dipping her fingers into the mortar and sprinkling the mashed-up herbs around us.

“This will begin to bind the three of you together,” Kira explained.

I felt Greyson’s hand go rigid in mine. I wondered if maybe we should have thought this out more. Did I really want to be linked with Greyson? And in what way? Weren’t the cursed veins and the shared DNA enough?

I gritted my teeth, trying to put those questions to the back of my mind. This was for Cali. She came first, and nothing else mattered. At least Greyson seemed to agree with me on that.

Kira finished her circle and tipped the rest of her herbs into a fancy-looking golden chalice covered in gemstones. She murmured in a language I didn’t understand and waved her hand over the concoction.

I watched her, mesmerized, as she added a few drops of water to the mixture and started to swirl it. The little potion bubbled, and I could see it shimmer and change as lines of liquid silver spread over the mixture. I couldn’t help but suck in a breath when Kira presented me with the final product.

“Both of you need to dip your claws in this mixture and then give your mate the Luna mark,” she explained solemnly. “This action will link all three of your together. After that, the spell’s power will be in your hands.”

I looked down at the silver liquid. I’d pictured this moment before—the moment I chose my Luna and marked her before everyone. As a younger man, I’d thought it would happen with Ava. But obviously, that had changed. I’d thought about claiming Cali as my Luna more than I wanted to admit.

This is what it would look like. What it might feel like.

I knew this was only going to be a pale imitation of the real thing, but I found myself longing for the day when she’d really be mine and I wouldn’t have to share her. When I could be in front of the entire pack tracing the real mark—my mark—onto her body.

We dropped each other’s hands, and I shifted just enough to dip my claw into the liquid, taking a deep breath as I did so. I let the silver coat my claw and watched Greyson do the same.

Almost mirroring each other, we raised our hands to Cali’s shoulders.

**Episode 2002**

MARTA

“It needs to be more to the left.” Lola looked at the Christmas tree critically, like she was studying a portrait at a museum rather than a tree her boyfriend had shoved into the living room, tracking dirt everywhere.

“Don’t tell me I have to move that thing one more time…” Ravi groaned, incredulous, like she had to be insane to ask for something like this.

“Lola, it’s in the perfect place.” At least Jay had the self-preservation to sound a bit more neutral.

“It’s awkward,” Lola countered, shaking her head. “You want the tree in a corner so that everyone can gather around it in a semi-circle when gifts are opened. If you have it floating in the center then you have to decorate the back, AND then there’s this awkward little space.”

“You want to *not* decorate the back?” Jay cried, losing whatever composure he’d had. “That’s nuts!”

*Another happy couple in the Redwood pack house*, I couldn’t help but think to myself. I tried to focus on untangling the enormous ball of string lights I’d hauled into my lap. Why in the world were they stored like this?

I looked up to see Violet, Charlie, and Lilac on the opposite side of the room, contending with an even larger mass of colored lights. Violet and Charlie were holding hands, and thus only picking at the mess with their free ones, making it slow going. Lilac was staring at the ball intently, clearly trying to form a game plan. He looked so handsome in the mid-morning light. He looked handsome in any light, really.

He must have felt my eyes on him, because he looked up my way, and I quickly had to drop my gaze back to my lap. The truth was, I’d been avoiding Lilac since last night, when he’d called me his girlfriend.

I’d asked him about it before, because we’d never really described ourselves in any certain terms. We had a good time together, we liked each other, we’d even watched that movie as part of a double date.

But girlfriend?

Boyfriend?

Was that really how he felt? Was it how I felt?

I snuck another glance at Lilac. He was glancing between Lola and Jay like he was watching a tennis match, his brow furrowed. I could tell he had an opinion, and it wasn’t going to be long until he shared it.

“You’re both wrong,” he finally interjected, pushing himself to his feet.

Lola and Jay gaped at him as he made his way over to the tree, then pulled it backward and to the right.

“You want it by the window,” he explained as Ravi joined him, clearly growing weary of this argument. “That way the lights will reflect off the glass, making it look brighter, and it’ll show off all the ornaments on the tree. Not to mention, if you pull it slightly out from the corner you still decorate the whole thing, but when we gather around, we can all see each other. We won’t be talking through the tree or anything.”

“THERE!” Lola commanded, as Ravi and Lilac froze in the exact spot he’d described. “Everyone, stay *exactly* where you are. From your angle, does it look straight? Does it look full? Do you think it overwhelms the room or compliments it? Be honest.”

“Looks good,” Charlie commented with a smile.

“Perfect,” Violet agreed quickly.

Everyone’s gaze settled on me, the final opinion. But I wasn’t looking at the tree, I was looking at Lilac. At the pine needle that had made its way into his hair, at his expectant smile, at his kind eyes…

“Looks great,” I mumbled, my cheeks burning as I stood up and sent my ball of Christmas lights tumbling to the floor. “Excuse me.”

And with that, I very gracefully turned on my heel and darted up the stairs. I honestly didn’t even know where I was going. Maybe I’d wash my face in the bathroom? Try to cool down?

But then I turned a corner and nearly ran into Big Mac—who happened to be walking right out of *my* bedroom.

“Aha!” she cried at the sight of me. “There you are. Walk with me.”

She set off down the hall, and I followed at her heels, confused by her intensity.

“Is something wrong?” I asked, wishing I knew how to not sound so worried.

“No,” Big Mac answered with a shake of her head. “But we have a lot of prepping to do for your trial, and there’s no time like the present. I want to go over some questions you’ll probably be asked. That way we can see how you respond and work on polishing up your answers.”

I heard peals of laughter from downstairs. I could pick out Lilac’s cackle, clear as a bell. His laugh always built, starting small and then rising to sometimes uncontrollable heights as the joke seemed to dawn on him in waves. I winced at the pang I felt in my chest. I wanted to be with him, not stuck here prepping for a trial.

“Do we have to do this now?” I asked, not thinking before the words flew out of my mouth.

Big Mac whirled around to face me, her expression souring.

“I’m sorry,” she replied, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “Is there something more pressing than your summons to the witch council? The trial that’s occurring in a week’s time, last I checked?”

“Nope. Nothing,” I replied, chagrined.

“Good.” Big Mac gave me a wink before turning back and resuming her walk. “Didn’t think so.”

She led me into her room, where Mrs. Smith was waiting in the little seating area they had. I relaxed when I caught sight of her. Big Mac wouldn’t be too harsh to me in front of her fiancée, would she?

“Have a seat,” Mrs. Smith said, beckoning me forward with a smile. “There’s no need to look so scared. We’re not the jury after all. We only want to help make sure you understand what’s coming.”

I sat down next to Mrs. Smith, and Big Mac bustled into the chair on my other side. Flanked by the two women, I couldn’t help but feel cozy, even if I was being put on the spot more than I normally liked.

“This is just for practice,” Big Mac assured me. “Better to say the wrong thing in here than in front of the council.”

I nodded, letting myself relax a bit into my chair. I told myself that it was good to have two people who were willing to help me. People who cared.

Just then I heard another round of laughter from downstairs, and my heart instantly felt heavier.

*Focus*, I ordered myself, clenching my fists.

“Ready for a few questions?” Big Mac asked, eyebrows raised.

“Yes,” I said with a nod. “What kind of questions will the council ask? Do you really know, or are you guessing?”

“We’re making some educated guesses,” Big Mac replied with a wave of her hand. “We’re basing our practice questions on reports from different witch proceedings. There are a few famous trials I’ve heard about. We feel they’ve set a precedent for what you might be asked.”

“We’ve done our research,” Mrs. Smith chimed in. “Don’t you worry.”

“Why isn’t Kira here to help? She’s a witch too, after all,” I said. “No offense, Mrs. Smith.”

“None taken.” She smiled. “I figured having two witches berating you with questions might make you nervous, and I convinced MacKenzie that a friendly face wouldn’t go amiss.”

She was right, as usual. “Thanks. I… really appreciate that, actually.” I swallowed roughly. “In that case, I guess we’d better start.”

Big Mac leapt out of her chair and began to pace. Her posture was ramrod straight as she played the part of the cross-examiner.

“So, Marta.” She let her eyes rake over my expression appraisingly. “Where were you the night of the Battle of Letifer?”

“Um.” I blinked, already thrown off. “Like—which part? When in the battle?”

“The beginning,” Big Mac answered, as if it were obvious.

“I was in the house…”

“No, no, no,” Big Mac chastised, shaking her head. “When you brought Lilac back from the spirit world.”

I scratched my head, feeling like I had a pretty solid recollection of the night. I’d been there, after all.

“But that wasn’t at the beginning,” I told her. “That was at the end.”

“Objection!” Big Mac cried, making me jump in my chair.

Mrs. Smith reached out to pat her fiancée on the shoulder.

“A bit intense, dear,” Mrs. Smith advised. “Maybe scale it back a bit?”

“Of course.” Big Mac took a deep breath, re-centering herself. “Marta, can you please describe each action you took before you pulled Lilac out of the spirit realm?”

I launched into my explanation. But as I began to rehash everything, I felt myself fumbling over bits and pieces. The details were hazy, even for me, and I’d lived it! Only a few days ago!

“I remember seeing Lilac,” I continued, watching Mrs. Smith’s brow furrow with worry. “And I grabbed him. That’s about it.”

“And when you grabbed him,” Big Mac pressed, “was that an attempt to bring him back to life?”

“*No*,” I answered forcefully. “I just knew that I didn’t want him to be there. Closed off with Letifer and away from his friends and family.”

*Away from me*,I added, to myself.

How could I even begin to explain my connection to Lilac to the council? It was unlike anything I’d ever felt before… Was it love?

But that word was so big, so scary. It came with so many implications and attachments and responsibilities. I cared about him, I knew that. It was the care I had for him that had brought him back. But that wasn’t love, right? I wasn’t even his girlfriend!

“Good, good,” Big Mac mused as she mulled over my answer. “Perhaps we can make your case even stronger if we have Lilac come as a character witness. That should make you sympathetic as all hell. I’ll go get him.”

“No!” I cried out, leaping to my feet and causing both women to stare at me like I’d gone insane. “I mean…” I fumbled, feeling my cheeks heat up as I tried to sound normal. “I’d like to ask him myself.”

**Episode 2003**

I took a deep breath and prepared myself for the feeling of each of my mates’ claws on my back. It was just a faux Luna mark, but it was still coming from them. It was still a gesture of love. Honestly, it was feeling pretty freaking real.

I tensed my muscles, trying to stay as still as I could. But I felt restless. Not only was I bracing myself for the pain, my head was buzzing with questions. What the hell was going on with Greyson’s veins? Why had the curse spread? How had it happened? Was it my fault? Had I done something too decisive? I’d thought being indecisive was like the one thing I had going for me these days, and now I couldn’t even do that?

*Breathe, Cali.* The more rational part of my brain slammed the brakes on my shame spiral in favor of some good old-fashioned self-preservation.

I listened, focusing on the air flooding into my lungs. As I exhaled, I tried to let my muscles loosen. Like I was in one of the two yoga classes I’d let Lola drag me to right after Welcome Week at school. I’d planned to join a ton of clubs and maybe even graduate early. And look at me now.

I reminded myself that shame spiraling about being a college dropout was no better than shame spiraling about the *due destini* curse. Back to yoga. What had the instructor said? *Be present and focus on the now.*

I could do that. Right now, I just had to stay still. Greyson had saidwe’d talk later. I had to stay present. I focused on the heat rolling off him and Xavier as their hands hovered over my shoulders. The air felt thick with anticipation.

I realized I was desperate for their touch. I wanted this. I was *ready* for this. Ready for it to be real, even if it wasn’t. I licked my lips and resisted the urge to ask them what they were waiting for.

Would this feel anything like getting the real mark? Like being a true Luna? Or would it be like staring through the window at the real thing? I longed for it to feel real. If I was never going to be able to have it, maybe a taste would be enough.

“Are you ready?” Greyson asked from behind me. I was so sensitive, I could feel the low rumble of his voice in my chest, and my heart sped up in spite of myself. Was I actually getting turned on by this?

“We won’t start until you are,” Xavier assured me. The tenderness in his voice made me wish I could look them both in the eye as they touched me, marked me, claimed me.

But instead, I just nodded and straightened to my full height. Presenting them with my bare back, smooth and vulnerable and waiting for their marks. I couldn’t believe it, but I was actively aching for their touch.

“I’m ready,” I promised them, my voice husky.

“Okay,” Kira said, almost startling me with the reminder of her presence. “You need to do this as if it were the real thing. You have to cut into her skin.”

“You said this wouldn’t hurt her,” Greyson growled.

“Why does this need to be a part of it if the marks aren’t real?” Xavier asked, sounding equally agitated.

“Because,” Kira answered flatly. “I never said this would be easy.”

I turned around to look at my mates. My eyes were drawn to their claws, fully extended and dripping with silverly liquid. I should have been scared, but I wasn’t.

“It’s okay,” I promised, my eyes flicking between the two of them, my heart so full of love for them both I thought I might burst. “I trust you both. I’m ready for this, I swear.”

And with that I turned back around and pulled my hair over my shoulder, making sure not to shiver when I exposed the bare nape of my neck to the cold air of the room.

“Do it,” I urged them in a voice I hoped made it clear that I wouldn’t ask again.

Neither of them said anything, but I felt them move into position behind me. I squeezed my eyes shut, bracing for the pain. I felt the points of their claws, cold against my skin, and then the gentle pressure of them pushing until—

I had to bite down on my lip to keep from crying out from the pain. As if the skin slicing wasn’t enough, the herb mixture felt like it was burning me from the inside. Tears began to well up in my eyes, but I knew I couldn’t ask for it to stop. I had to stay strong for this. For them. For myself.

I’d told myself I could do this, so now I had to see it through. I could feel every curve of the half-moons my mates were carving into my back. I could see them clearly in my mind’s eye, like I was looking in a mirror.

I started to feel something odd on my lower back, a tickle, and I was shocked to realize it was my blood. And then it was over, almost as quickly as it had begun.

The burning sensation lingered, but at least the cutting was over. I had vague awareness of Kira murmuring as she circled us again, completing the spell. But it was difficult to focus on anything but the burning awareness I had of my mates and the marks they’d created.

Unable to deprive myself of the sight of them any longer, I turned to face them, almost delirious in my joy at feeling this close to them. I felt both of them in my mind, asking if I was okay, their voices laced with concern and love.

“I will be,” I promised. “It hurts a little, but I’ll be fine.”

*I knew this was a horrible idea*, Greyson replied with a grimace.

*Well, we did it and it’s over*, was Xavier’s mental rebuttal. *We’ll be able to heal her shoulder as soon as we’re done.*

*And if it doesn’t work?* Greyson shot back, eyes flashing with anger. *Then we’ve hurt her for nothing.*

“Stop!” I held my hands up, hoping they’d both quiet down. “If we’re going to fool anyone tonight, you can’t be fighting for space in my head.”

Xavier and Greyson both started at my words, their eyes widening in surprise.

“What now?” I asked, wondering how I could have shocked their delicate werewolf sensibilities this time.

“You… You heard us?” Xavier asked, bewildered. “Just now?”

“Yes,” I replied, blinking back at them. “You were arguing. Which is annoying, because we need to work together.”

“But we were only mind linking each other,” Greyson explained.

“Which you shouldn’t have been able to hear,” Xavier finished.

Shocked, I turned to look at Kira for an explanation.

“Can we all mind link now?” I asked her, my voice coming out a squeak.

“Oh, did I not mention that?” Kira asked distractedly. “Looks like the spell is complete.”

Suddenly feeling a bit weak in the knees, I stumbled out of the herb circle and collapsed into a nearby chair. I couldn’t believe it.

“So, we can all talk now,” I murmured, feeling dazed and grateful for the chair beneath me.

“In order to keep everyone accountable for the secret,” Kira explained. “The spell connects you in a much deeper way. It’s not permanent. But for tonight, it will allow you to stay in touch. That way, if someone is struggling to keep the secret, all three of you will know.”

“Basically we’ve got a three-way walkie-talkie,” I said, and if I hadn’t been feeling so weird from the spell I’d have laughed.

“Sure,” Kira answered with a shrug.

I nodded, and my new understanding was accompanied by a rush of energy. I no longer felt like melting into the chair. I wanted to bounce out of it. I had the Luna Mark! *Marks*, plural!

I leapt out of the chair, wanting to relish this feeling. Xavier and Greyson both rushed to my side, clearly worried.

“Slow down, Cali,” Greyson urged.

“Yeah, you don’t want to tire yourself out,” Xavier agreed.

“Can I see a mirror?” I asked, desperate for a look at my marks.

“I figured you’d want one,” Kira replied, handing me a beautiful pearl hand mirror with ornate designs on the back. I wondered if it was hers, or if she’d just found it lying around in the pack house. Neither explanation would have surprised me at this point.

I peered at the marks on my back, at the two silvery half-moons sitting back to back on my shoulders. It looked like Joss’s Luna mark, times two. Perfectly legit. I felt a lump growing in my throat… It looked just like the real thing.

And then the marks started to fade, disappearing back into my skin like they’d never existed.

“What’s going on?” I cried, shocked and saddened to see them go.

*You can’t miss what you never actually had*,I thought to myself. It was going to be even harder to handle my longing to be a Luna now that I’d had a taste of it.

“I told you,” Kira reminded me patiently. “The mark needs time to develop. By the time you leave tonight, it should look like the real thing—as long as you keep to your plan and don’t mess it up.”

I nodded, mesmerized by the faint imprint that remained on my back. I felt some comfort that at least it hadn’t disappeared entirely. Even if it would eventually. I put down the mirror and turned back to Greyson and Xavier.

“What do you think?” I asked them, feeling suddenly self-conscious.

But it seemed like there was no need to ask—both of them looked ravenous. Mouths open, pupils blown with desire, their eyes flashed with need as they each took a step toward me.

**Episode 2004**

XAVIER

Fuck.

Everything about Cali was intoxicating. Even more so than usual. Every part of her sparked desire in me. I wanted to bare every part of myself to her, to mark her as my mate so everyone knew who she belonged to. I wanted her to do the same to me.

I shook my head, trying to clear my mind. Where the hell was this coming from? The spell? The mate bond? Or was it from seeing Cali wearing *my* mark? I didn’t care that it would disappear soon—the sight of it was making me feel absolutely crazed.

I took my eyes off of her for a moment in an attempt to regain my composure. I was, after all, not wearing clothes. But doing this meant looking at Greyson, and realizing that he was staring at Cali with just as much rapture as I must have been a moment ago.

I could feel it—the lust, the heat, the desire. Like it was rolling off him in waves. All directed at Cali. And now that I could feel it, I found that I couldn’t make myself *un*aware of it. Greyson’s desire for Cali felt like a real, tangible thing that I could’ve reached out and touched.

But I didn’t want to. In fact, I wished more than anything that I could shake it off and ignore it like I usually did. I didn’t want to be let in on my brother’s lustful feelings toward *my* mate.

And I knew that Cali was his mate as well, but that didn’t make it better.

“Can you back off?” I asked him, feeling possessive and disgusted at the same time.

“Funny, I was about to say the same thing to you,” Greyson retorted, his eyes not leaving Cali.

I felt the urge to cover Cali’s body with my own. And not just for amorous reasons. I wanted to protect her. After all, she had my mark, she was mine. I felt more connected to her than I had in a long time.

But more than that, I felt… responsible. It was my duty to protect her tonight. To make sure that perfect, delicate, sweet Cali remained unharmed. To do anything and everything to ensure her safety.

And to make sure Greyson’s wishy-washy bullshit didn’t get in the way. Which meant I had to be the bigger man. Not for myself, but for her. “We have to keep it together,” I growled out. It felt funny to say when I was inches away from snapping. “If we can’t handle it five seconds after the spell is cast, how are we going to handle tonight?”

“You’re right.” Greyson nodded, looking like he was restraining himself as hard as I was.

“We good?” I asked Greyson, hoping he had the stakes in mind as well.

He looked at me almost appraisingly, and I wondered what he was thinking. Was it possible he and I were on the exact same page, just opposite sides?

Greyson nodded before turning to Kira—the only indication I had that we were in agreement.

“Is there anything else we should know about the spell before tonight?” he asked Kira.

“Yes,” she replied. “The moment you tell the truth about the spell to anyone in the Vanguard pack, it’s over. The marks will disappear, and the jig will be up. If you want this to work, the most important thing is for you to trust each other.”

I snorted in spite of myself. All I had to do was trust my brother. The guy who’d lied, cheated, stolen my pack from me, *and* stolen my mate. And yeah, maybe he’d had his reasons for some of that. But still… trusting the guy wasn’t something that came easy to me.

If I’d known that was the key to making this work, I probably wouldn’t have agreed to the spell. But I hadn’t known, and we were in it now. And my only option to get through the night—to get Cali through the night safely—was to work with Greyson. And try to trust him as much as I could.

“Well, thanks, Kira.” I tried my best not to let my worries show. I didn’t want to show any doubts about the plan in front of Cali—that would only make her worry.

“There’s more,” Kira told us all. “The spell will wear off by the next sunrise, so you should be careful to not be out all night.”

I snorted again. “Easy. I’m Irish Goodbye-ing as soon as fucking possible.”

“Agreed.” Greyson nodded. “We’re only going to appease the Vanguard pack. Nothing more. I don’t see us closing down the place.”

“Great.” I relaxed a bit. “We’re on the same page, then.”

Maybe this didn’t have to be as hard as I’d thought.

“Yeah,” Greyson agreed, his posture relaxing. “Same page.”

I looked at Greyson and felt this strange sense of clarity. Like when you finally cleaned your glasses and suddenly everything looked less murky. I knew he meant what he said. I didn’t have doubts about his motives. I wasn’t worried he’d stab us all in the back because of some hidden agenda. I didn’t know how, but I knew he wasn’t bullshitting.

“Great.” Cali gave us both a tight smile. “That’s solved. Now, Greyson, you and I need to talk.”

Normally, hearing those words would’ve made me tense. But I knew she just wanted to talk to him about his veins spreading. And to be honest, I didn’t want any part of that talk.

However, what did feel off was the way Greyson grimaced at Cali’s words. I could sense something shifting in the air around him. Almost like he was closing himself off from Cali. Filtering their connection in some way.

It was weird—I’d never felt this close to Greyson and what he was feeling. I’d never been able to read him, and now I could. And I hated it. It wasn’t that I wasn’t interested in knowing what he was thinking—there had been times when that would have been a great asset. It wasn’t even just not wanting to feel his love and lust for Cali.

It was more than that.

It was the fact that if I was suddenly feeling what Greyson could feel, then wouldn’t the opposite be true as well? Could Greyson feel everything I felt?

I hated the idea of that. It freaked me out. I didn’t even like sharing my emotions with *Cali.* It usually felt like pulling teeth. And it wasn’t that I didn’t want to share things with her. I loved her. I wanted to give her everything, but sharing that stuff had never come naturally to me.

I’m an aloof guy. What can I say?

“And with that,” Kira piped up, hustling toward the door, “I’ll be going.”

The soft click of the door closing was like a gunshot going off in the silent room. Now it was just us and Cali’s expectant stare and Greyson giving absolutely nothing back.

“I don’t want to talk about it right now,” he offered gruffly.

“But, Greyson”—Cali looked at my brother, her eyes wide with concern—“the veins have spread. That has to mean something. Are you okay? Does it hurt? I need you to talk to me about this kind of thing.”

“I’m fine,” Greyson insisted, sounding more than a little frustrated. “I didn’t want to make a big deal over it and worry you.”

He wasn’t going to give her any time to fire back as he went about getting his clothes together, eager to get away from her inquiries. Shirt first, presumably so he could hide the offending veins. Cali stayed where she was, nibbling at her lower lip. I could feel how helpless she felt.

“Just answer her,” I told Greyson, hating to see Cali like this. “Can’t you see this is upsetting her?”

“I don’t need this from you too,” Greyson snapped, glaring at me. I knew it was a warning. His way of saying “DO NOT ENTER.” He pulled his pants on jerkily, the tension in the room mounting.

“We need to just focus on the party tonight,” Greyson told us, clearly forcing himself to sound calmer. “We can talk after that.”

And before Cali or I could say anything, Greyson was out the door. When it slammed shut behind him, Cali jumped a little, and my heart broke for her.

“Are you all right?” I asked softly.

As with Greyson, I could feel all her anxiety and worry. And all of it was directed toward my brother.

“You know everything’s going to be okay, right?” I asked, closing the distance between us when she wouldn’t answer me.

“I hope you’re right,” Cali replied, before looking up at me and giving me a bright smile. “Should we get dressed?”

She reached for her bra and started tugging it back on, but something must have caught on the mark because she winced.

“Can I help?” I asked, stepping behind her. But before I could assess the situation, I was smacked in the face by her scent.

I slid her bra strap up her shoulder, enamored with the smooth curve of her body as I made sure to avoid the wound. God, she was enticing.

I forced myself to stay on task and not replace my fingers with my mouth. “We should find Torin.”

“He’s at the mall for Black Friday,” Cali replied, shaking her head. “I’ll be okay. I’m sure Kira can help me out. Didn’t she heal you before?”

I didn’t answer her, transfixed by her soft skin as I tried to work the clasp on her bra. Cali giggled at my fumbling.

“I’m more used to taking these things *off*,” I grumbled, making her laugh again and sending a ripple of lust running through me.

Unable to stand it a second longer, I put my hands on her waist and turned her around to face me. She nearly stumbled into my arms on coltish legs.

*Perfect… Sweet… Have to protect her…*

I leaned down, my lips less than an inch from hers. Her breath hitched, and I knew she was just as affected by the spell as I was.

“Maybe we don’t need to put our clothes on at all?” I whispered.

**Episode 2005**

Xavier’s voice stirred something inside me. I pressed my thighs together as memories of last night flooded my mind. Of his skin against mine. Of the sounds we’d both made…

God, he smelled so good. Like the forest and smoke and sandalwood. I wished they made a Xavier candle. I’d totally buy it.

I parted my lips, preparing to be kissed. To get lost in him again. To forget every single thing besides the feeling of him against me. But then I remembered—I shouldn’t forget those things. Those things were important. Thinking about those things was going to keep us and our pack safe.

So, reluctantly, I planted my hand on his chest and pushed him away, gently. Letting him know that we wouldn’t be getting any closer.

I stared at the map of crisscrossing dark veins on Xavier’s chest. I wondered if it was possible that they had spread, even minutely. Perhaps something was happening to both him and Greyson, but it was only affecting Xavier more slowly.

But they looked the same as they had for a while.

*He’s as cursed as he was before*, I thought, suddenly feeling a little sick to my stomach. How had I gotten so complacent about this? How had I made myself get used to these constant glaring reminders of the *due destini* curse? Of the thing that threatened to take out all three of us?

They might as well both have had it tattooed on their chest: *If you choose me, the other will die.*

I began to trace the veins on Xavier’s chest, oddly drawn to them. I felt my breath hitch as I ran my fingers down his torso. Could I have done this? Would pretending to be Luna to both of them make everything worse?

But if that were the case, wouldn’t Xavier have been suffering the consequences too? Plus, this had happened to Greyson before we’d even done the spell. Which meant it couldn’t be that.

I felt Xavier tuck his finger under my chin and lift it, so I had to meet his gaze.

“Cali.” He spoke softly and carefully, like he was savoring my name on his tongue. “You need to stop worrying.”

“I wasn’t worrying,” I objected. “I’m fine, really—”

But Xavier shook his head.

“I know you, remember?” he reminded me. “I know your worried face.”

He threaded his fingers through my hair, cradling my head in his hands as he brought his lips to my ear. He felt so warm. I resisted the urge to go completely limp in his arms. To let him do whatever he wanted. His touch felt that good.

“I could help you relax,” he whispered, lips brushing against the shell of my ear. “If you want…”

I felt my entire body flush. I couldn’t even make a sound, I was so lost in the desire I had for Xavier. The desire I always had for him.

He pulled back, just a bit. My eyes were drawn to his lips. I knew what it was like to kiss those lips. I knew exactly how they felt, how they tasted. If I let him kiss me, I’d forget all about what we were going to do tonight.

I’d forget about everything else in the world.

But I couldn’t do that.

I pushed him away again, even though it felt counter intuitive. Like swimming deeper into the water when your lungs were crying out for air.

“We’d better not,” I said lamely. “I need you to help me get dressed—no funny business.”

Xavier grinned. “I don’t know if we can manage that,” he teased with a smirk.

But nothing happened as we both got dressed. He even helped me back into my shirt. But once it was on, I couldn’t stop rolling my shoulders. The way the fabric hugged my body kept irritating my wound. Maybe a shirt wasn’t the greatest idea.

But it wasn’t like I could walk out into the hall in just a bra. Yes, werewolves were used to nudity, but it was the principle of the thing.

I grimaced as I tried to pull the fabric away from my marks, only succeeding in making it brush up against them until I hissed. I saw Xavier’s hands twitch, like he was stopping himself from reaching for me and trying to make it better.

“I’ll be fine,” I told him, making sure my voice was even. “I’m gonna go wash up.”

But then we both heard a very loud noise from the other room. Someone yelling about multi-colored lights going *inside* the tree rather than outside.

“Where the hell do you think the lights are *supposed* to go?”

Xavier sighed.

“Looks like I have something to do while you clean up,” he quipped with an eyeroll before heading out of the room.

I watched his back retreat, wishing for a moment that everything was simple. That I could go with him hand in hand and take part in whatever Christmas nonsense was going on. That I could sit in Xavier’s lap and drink hot chocolate and smile so hard my cheeks hurt.

But I knew I was needed elsewhere.

I made my way through the house as quickly and quietly as I could. I didn’t want anyone to see me going into Greyson’s room and gossip about it. The closer I got to his bedroom, the more I could feel him. I was positive he’d be in there when I opened the door.

This new awareness of both brothers was strange. It was like a sixth sense. Not only could I tell that Greyson was in his room, I could feel his emotions, too. He was feeling upset, frustrated, and guilty. But to be honest, I didn’t really need a spell to know that.

Still, actually feeling what he felt rather than just knowing about it… It heightened things in a way I never could have expected.

I knocked softly on his door, but there was no answer.

I pushed it open only to find the room empty. His bed was made, and everything was in its place. However, my eyes were drawn to the light glowing from under the bathroom door. He had to be in there.

“Greyson,” I called out softly as I slowly opened the door, giving him time to stop me if he wanted.

I found him standing in front of the mirror, his shirt off once more. I sucked in a harsh breath when I saw his veins on display.

“Greyson, I’m so sorry,” I blurted out, unable to hold my tongue. I know he didn’t want me to feel bad, but I couldn’t help it. I found myself worried that it had to be hurting him. That I was hurting him.

Greyson turned to me, his dark eyes softening just a bit when his gaze landed on me.

“You haven’t done anything wrong, love,” he murmured.

I moved toward him and placed a hand on his chest. I couldn’t help but start tracing the veins, just like I had with Xavier’s. Only Greyson’s now swirled out onto his broad shoulders and down his impressive biceps.

Greyson covered my hand with his own, keeping it pressed to his arm. He didn’t say a word, but he didn’t need to. The pain was shining in his eyes. I found myself wishing there was something I could do to take it away. Because it just didn’t seem fair. None of this was fair.

“When did you first notice they were spreading?” I asked. “And were you ever going to tell me?”

“Of course I was,” he answered earnestly. “I just wanted to get through tonight first. You have enough to worry about without having to be scared for me.”

A sob burst from my lips.

“Too late,” I rasped, my voice barely there. “I’m beyond worried, Greyson. I have so many questions and no way to get answers. You can’t get hurt. Nothing is allowed to happen to you. Not when it’s my job to protect you, the way you protect me. Only I’m always failing.”

I leaned into his chest as the tears started to fall, and he wrapped his arms around me. I found that it was easier to breathe this way. I focused on the yoga breathing. In and out. Being present. Relaxing into Greyson’s warm, solid touch.

Soon enough, we were breathing together as he held me. And it was just like Kira had said it would be—there were no barriers left between us, and it felt so right.

“There’s so much going on right now,” Greyson murmured into my hair. “Can we put this on hold? For tonight, at least?”

I looked up at him. I could sense the guilt he felt over keeping this from me, but I also sensed the helplessness. Greyson really hadn’t known what else to do.

“I’m sorry for not telling you right away, love,” he whispered.

I shook my head, not wanting him to blame himself for another second.

“It’s all right,” I told him. “I understand why you didn’t. You were trying to protect me. But you have to get that I want to do the same for you. Even if my arms aren’t as big as yours.”

Greyson huffed a little laugh and smiled down at me. I loved his smile. It was a balm. Nothing was fixed, but at least he was smiling at me. So who could blame me for getting up on my tiptoes and giving him the softest kiss I could manage?

He cupped my cheeks, kissing me back fervently. Like my kiss was a question that he was answering. His tongue traced the outline of my lower lip, and I felt my heart speed up.

Suddenly, I felt like I was burning up, consumed by the heat and hunger I’d sensed in both my mates after Kira had finished her spell. Now I knew how they’d felt.

Greyson licked at the seam of my mouth, and I opened for him, knowing I’d give him whatever he wanted.

I reached behind me with shaking hands and locked the door.

**Episode 2006**

VIOLET

“Lilac is right!” I did my best to sound firm but not too intense. “White lights go on the inside of the tree, and then the multi-colored lights go on the outside. That way it’s bright and cheery on the outside and sparkly inside. That’s how our parents always did it when we were kids, and our trees were always the best. This is basic Christmas tree knowledge, people.”

“I know that’s how you’re used to having it,” Lola replied, hands on her hips like they always were when she was at her most stubborn, “but that’s not how *everyone* does it. As long as the lights are on the tree, no one cares. It just has to be lit up.”

“This is getting more heated than I anticipated,” Charlie said. “Seriously, I didn’t know this mattered so much to people.”

“Of *course* it matters!” Lilac cried, full of righteous yuletide indignation.

“What the hell is going on?” Xavier called out, rushing into the room. “What’s with all the screaming? Is there a problem?”

“Only that Lola thinks Christmas lights can just go wherever,” I replied, more heated than I wanted to be.

At the exact same time, Lola yelled, “Violet and Lilac are Christmas-splaining to me like I’m not *older than them*!”

“Jesus.” Xavier froze at the doorway like he regretted coming in here.

“Xavier, I was your friend first.” Lola pointed at him accusingly. “I helped you find Cali. Just tell them they’re wrong about the lights and let Jay and me do it our way. I don’t want a Martha Stewart Christmas.”

Lilac gaped at them—whether that was for insulting our parents’ style of tree lighting or insulting Martha Stewart, I couldn’t tell.

“Well,” he interjected, looking at Xavier. “Violet and I are like your little brother and sister.”

“The ones I never wanted?” Xavier teased, laughing.

I rolled my eyes but couldn’t help snorting out a laugh. Xavier *was* like our big brother. Our grumpy, overprotective, sometimes very annoying big brother.

“The ones you love regardless,” Lilac corrected. “Come on, X, tell them that—”

“I’m not telling anyone shit.” Xavier cut Lilac off with a grin. “I don’t care how you do the lights—but I do care about the decibel level of your argument. Keep it the fuck down and figure it the hell out, okay?”

We all grumbled in protest, but Xavier raised a finger, silencing us.

“Seriously, guys,” he warned. “If I have to come back in here, I’m turning that thing into firewood, got it?”

Lilac crossed his arms and gave Xavier a petulant look. Lola opened her mouth like she had a rebuttal, but then she shut it.

“Fine,” they both mumbled, and Jay mouthed *thank you* to Xavier before he left.

I patted Lilac on the back, hoping it might soothe him a bit, before turning to Lola.

“How about one of us decides how we do the lights and the other one picks the ornaments?” I offered.

“I guess,” Lilac answered gloomily.

Lola sniffed. “That would be fine.”

“As long as I get ornaments,” they both growled in unison.

I sighed.

*I don’t know if I can take this anymore*, I mind linked to Charlie, who grinned at me.

*Well, at my house, the only argument around the holidays is whether to have cranberry sauce from the can or not*, he replied. *My dad usually wins, and we do.*

I smiled back, trying not to let the twinge of guilt I was feeling show. I still hadn’t agreed to go with Charlie to Minnesota for the holidays. And while I knew I was well within my rights to want to think this over a little more, it didn’t make the situation any less difficult.

Even just starting the Christmas ball rolling today with Charlie—untangling the lights, smelling the sweet scent of the pine tree, speculating about snow… It felt so good. The best that Christmas had felt in a while. I’d never had a holiday that felt romantic like this. And now that I’d gotten a taste, I couldn’t imagine letting it go.

I wanted to decorate the tree with him. I wanted to worry about eating too much Christmas cookie dough and remind him we had to have enough to bake. I wanted to slide down a hill with him on a sled and feel his warm arms around me as we were sprayed with snow. And yeah, maybe I didn’t want Iris as our backdrop while we drank peppermint hot chocolate… But shouldn’t I get to spend the holidays with my mate?

“Okay.” Lilac came back from his conference with Lola and Jay. “We get lights, they have ornaments. But jokes on them, because there’s basically just one way to do the ornaments—you hang them. So, what do you say, Violet? Ready to do this the Blackburn way?”

Before I could answer, I felt my phone buzz in my pocket and jumped about a foot in the air. I felt the fear surround me. Goosebumps erupted all over my skin, my palms were suddenly slick with sweat, and I could taste the panic in my mouth, sour and metallic at the same time.

Try as I might, I hadn’t been able to shake that freaky text message I’d received last night. I was anticipating a serious decline in my screentime report. Which Charlie would say was a good thing, but whatever. There was nothing good about being scared to look at your phone.

Charlie rubbed circles on my back.

“You okay?” he asked, sounding concerned. “You look like you just saw a ghost.”

“Nothing’s wrong,” I lied. “Just surprised by a text.”

I reached into my pocket, trying desperately to keep my hands from shaking. I stole a glance at the illuminated screen and saw that the text was from Sophie. We’d been talking about season four of *The Vampire Diaries*, and she was just replying about how much she missed Elijah.

Relief flooded through me as Lilac shoved a bunch of lights at Charlie and ordered him to string them from top to bottom.

“Do not skimp,” he told Charlie with great authority. “I’ll know if you do.”

“Aye, aye,” Charlie replied with a salute before bounding off to complete his task.

While Charlie strung up lights and Lilac “supervised” while giving lots and lots of pointers, I focused on Sophie’s text. It was just her. Nothing to be freaked out about.

I sent a quick text back asking her if she’d noticed how weirdly big Jeremy’s arms had gotten, while saying that at least Stefan, Damon, and Matt were still there to look at. Then I shoved my phone back in my pocket and tried to remind myself that nothing inherently scary had happened.

I watched Charlie preparing to string the lights. I hadn’t told him about the text yet. I had started to, when I first saw it, but then I made the split-second decision to show him a meme instead. I knew I *should* tell him*.* But something was stopping me. Something other than my own nagging paranoia, but I didn’t know what. I knew that telling Charlie could only help me. There was strength in numbers, right?

But I also didn’t want to worry him over a stupid text message. After all, it could have been a wrong number! Or some stupid prank. And yet…

I grabbed Lilac’s arm and tugged. “Can I talk to you?”

“Can we do it later?” he asked. “I’m kind of being an artiste right now.”

“I’ll bring you right back,” I promised. “And you can always make Charlie redo it if you don’t like it.”

“I heard that,” Charlie teased.

“I just have to ask you something,” I pressed, squeezing Lilac’s arm.

“Okay.” Lilac relented, and I dragged him to the kitchen and out of earshot.

We ran into Marta on the way, who made awkward eye contact before staring at the ground like it was deeply fascinating to her.

“Um, Lilac, I have to talk to you,” she mumbled.

I looked between the two of them, trying to figure out what was wrong. Had something happened after movie night? Were they not good? I’d have to investigate later.

“I’m sorry, Marta,” I said hurriedly, pulling Lilac into the pantry as I spoke. “But I need Lilac right now. We’ll just be five minutes, I swear.”

As soon as I shut the door behind us, Lilac stared at me like I was a crazy person.

“Vi, you know I love snacks, but what the hell?” he asked. “Are you okay?”

I handed him my phone with the text pulled up.

“Okay.” Lilac looked at it. “This is weird. Could be a wrong number, but with *our* history… Do you think someone is targeting you?”

I looked at my brother, watching his expression darken with worry and anger. But all I could do in return was shrug.

“I don’t know,” I admitted.

“It could be someone playing a prank,” Lilac offered hopefully.

“Is it you?” I asked him, knowing Lilac was the only person who’d ever pranked me before in my life.

“I’d never send you something like that!” he replied, clearly baffled and offended.

I sighed, feeling helpless and antsy. “I know. I just… If it had been you, that would’ve meant there wasn’t any danger.”

Lilac set his jaw and looked down at my phone. And began to type.

“What are you doing?” I squealed, reaching for my phone.

“I just want to know who it is,” he gritted out while wrestling me in the limited space available in the pantry. I heard the whooshing sound of a sent text and went limp. The damage was done.

At least, I thought it was. Because a second later, the phone began to buzz in Lilac’s hand. Someone was calling me.

Lilac looked up at my grimly. “It says it’s from a restricted number. You don’t think it’s the same person who texted you, do you?”

**Episode 2007**

Greyson broke the searing hot kiss, and I found myself gasping for air as he pressed his forehead against mine.

“Damn, this feels… so much more intense than usual,” he groaned against my lips, his voice ragged.

I wanted to agree with him, but I had no idea how to. It was like his presence was clouding my mind. I couldn’t think of anything but him. Of protecting him. Of reassuring him and letting him know how much I loved him. It was like I was drowning in his proximity.

And then there was the way he looked at me, like I was the only person on earth. And I could tell I was the only person on this planet he’d ever looked at like this. Like he was helpless against me. Like I was it for him.

And right now, he was it for me, too.

I took a step back so I could lean against the door, taking breath after breath. Like I was saving up. Like I knew that soon, breathing wouldn’t be a priority.

He moved forward, closing the distance between us, and crashed his lips into mine.

His hands wrapped around my waist, nearly spanning the whole thing because they were so damn big. *He* was so damn big. It wasn’t fair, just how *much* of him there was. It was impossible to touch all of him at once. But damn if I wouldn’t try.

He pulled me to him, molding me against his chest as he plundered my mouth. There was always heat when we were together, but right now he was burning me up like he never had before. Like it didn’t matter if the heat destroyed us. Destroyed everything.

He pushed me against the door, and I yelped in pain at the way it put pressure on my wound.

“Shit, sorry,” Greyson mumbled drunkenly as he lifted me in the air and spun me around so his back was to the door and I was in his arms.

I pressed up against him and moaned at the feeling of the bulge in his jeans rubbing against my stomach. But Greyson didn’t make a move, just kissed me and stroked at the bare skin between my leggings and the hem of my shirt until I thought I might go insane from the sensation.

“Cali, fuck,” he moaned into my neck as he sucked a white-hot line of kisses all the way down to my collarbone. I worked on pulling off my shirt, but separating for even a moment seemed to be too much for Greyson. He groaned impatiently, clawing off his own shirt while I shucked off my leggings.

Soon enough, we were both naked and staring at each other, our chests heaving. Was this the spell’s work? Was *that* why we couldn’t get enough of each other? Why I was more desperate for him than I knew how to deal with?

I let my fingers brush over his chest, tracing the veins. God, how I wished I could erase them. Make him like he was before. I didn’t want to worry about the curse. I didn’t want to be scared that everything I did could kill him.

Almost like he could see my thoughts getting out of control, Greyson grabbed me and lifted me up in the air. Instinctively I wrapped my legs around his waist, ensuring that our bodies were flush against each other.

My mind went blank.

“Greyson,” I groaned. “Please…”

He reached down and pushed his hard cock through the wetness between my thighs. I bit down on my lip when the head brushed against my clit and sent a lightning bolt of pleasure up my spine.

“Fuck,” Greyson growled in my mouth. “I need you now. I’ve been trying to stay away, but I just have to—”

“Do it,” I urged him, rolling my hips so he caught at my entrance. “I need you too.”

He brought me down on his length in one smooth motion. I thought my eyes were going to roll into the back of my head, it felt so good to be filled by him. It was like there was nothing left but him and the way he could make me feel.

I threw my head back and caught a glimpse of my reflection out of the corner of my eye. My hair was mussed. My lips were red and shiny with spit. My pupils were wide and full of hunger. But none of these things caught my eye.

Because I was staring right at my Luna mark, the one Greyson had given me. Rising and falling with every thrust of Greyson’s hips. It looked like it was getting darker and more pronounced with every passing moment. I wondered if my mark from Xavier was doing the same thing. If he’d notice if it wasn’t.

But that was when Greyson grasped me by the nape of the neck and pushed our foreheads together.

“Focus on me, love,” he ordered, setting me down on the counter so he could drive himself into me and play with my clit, making me forget everything that wasn’t him and his touch. “You like that?” he murmured, pressing down on my clit and making me whine. “My girl likes that?”

“Yes!” I cried out.

And then I was clenching around him as I came, and he was biting down on my shoulder as he reached his climax as well. And in that moment, I knew that we were on the exact same page. That neither one of us would change a thing as long as it meant we got to have this one perfect moment of pleasure.

I was his, and he was mine. And if the mark wasn’t real, it didn’t matter. Because this *was*.

My chest rose and fell rapidly as I caught my breath. I was so hot, I felt the desire to gulp water out of the sink to cool myself down.

“Shower?” I asked Greyson, only feeling comfortable with one-word sentences.

He raised an eyebrow playfully.

“I didn’t mean shower *sex*!” I squealed, clapping a hand over my face. “I meant… we need to get ready for tonight.”

“Right.” Greyson nodded, his eyes darkening again as he drew closer. “Tonight.”

He let his fingers trail up my sides softly, sending shivers running down my spine.

“Why don’t you get in the shower?” he murmured, eyes alight. “And I’ll make sure you’re ready?”

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I headed back to my room, freshly showered. Even though by the time we’d actually started cleaning ourselves, the water had gotten cold and Greyson had had to hold me the whole time to keep me from shivering—which had almost started round three.

I tried to dash to my bedroom as fast as I could, not wanting Xavier to see me leaving Greyson’s room. But unfortunately, the hallway wasn’t as empty as I’d thought.

“There you are.” Lola sounded exasperated as she grabbed me by the arm. “God, I need a break from downstairs. Lilac is *killing* me with all this holiday decorating. Torin isn’t even here yet, and it’s already this bad? I swear, they’re going to tear the entire house down in the name of Christmas.”

I laughed a little, hoping Lola would keep talking and I could change before she noticed that I was dripping wet and wrapped in a dark grey towel instead of my usual pink one.

“Wait a second.” Lola, almost like she’d read my mind, scanned my body. “What the hell have you been doing? Or should I say *who*? You better spill.”

I rolled my eyes and headed for my bedroom, jerking my head so Lola knew to follow. Because there was no way I was talking about this in the hall.

“I need you to check out my Luna mark,” I told her once I’d shut the door behind me.

“I’m sorry, *what*?” Lola whisper-screamed. “Your Luna mark? Did I miss something major here?”

“Lola, calm down,” I hissed, knowing I needed to get ahead of her impending meltdown. “It’s fake. We did a spell so that tonight, at the Vanguard party, everyone will think I’m Greyson and Xavier’s Luna.”

Lola’s mouth formed a perfect “O” as she processed this.

“Okay…” She nodded. “And that’s supposed to… actually work?”

“It’s supposed to, yeah,” I replied grumpily. “As long as we don’t let it slip to the Vanguards, the spell should work.”

“Wow,” Lola replied, flopping onto the bed. “That’s just… Wow. Congratulations. You have cured my FOMO. I have never been happier not to have an invitation to an event.”

I glared at her, annoyed.

“Can you come check on the marks, please?” I asked her impatiently. “They faded, but they’re supposed to reappear with time.”

“Sure, sure.” Lola hopped out of bed and walked behind me to examine the marks. “They look healed. Like silvery scabs.”

I reached behind me to find out for myself, but when I ran my fingers over them gingerly, I felt no pain. Only ridges in the shape of half-moons.

“Wow,” I murmured to myself, still finding the whole thing pretty surreal. Even if the marks *were* fake.

“Wow is right.” Lola walked over to the silver dress, draped over a chair. “Are you wearing this tonight? It’s hella skimpy.”

“It was a gift from the Vanguard Alpha,” I answered with a nod. “I can’t say no, right?”

“Well, I know two brothers who are gonna be pretty stoked to see you in it,” Lola teased.

I felt a twinge in my stomach at the thought of both of them wanting me and not being willing to share. And then I remembered Aysel and felt even worse. She would be happy to see Greyson, I was sure.

Uncertainty festered in my mind. What if Greyson found being with Aysel easier than fighting for time with me?

“Is there a way female werewolves can defend their mates?” I asked Lola. “From… competition?”

“Like, marking your territory?” Lola asked, confused.

“There’s a girl in the Vanguard pack,” I explained. “She’s interested in Greyson. If she tries to make a move tonight… what do you think I should do?”

**Episode 2008**

LOLA

Cali’s question shocked me. I’d never had to think about defending my mate against someone’s advances. Well, except for Jacqueline lately maybe. But Jay had always been loyal to me, even when I wasn’t around. And even with the vampire heat at Tottenville, even though I’d had various weird little issues and felt guilty, I hadn’t done anything *too* fucked up, or betrayed Jay.

Of course, that didn’t mean that the idea of it happening didn’t set me on edge.

I felt really bad for my best friend. She was stuck in this *due destini* curse, which meant she had two (very hot) men to worry about when it came to all that bullshit. And now apparently there was someone who wanted to steal Greyson as if he were Cali’s purse? Ridiculous.

I cringed. “You know…”

“What?” Cali asked.

“Sometimes I worry that all your problems are kind of my fault,” I said. “After all, I was the one who introduced you and Xavier in the first place.” The moment the words were out of my mouth, I felt even worse. I had joked around about this while we were decorating the Christmas tree, but now I had to admit that it wasn’t a joke.

I felt guilty for being the one to shove Cali into this whole mess.

What if my best friend’s life could have been normal?

What if I’d basically exiled her to this insane world of werewolves and mates out of sheer stupidity?

But Cali rolled her eyes at my worries. “Oh, please. Even if you’d never created the circumstances for me to meet Xavier, it would have happened eventually.”

I arched an eyebrow. “You don’t sound so thrilled about that right now.”

Cali snorted. “I guess worrying about whether one of my mates lives or dies all the time can get a *little* intense. But it’s not like I would change my love for them, or that I’d ever even be able to do it. After all, the word ‘destiny’ is in the *due destini* curse. It’s not going anywhere.”

Cali had this sarcastic playful energy to her right now. I felt like she was trying to make me feel better. Which seemed a little backward at the moment, when *I* was the one who should have been supporting and comforting Cali.

“I can’t believe we started talking about someone trying to steal your man and you ended up coddling me,” I said.

Cali smiled softly, reaching out to cover her hand with mine. “Friends can support each other at the same time.”

I felt all warm and fuzzy inside, my eyes getting a little misty. I was so glad that no negativity lingered between Cali and me after our fight a few weeks ago. She and I were an unstoppable duo, and we always had each other’s backs.

“No matter what that wolf says, and even if she does have some sort of way to compromise your mate bond with Greyson, I will help you defend your man,” I said seriously. “Besides, who does this absolute fool think she is, trying to take someone’s mate? Where’s her fucking honor?”

“It’s actually not the first time this has happened to me,” Cali said wryly. “Ava has been after Xavier for months now.”

“And she hasn’t managed to get to him! He’s all yours.”

Cali frowned, crossing her arms. “It’s just so infuriating that she thinks she’s even allowedto fucking *try*. Same thing with this Aysel girl—the disrespect makes me absolutely furious.”

I nodded seriously, putting my thinking cap on. I needed to look at this from every angle, especially from a werewolf one. “I think that the best way for you to defend your bond with Greyson is to intimidate this other wolf. Wolves react very intensely to territorial behavior. That might make her get the message.”

Cali huffed. “Unfortunately, I’m not very good at scaring people. I’ve been taking fighting lessons from Artemis and Rishika, but something always comes up and I haven’t really gotten that far.”

I waved her off. “Please. Fake it till you make it. You don’t actually have to fight this other wolf. You just need to seem intimidating to her.”

Cali’s eyes widened. “Interesting… So I don’t have to be a badass, I just need to act like I am one?”

“Exactly,” I told her, eyebrows arched. “And you’re going to do that by sticking to Greyson’s side for the entirety of the party, getting a little handsy, and making it crystal clear that you two are mates who fuck on the regular.”

Cali seemed cautious even as she blushed. “Is that really what you would do?”

I snorted. “Oh, honey, if Jacqueline dared to make an actual move on Jay, I’d be all over him in front of her. I would have *sex* with him in front of her just to drive my point across—never say that I half-ass anything.”

Cali blinked in alarm. I tended to have that effect on people, so I didn’t take it personally. “You want me to have *sex* with Greyson in front of—”

“No! It was just a figure of speech.”

“Either way, I can’t be flirting with Greyson all night, not when Xavier’s going to be there.” Cali shook her head. “It was hard enough to get them to agree to co-Alpha the pack for this one night. It’s going to be a shaky truce, and I can’t ruin that. It’s vital that we show the Vanguard pack a united front.”

I paused, taking in the information. Cali had a very good point here. This whole *due destini* thing was really so messy—the girl couldn’t even suck face with her man to mark her territory without her other mate getting mad!

“Fine,” I said, annoyed. “But you’re still attending as Luna to both of them, so you can at least make that clear to the Vanguard girl. Keep an eye on your mates, touch them, and leave your scent on them—maybe a hint of your lipstick on their cheek. Werewolves respond to that kind of thing, trust me.”

“I can do that.” Cali nodded decidedly. But then she let out a tiny noise, kind of like a whimper. “It would be so much easier if you were there with me!”

“Could I really be there, though?” I asked, perking up.

Cali sighed. “There’s no way Greyson and Xavier will allow anyone else from the pack to put themselves in danger. They already made a fuss about me.”

“What if…” I pulled out my air pods and showed them to Cali. “What if you put this in your ear?”

Cali shook her head. “It would be rude for me to wear headphones during the party.”

“Shit, you’re right,” I said, pouting. “Well, at least you know I’m only a phone call away if there’s an emergency. I’ll keep my phone on me the whole time you’re gone, and I’ll be there if you need me to rescue you. Or, you know, give you some advice—potato, potahto.”

Cali teared up. “You’d really do that for me?”

“Of course!” I said, and pulled her into a hug.

She started sniffling, and I pulled back to face her, eyebrows arched. “Don’t cry—it’ll only make your eyes puffy, and we don’t want that.” I glanced at the clock on the wall. “Especially not right now. You should start getting ready!”

Cali frowned. “It seems kinda early…”

“Cali, you only have a few hours, you will barely make it. Do you even have any idea how many things need to be done before you go to a cocktail party?” I asked her seriously.

Cali blinked like Bambi would. “No?”

I sighed. “I’ll go get my curling iron. I know you love it when my hair is wavy—I’ll do yours like that! Be right there, okay?”

Cali nodded excitedly, and I felt really good about myself and our friendship. Before I went to get the curling iron, I remembered that a get-ready session was never complete without wine, so I ran downstairs to grab some from the kitchen.

The Christmas tree looked amazing. We’d done a pretty good job, despite all our bickering. Perhaps the bickering had actually helped deliver this masterpiece. Grinning to myself, I walked over to examine the sparkling lights and shiny ornaments.

But then…

I saw movement on the reflection of a snowflake ornament.

Big Mac was approaching.

*Oh, crap!*

Silently screaming in my head, I ran behind the tree to hide without really thinking about what I was doing. Had she seen me? I really hoped she wouldn’t look over here. For a long moment, I didn’t actually hear anything, and I let out an exhale of relief.

“Lola?”

Spoke too soon. *Fuck shit fuck!*

I peeked out and saw Big Mac standing on the other side of the tree, looking stern, foreboding, and all-powerful-witch-like. Her eyes narrowed, and her voice was ominous.

“Are you avoiding me, Lola?”

**Episode 2009**

VIOLET

The ominous text I’d received flashed through my head.

*We’re coming for you.*

I stared at the number on the screen as my phone kept vibrating. It had to be them! Whoever they were. This was definitely not good—I could feel the stress rising inside me, and I did not work well under pressure. I held out the phone to Lilac, fumbling, but he shoved it back at me.

“Why are you giving that to me?” he asked, flailing about.

I huffed. “You texted the number! You have to answer it!”

Lilac, the little coward, looked at me like I was insane. “Me? Seriously? It’s *your* phone!”

“You’re my brother!”

“Since when does that mean that I have to do the dangerous stuff?” he asked, looking offended at the mere idea of me asking him to step up. “You’re a better fighter than me, everyone knows it! You’re also like ten seconds older!”

Oh, wow. Lilac had just pulled the age card. All bets were off, now—he’d just chosen to throw me under the bus. I felt like smacking him upside the head, seething, but before I could attack him, the ringing finally stopped.

I let out a breath of relief. “Maybe that’s it. Maybe they got bored.”

“So easily?” Lilac scoffed, the brat. “I really doubt it. I bet they’re going to call back in three, two—”

The phone lit up again, ringing with the same number.

“See?” Lilac’s tone had a hint of humor to it, though it was probably more like hysteria. “I was right! I don’t think they’re going to stop until you answer it.”

I growled at him. “You are so annoying! And a coward!”

“I know!” Lilac said simply. “Now answer the phone and let’s get this over with. I’ll be right here with you if you need any help.”

“You’re literally shaking like a leaf,” I said dryly.

“Okay, perhaps I’m scared of dying after doing it once already,” Lilac said seriously. His words made it sound like he was going through some sort of trauma that I had no time to unpack right now.

I glared at him half-heartedly, gathering all my courage. Taking a deep breath, I answered the phone and shakily said, “Hello?”

At first, all I could hear was static and what sounded like heavy breathing. Gross and creepy. Then a voice spoke, but it was so low that it didn’t sound natural. In fact, it sounded like all those serial killer/ransom phone calls in horror movies. Like when the caller used some kind of voice distorter. I wanted to start screaming and run for the woods.

“You will come,” the voice said, and my chest ached with anxiety.

Lilac scowled. “Put them on speaker, I want to listen!”

“Who is this?” I demanded, ignoring my brother before Lilac could cause a scene. It was like he was scared shitless one moment, and the next he was ready for battle. “What the hell do you want from me?”

I was trying to sound brave, but my voice was trembling.

“If you do not come to us, your boyfriend will die,” the person on the other end of the line said.

I gasped. “Who the hell is this? Don’t touch him!”

The voice laughed. “Come alone, tell no one. Or he dies.”

The line went dead. A second later, my phone lit up with a text. I opened it to see a set of coordinates. Longitude and latitude for a clearly pinpointed location.

What now? Was I supposed to go there and meet my doom?

“What did they say?” Lilac asked, resting his hands on my shoulders.

I shook my head, breathing harshly before shoving the phone in my pocket. I didn’t want him to see the text. I desperately wished I could tell him what the voice had demanded, but its words echoed in my head. If I told anyone about this, then Charlie could die.

Could this be a *real* threat, though?

Could someone actually do this? Like, jump up while Charlie hung out at the grocery store and kill him out of the blue? Or would they kidnap him?

This whole thing sounded so unbelievable and farfetched, but it felt like too much of a risk to ignore. If anything ever happened to Charlie because of me, I would never forgive myself.

“Violet, what is it?” My brother shook my shoulders, staring into my eyes. “You look white as a sheet. What did they say?”

I gulped, dislodging myself from his grip. “Nothing, really. It was just static. I think maybe it was the wrong number?”

Lilac’s eyes narrowed. For someone who’d been terrified just seconds ago, now he seemed ready to take on the world. I would never understand my brother. “They called the wrong number *twice*? And who shouldn’t they touch?”

I let out an awkward chuckle. “Maybe it was just one of those telemarketing things where they call you over and over again to get you to sign up for their credit card or something.”

“And you look this scared because of telemarketers?” Lilac asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Well, yeah. You have no idea how intense they can be when they want to make a sale,” I said. I sounded ridiculous, but whatever.

Lilac crossed his arms, looking even more suspicious. “Why don’t *I* ever get any calls from those scary telemarketers?”

I cleared my throat. “Well, I’m eighteen now, and you were dead for a few months. I guess they just don’t care about calling you.”

Lilac was instantly distracted. “What the hell? I’m not good enough for telemarketers? What kind of operation are they running here? I’m a living, breathing potential customer, just like everyone else! In fact, I’m even better than the average potential customer, because I can be very easily fooled when someone talks a lot and uses big words! And did I mention I’m alive?”

Lilac launched into a full rant, and I was relieved that he’d moved on. This was apparently a very grave hit to his ego and I’ve-come-back-from-the-dead adventures. It seemed like he really wanted to be a valid member of society. Whatever that meant to him.

“How can they not see that their capitalist scheme is perfect for someone like me?” Lilac demanded. “I am young and a fool and I have Xavier’s wallet at my disposal! I will literally give them the Alpha’s money without even blinking!”

While Lilac’s rambling escalated, I focused on the phone call that had just taken place. I needed to figure out who this mystery caller was, and what I was going to do to protect Charlie.

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I made my way up to my room after telling Lilac that I’d already eaten too many snacks for the day, so I was done. I had to set up a plan on how to get out of this meetup and not walk into some kind of trap. Maybe I should ask Big Mac or Kira for a spell?

No. That would alert the others about me going off to do something dangerous. The pack house was hard enough to get out of already. Everybody was constantly in each other’s business, whether they liked it or not.

I opened up my laptop and googled the coordinates from the text, just to get a feel for the location. I frowned. It looked like a movie theater, but according to the internet, it had been closed down for years. I tried to do street view, but nothing came up. It was as if the world and invasive technology had forgotten this place. This was so creepy.

I checked the clock. I realized I was running out of time if I wanted to make it there by the deadline they’d set. I glanced at my window, then at the door. The window was the only viable choice, and I’d sneaked out before without being detected. I would have to figure out a plan once I was on the road. Maybe I could steal one of Xavier’s many cars just to get there as quickly as possible?

Or I could shift and run, but I had no idea if that would be good, considering what was waiting for me. Plus, Xavier had all his car keys hanging on the wall in plain sight in the garage. The man truly had no sense of protecting his money and assets, if you thought about it. Lilac could easily give Xavier’s entire fortune to telemarketers before he even realized.

My decision was made. Putting on my thickest jacket and gloves, I took a deep breath and slid my window open. I was halfway outside, my foot resting on the tiled roof, when my bedroom door creaked.

I froze.

Shit. Was someone out there?

A second later, Charlie walked in. Tall and broad and imposing as ever, he stopped short and stared at me.

*Oh, damn!*

Charlie frowned, worry and alarm twisting his beautiful features. “Violet? What are you doing?”

**Episode 2010**

GREYSON

I finished up showering, still thinking about being with Cali. It was always amazing to have her, to feel how much she wanted me. With a smile on my face, I stepped into my bedroom, about to start getting ready for Pretentious Prince Lucian’s party.

I would’ve laughed if this hadn’t been a potentially life-or-death matter.

I opened the drawer and put on a pair of black boxer briefs before catching a glimpse of myself in the floor-length mirror. I was shocked by the angry dark veins on my chest. They looked like creepy fucking tentacles. Had they gotten even *worse*?

I touched one gingerly to see if it hurt, but my skin wasn’t aching at the moment. The veins just looked angry and ominous on my chest, like a little nest threatening to spread and swallow me whole.

Fun times.

There was a knock on the door, and I rushed to pull on my dress shirt before I opened it. I was surprised to find my brother standing on the other side, already dressed for the party in some sort of fancy tuxedo.

“Xavier.”

“Greyson.”

“You look less bland than usual tonight. Color me impressed.”

He scoffed. “Fuck right off.”

“Anyway, I’ll be downstairs in five minutes.”

My brother nodded, but he didn’t leave.

I frowned, confused. “Did you want something?”

Xavier paused. “I just want to make sure that we’re on the same page for the party.”

Well. This was going to be a very pleasant conversation. I could already tell.

I took a deep breath and invited him in the room, closing the door behind him. When I faced Xavier, I tried to measure his mood. The situation tonight was going to be very delicate, and I knew I’d have to be careful around him. Making jokes was fine—he could take me giving him shit about his outfit. But when it came to something that mattered? It was so easy for us to misunderstand each other and blow up.

To my surprise, though, Xavier seemed uncharacteristically calm.

I could tell because of the added connection between us from the co-Alpha/Luna mark spell. I could actually sense my brother’s vibe, that he was ready to be honest and straight forward right now. There was no sense of deceit coming off him.

Very interesting.

Could this whole co-Alpha thing be a good idea after all? I had never, *ever* felt such confidence in trusting my brother before.

“I have two goals for tonight,” Xavier started. “Figure out what the Vanguard pack wants with us, and protect Cali at all costs.”

I nodded. “I have the same goals.”

It felt like tonight would be one of those rare occasions where my brother and I would actually get along. Weirdly enough, as I completed that thought, there was a sudden pain in my chest. Like the veins didn’t like the idea of me wanting peace with my brother.

Was this because of the *due destini*?

The curse obviously didn’t want us to be close; if anything, it seemed to like pitting us against each other. But it probably wasn’t healthy to be thinking of the curse as a living organism, out to meddle in our relationships like some sort of gossipy relative.

Deciding not to give in to the paranoia, I allowed myself to take in these few moments when Xavier and I seemed to be on the same side. Even when I couldn’t stand my brother, I could never deny that I kind of cared about the asshole in a weird, brotherly way. And I realized that tonight, I needed to lay all the cards on the table, if only to make sure that the important ones were kept safe.

“You just got all quiet,” Xavier said, squinting at me suspiciously. “What’s wrong?”

“We should talk before we go to this party,” I said in an even tone.

Xavier looked wary, like he was waiting for me to jump on him and tear out his throat.

“About the veins?” Xavier supplied, raising an eyebrow. “When were you going to tell anyone?”

I could actually feel some kind of genuine emotion rolling off my brother through our new bond. He felt on edge, uncertain. Was he worried? If he was, I couldn’t be sure if he felt that way for me or for himself. After all, if this was happening to me, it could happen to him too in a heartbeat.

He swallowed roughly, looking up at me with arched eyebrows. “When did it happen?”

“Not long,” I said. “But I can feel the effects. They’re barely noticeable, but there.”

Xavier pressed his lips together, rubbing his forehead. “If this is happening to you right now, maybe you shouldn’t come to the party. We don’t know what it means or how it could affect you while we’re there.”

I shook my head. “I thought of that. I don’t want to be a liability to the pack by not showing up as a co-Alpha. If we don’t both go, then Lucian and the Vanguard pack might take that as a sign of weakness from the Redwood pack.”

Xavier looked dejected, but he nodded calmly as he recognized the truth in my words. “You’re right. But that means we need to come up with contingency plans in case everything goes to shit.”

I laughed sarcastically, buttoning up my shirt. “You mean because every party we throw or attend ends with fire and death?”

Xavier snorted. “Something like that. And we can’t let Cali be put at risk.”

I nodded, taking a deep breath. “We’re on the same page here. And I think that means we need to limit who knows about the veins to only the pack.”

Xavier frowned. “I agree. The Vanguards can’t know about any potential weaknesses we have.” He looked at me up and down, as if trying to figure out any future weaknesses. “You should probably let me take the lead at the party.”

I scowled. Apparently, a man couldn’t even be devoured by an ancient curse around here without someone coming in and doubting his ability to perform in battle.

“I’ll be okay,” I said. “I can handle it, trust me.”

Xavier raised an eyebrow. “You’d better. You have no choice,” he said, and then he left me to finish getting ready.

That was what Xavier said, and he seemed determined. But through the link, I could tell that he had his doubts. Even though I kind of hated the guy, I couldn’t blame him for feeling that way. I would have felt the same if our roles had been reversed.

It was obvious that between the two of us, I was more susceptible to supernatural threats. Seriously, why couldn’t *Xavier* be the one to get possessed or have the veins go berserk on him? It felt like being more empathetic than Xavier made me more susceptible to all this magic madness. I was constantly battling weirdness while my asinine brother continued on, oblivious to the chaotic energy around him.

I wished I could be as emotionally disconnected as he was most of the time, with literally everything that wasn’t Cali. And that had only happened after Cali had basically forced him to treat her with respect and be attentive to her emotional needs. Xavier definitely would never have figured that out by himself.

Annoyed, I finished getting dressed and combed back my hair, resisting the urge to unbutton my shirt and look at the veins again. It would be fine. Like Xavier had said, it wasn’t like I had a choice. I hated it when the asshole was right.

Grumbling under my breath about the unfairness of it all, I went downstairs to find my brother waiting for me in the foyer. He gave me a tight nod of acknowledgement. I could still feel the doubt rolling off him, and it didn’t help with my morale.

I approached him, dropping my voice to say, “Should I not have been honest with you?”

Xavier stared at me like that was the last question he’d expected me to utter.

“Because I could have just avoided this whole conversation,” I said seriously. “I could have left you in the dark. But I didn’t, because I wanted to trust you. Because I do trust you when it comes to protecting Cali, no matter what.”

Xavier sighed. “Look, Greyson—”

“I need you to know that I can do this. If only for Cali,” I whispered. “I won’t let my weaknesses be the cause of her getting hurt. I know that we’ve had our differences, but you know I’d do anything for her. Right?”

Xavier fell silent, his eyes roaming my face, taking in every inch as if weighing how much of the truth I was sharing with him.

“I just told you that I trust you, Xavier,” I said. Was I getting through to him? “If we’re going to get through this night, we need to be united. You need to trust me, too. Can you do that, brother?”

**Episode 2011**

LOLA

I had been caught, so now I had no choice but to accept defeat.

Sighing deeply, I stepped out from behind the Christmas tree, trying to look remorseful. I didn’t care that Greyson and Xavier were supposed to be the Alphas in this house—freaking Big Mac could eat them both for breakfast if she wanted to. I decided to put on my most beta expression possible and ask for mercy.

“Lola,” Big Mac said firmly, her arms crossed over her chest. “I just asked you something. Are you trying to avoid me?”

I stared at her with wide eyes, wrapping my arms around myself. I hoped this looked helpless and pathetic enough for her to take pity on me. “I…”

“What?” She rolled her eyes. “Aren’t you going to say anything? You can’t hide every time you see me in the house. That would be ridiculous.”

I took a step back, wincing. “Does that mean you’re going to take your payment right now?” I cringed. “What will it be? My eye, like Jay? Or one of my limbs? Oh my god, my beautiful nose? People pay for this kind of nose, you know! I am a plastic surgeon’s dream!”

I was spiraling here, holding my hands over my face in fear.

Big Mac, though, actually laughed. *What?*

“Look, as much as I enjoy watching you stress, I’m not a monster,” Big Mac said. “Relax.”

I exhaled sharply, feeling some of my nerves release. It was true that Big Mac wasn’t a full-blown monster. She had a reason for everything she did. And if Mrs. Smith loved her so much and had sex with her all the time—from what I had gathered through these thin walls—Big Mac couldn’t be all that bad, right? *Right?*

“So you’re not going to take my eye? Or any of my really well-shaped body parts?” I asked hesitantly.

Big Mac arched her eyebrows. “Why would you even think that?”

I would have started yelling at her if I weren’t so intimidated. “Obviously, because, well… *Jay*…”

Big Mac seemed unimpressed. “I didn’t take Jay’s eye because I’m a sadist. I took it for a very specific reason. I don’t have a need for yours right now.”

That was encouraging. Kinda.

“Then why won’t you tell me what you want from me?” I asked. “The suspense is killing me here!”

Big Mac shrugged, all casual. “I don’t know what I want from you to repay your debt. Not yet. But I promise that when I figure it out, I’ll tell you. Don’t worry in the meantime.”

That was easier said than done. But right now, it seemed like my only option.

“Sounds good, thanks,” I said. Even though I still had many doubts.

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I rushed to the staircase without the wine because I’d been frazzled by Big Mac’s menace and forgotten to grab it. I had left Cali waiting for a while now, and that wouldn’t do. I was about to go upstairs when the front door burst open with a thud, laughter spilling into the house.

Tom and Torin marched inside, dozens and dozens of bags in their arms. There were so many of them that I actually momentarily forgot about my issues with Big Mac.

“What’s all this?” I asked, awestruck.

Torin saw me and yelped, flailing. “Don’t look! They’re supposed to be a surprise!” He tried to hide the bags behind himself, but it was literally impossible. There were just too many of them.

“Did you go a little overboard with the Christmas shopping?” I asked, grinning.

Torin beamed at me. “I was told that gifts are a way to spread holiday joy. I figured that more gifts equals more joy, right?”

I chuckled at Torin’s unabashed enthusiasm for the holidays. He really was the sweetest. I was glad we got to keep him.

“You’re right—that’s gotta be a good thing, especially in this house, where there are so many people. Although…” I turned to Tom, curious. “How could you guys afford all of this stuff? I’m seeing a lot of Nordstrom and Bloomingdale’s bags here...”

Tom cleared his throat. Then he sheepishly said, “Xavier said that I’m part of the pack now, so everything that’s his is also mine. I figured that, *technically*, that also includes his credit cards. I’d never seen a black American Express before!”

I blinked very slowly. I could just imagine Xavier getting the bill for all this stuff and gaping in horror before realizing the mistake he’d made. I quickly decided that it would be best not to be associated with this shopping spree in any way, shape, or form.

“Well then, good luck. Gotta go now!” I hurried back upstairs, leaving the two of them with all the evidence.

I was about to go into Cali’s room when a door down the hallway opened. I saw Jacqueline coming out of the bathroom, fully dressed, her hair tied up in a towel. She looked pretty comfortable in this house for someone who didn’t really belong in the pack. This annoyed me for some reason.

But maybe it was just because Jacqueline annoyed me in general. As a vibe.

Not willing to deal with her, I was about to rush into Cali’s room, but I should have known better. Jacqueline’s vampire eyes detected all movement. She made eye contact with me.

“Lola? What are you doing?” she asked haughtily.

It was really rich that she was asking me what *I* was doing in *my* house. Well, technically it was Xavier’s house, but I was part of the pack—I deserved to be here, and to get presents from luxury department stores, thank you very much!

“Looks like you’re settling in nicely,” I said, tilting my head to the side.

Jacqueline’s eyes narrowed. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m just trying to be friendly, don’t jump down my throat.”

“Then don’t talk to me with that tone,” Jacqueline said, annoyed.

“What tone?” I asked.

“Like I’m some sort of freeloader that refuses to leave your house and won’t even do her own laundry or dishes,” Jacqueline said.

“*Are* youdoing your own laundry or dishes?” I asked, squinting.

Jacqueline huffed. “That’s not the point.”

I scoffed, trying to weigh the situation. Why was Jacqueline still here, anyway? She’d only come because of the revenants attacking the school. Despite her bravado, I knew that Jacs was still scared about all that.

I couldn’t believe I’d been conned into being a good hostess for Jacs just because I felt sorry for her. Then again, how *good* I was at the hostess-ing thing was debatable. It wasn’t my fault that Jacqueline pushed all my buttons. Even if she hadn’t been an annoying vampire, she was totally the kind of person I would have avoided at school. Stuck up, prissy, probably pledged to the most annoying sorority.

I would’ve preferred to let Big Mac take both of Jacqueline’s eyes rather than be friends with her, but it looked like I was stuck with her, at least for now. For some reason. Xavier really had no control over either his credit cards or his property, did he? Apparently that was what happened when you were very rich and your house had too many rooms. You just forgot who was living there.

I cleared my throat. “Is everyone here being nice to you?”

Jacqueline sniffed. “Why do you care?”

This brat was really pushing her luck here. “I’m just trying to extend an olive branch here. If you don’t like it, then fine.”

Jacqueline’s annoying expression seemed to soften a bit. “Everyone’s fine. No one really bothers me. But your food supply is severely lacking.”

“What?” I asked, puzzled. “Xavier’s kitchen is always stocked with enough ingredients to make a gourmet meal. And so many snacks!”

Jacqueline gave me an amused look. “That’s not the kind of food I’m talking about.”

Realization dawned. The vampire was talking about fucking *blood*. Not Tom’s fancy steaks, or all the variations of candy and chips we had in the cupboards.

Suddenly, my throat grew tight. “Maybe we could… I mean—do you want to go on a hunt?” I asked hopefully.

Jacqueline rolled her eyes. “I don’t drink animal blood, you heathen. It’s gross!”

What I really loved about Jacqueline was that she stayed here without being part of the pack, for free, *and* she also dragged everybody. It had to be fun to be her. She was like Joanne the Scammer.

And then I realized that Xavier and Greyson had actually let Ava do the exact same thing for a really long time. It was kind of hysterical, wasn’t it?

“Lola?” Jacs said, poking my shoulder to bring me back to the present. “Are you even listening to me?”

“Listening to what?” I huffed. “You said you don’t want to go hunting with me.”

Twisting her wet hair up in a ballerina bun, Jacs said, “I actually have something else in mind, though.” She looked around, lowering her voice. “Do you want to come with me?”

**Episode 2012**

I stared at myself in the mirror, sliding my wavy hair back. The slinky silver dress draped gracefully over my curves and exposed my shoulders, collarbones, and both my new Luna marks. They were healed, like silvery scabs, and they matched the gown’s aesthetic perfectly.

It was gorgeous, elegant, sexy, and like *nothing* I’d ever buy myself. I felt like a princess going to a ball, and this was my perfect costume—one that would definitely make an impression.

*For real, though*, I thought, *how the hell did Lucian know my dress size so perfectly? This looks tailored!*

I decided not to dwell on that question. I would have enough time at the party to worry over what Lucian’s angle was. I just wanted to take a moment to enjoy the feel of the ethereal material against my skin and how beautiful it made me feel. I had to admit that no matter his pretension or creepiness, Lucian really knew how to dress a woman.

*Here goes nothing…*

I walked out of the room to go meet my mates. I looked down and saw them pacing in the foyer, tense. As I started to climb down the stairs, though, they both turned to look at me.

Greyson sucked in a breath, and Xavier’s eyes dropped from my mouth to the rest of me.

*I know!* I thought, smirking. *I look good!*

They watched my every movement, silent, fixated and awestruck, and I could honestly get used to this kind of treatment.

*Like, excuse me, peasants? Yes, it’s me, I am a dream come true.*

Hopefully I wouldn’t trip on my gown, face-plant on the floor, and ruin the whole thing. That was a very real possibility that I needed to avoid. When I got to the first landing, I was so proud of myself for surviving that I gave a little twirl.

“So? Do I look the part?” I asked.

I was of course shamelessly fishing for compliments. Both my mates stared at me with a hunger that sent a thrill through me. The bond created by the spell vibrated through all three of us, and I grinned.

“You look phenomenal,” Xavier said, his voice throaty.

“I think he means stupendous,” Greyson said, and of course he had to remind us all that he had the better vocabulary.

I wanted to laugh, thrilled and overwhelmed at the same time.

They both smiled at me, looking mesmerized, as they stepped forward at the same time.

*Oh, no. They’d better not get into a fight over who will escort me! This dress demands respect, dammit!*

To my shock, though, they both reached out their hands to help me, no debate. As I stepped down, holding both their hands in mine, Greyson to the right, Xavier on the left, something settled within me. All three of us felt in sync, completely bonded.

And I was so completely in love with both of them.

“You guys look incredible too,” I said, smiling. Greyson had a crisp navy tux on, Xavier a sleek black one, and they were both stunners.

Greyson smirked. “True. Even Xavier looks less frumpy than usual.”

I turned to Xavier, half expecting him to look annoyed, but all he did was offer a hearty laugh. It warmed my heart to see them getting along, at least for a little while.

*Could this actually work?*

I allowed myself to feel the contentment of this moment. And then, I asked, “Shall we?”

They both nodded and led me outside, where a giant limo was waiting for us.

The driver, a man in his sixties dressed in a penguin suit, stepped out and held the door open. “Courtesy of Prince Lucian,” he said in a deep, grave voice.

I felt both Greyson and Xavier tense.

*Oh no!* I thought*. You two aren’t going to ruin this so early with your Alpha nonsense!*

I took charge and stepped forward. “How kind.” I smiled at the driver. “We’ll have to thank Lucian for his hospitality.”

I climbed in without another word and waited for my mates to join me. They had no choice now, really. The inside of the limo was old-timey, velvet, and looked more like the inside of a carriage. There was champagne and chocolate waiting for us. Extremely fancy chocolate, I might add.

There was also a note from Lucian with a wax seal, the seal of the Vanguard pack, waiting for us on one of the seats. When Greyson and Xavier got inside the car, their eyes fell on it at the same time.

“I’d better read that,” Greyson said in a low voice.

“I’ll get it,” Xavier said, clearing his throat.

But neither of them was fast enough to stop me. I snapped it up and opened it. It was written in loopy elaborate writing, as extra as can be, which matched the prince’s whole aesthetic.

*Looking forward to seeing the Redwood Alphas and their beautiful Luna tonight.*

*Best Regards,*

*Lucian*

Xavier’s eyes were narrowed. “What—”

I shook my head and raised the partition, so we could have a bit more privacy. I didn’t delude myself that this limo wasn’t bugged, though. Lucian seemed shady like that.

*Let’s try out this new triple mind link thing, then.*

I took a deep breath and looked between my mates as they sat across from me.

*1, 2, 3, check—can you guys hear me?* I asked.

Greyson snorted. *Hello, love.*

Xavier frowned, looking around the limo. *I don’t like this.*

*Me neither*, Greyson admitted. *Now we’re beholden to Lucian for our transportation from the party. It’s like he’s taking all control away from us. We’re at his mercy when it comes to everything tonight.*

I raised an eyebrow. *Isn’t that a little extreme? Maybe this is really just a party for all of us to get to know each other. Can’t we just treat it like a diplomatic situation?*

Greyson raised his eyebrows. *You know I can do diplomacy, Cali. But this is—*

*Fishy*, Xavier cut in*. I agree with Greyson, this is all very fishy.*

*We can always leave if we want to. You guys can shift, and I can ride on someone’s back. So let’s not worry about that. Do you have any kind of other plan for tonight?*

The two brothers looked at each other. Xavier spoke up first. *You should just stay by our side and try to look like you’re having fun.*

I snorted. *Would it be against the rules to* actually *have fun?*

Xavier seemed surprised. His expression softened. *Of course I would love for you to have fun at the party, beautiful. But none of us can let our guards down. We have to be vigilant.* He glanced over at Greyson—at his chest, to be exact.

I hated that those veins were under there. I hated that they weren’t only on Greyson, but Xavier too. I mostly hated how I couldn’t do anything about it.

I took a deep breath. On the bright side, the brothers were working together tonight. That was almost unprecedented. I couldn’t help but think that even though the Vanguard pack was an unknown threat that could literally destroy us, the positive in this situation was that my two mates seemed to be getting along right now. For real.

I kind of liked this whole co-Alpha/Luna thing so far. A lot.

I wondered if there was a non-life-threatening way to make it more permanent for all of us. Maybe tonight would give us a taste of it, and my mates wouldn’t be too opposed. Maybe it could work for us the way that it had worked for the Eden pack.

*What are you thinking?* Greyson asked me.

I looked between these two amazing men and smiled. *Just that you two are very cute.*

Xavier scoffed. *We’re not cute! We’re badass!*

Greyson shrugged. *We can be both. Stop whining, brother.*

They exchanged a look and rolled their eyes in the same way. I chuckled, and the way they looked at me made my stomach flutter. The triple bond between us felt like an invisible string that grounded us, made us feel safe.

For the first time in what felt like forever, this triangle wasn’t making me feel a sense of despair.

“Miss?” The driver had lowered the partition. “We have arrived.”

I looked out the window to see the car going through a large archway entry to a huge estate. I held my breath—the house looked like a castle! So grand and gorgeous, lit up by lights and torches. The gardens seemed extravagant and lush, a few fountains set up here and there.

Everything looked perfect.

A little *too* perfect, and I couldn’t help but feel a twinge of fear over what was waiting for us inside.

The limo stopped in front of the entrance, and the driver helped me climb out. Greyson and Xavier followed, and I looked behind them to see the estate in its full glory. That same feeling of unease returned, but I pushed it down.

I looked at the two men that I knew would always protect me, and I knew that I would do the same for them. I loved them, and they loved me.

The three of us together had to be unstoppable.

I looped my arm through each of theirs, smiled, and asked, “Ready?”

**Episode 2013**

CHARLIE

I was stunned to see Violet halfway out the window. What was going on here? Was she sneaking out? Why would she do that without telling me?

“What are you doing by the window, Violet?” I asked, weirded out.

Clearly reluctant, Violet climbed back inside. She looked guilty and nervous and like she was hiding something. “I just needed—” She cleared her throat loudly, glancing outside. “Some air. Yep. Just some air.”

I was confused. “So you decided to go outside through the window instead of the door?”

Violet nodded. “It just seemed easier?”

I squinted at her, fully suspicious now. “Violet, I’m sorry to say this, but you’ve been acting odd lately,” I said, approaching her cautiously. I didn’t want her getting spooked and taking off through the window like some sort of beautiful scared bird. “You got a text message before and jumped at it. Who does that? Is everything good?”

She nodded again, this time more vividly. “I promise, I just needed some air. I’ve been feeling cooped up lately.”

I frowned, crossing my arms. “But I thought we were having a pretty good day with the decorating and the holiday stuff? And then you went to get snacks and never came back…”

I’d had no snacks and no Violet. For a moment there, I’d been slightly devastated, not gonna lie.

My mate took her head. “It’s nothing. It just happens sometimes—I get antsy out of the blue.”

I hated this. I didn’t want to make Violet feel uncomfortable. In fact, it was the last thing I wanted to do. I needed her to be happy at all times, smiling and in my arms and snuggled up next to me. That was the only thing that mattered to me.

“I know what this is all about,” I said slowly.

Violet cringed. “Do you, though?”

I closed the distance between us, taking her hands in mind. She was shaking a little. This wouldn’t do. “I know you’re upset about me asking you to come home with me for Christmas.”

Violet stared at me. “Oh.” Her brows furrowed. “*Oh!* Yes! That’s it!”

I sighed, tucking her hair behind her ear. I felt like such an asshole for making her freak out like this. I regretted every decision I’d made today. This had led her to feeling like she had to jump out the window.

Hoping that I sounded as earnest as I felt, I murmured, “I get that you’re not the biggest fan of my family, especially my mom. And you’re right not to be. She hasn’t treated you in a way that warrants any trust. Plus, you just got your brother back, and you must want to spend the holidays with him. So…” I stroked her cheek, my thumb brushing over her jawline. “If you really don’t want to come back to Minnesota with me, I’ll understand. I promise. I just want you to be happy.”

Violet stepped forward without a word and wrapped me into a tight hug. She clung to me, taking in my scent, trembling. She must have been really stressed about this whole holiday thing, and I felt even worse than before. I should’ve just kept my stupid mouth shut and let her do whatever she wanted. Always! She should always do whatever she wanted, and I had to shut up.

But then, I couldn’t shut up, because I realized that Violet was…

*Crying?*

I pulled back in alarm, my eyes wide. “Violet? What’s happening? Is everything okay?”

I used my palms to wipe her cheeks, her tears, and she just nodded, looking up at me through wet eyelashes. “It’s nothing.” She sniffled. “I just love you so much. I’m so grateful to be with you and to have found you. I don’t ever want anything bad to happen to you.”

I adored her for saying these things, but hearing her say them with such passion felt… weird. A little disconcerting and suspicious. Was I being paranoid here?

“Nothing’s going to happen to me, Sunshine,” I whispered. I gave her a smile, hoping that would soothe her. “Not when I have such a badass girlfriend by my side.”

Violet’s laugh sounded a little like a sob.

It hurt my chest to see her like this, so I wiped away her tears once more and whispered, “I love you too. So much. Always.”

I bent down and gave her a quick kiss. I just wanted it to be comforting, to make her feel cared for and safe. But before I could pull away, Violet reached for the back of my neck and pulled me down, kissing me in earnest.

The heat of her made me shake. She pushed me back on the bed, taking off her puffer jacket and sweater, only keeping her tank top. There was a small voice in my head that said we probably shouldn’t do anything other than kissing—not in the middle of the evening, with everybody still awake—but I didn’t have the time to think about it much before she leaned down and kissed me again.

It felt like this was what she needed the most—her mouth on mine, my hands all over her, the closeness. We kissed and kept on kissing, and everything felt real and hot and sexy enough to make my head spin. I wanted more, I always did, but this was amazing too. Being with her, tasting her, made my heart pound in a way that I couldn’t get enough of.

Her kisses slowed after what felt like a while. The skin of her cheeks, her collarbones, felt scorching under my touch. I held her close into my arms, kissing the top of her head. For some reason, she’d fallen silent again. I looked down at her, and I had this odd feeling that something was still bothering her.

Had I become way too needy here?

“Is there a…” I swallowed. “Is there anything else on your mind?” I tried to keep my voice light. I didn’t want to upset her again. That would just make me feel worse.

She nodded quietly and stroked my arm. Sitting up, she said, “I’m going to go get a drink of water. Do you want anything?”

I shook my head. “I’m good.” I started listing things in my brain that would make her feel better and got to an obvious conclusion. “You know,” I said, “maybe we should have a nice movie night again, just the two of us this time. What do you think?”

I was trying to cheer her up—to make her feel that everything was okay between us.

Thankfully, she smiled. “That sounds perfect. I’ll be right back.”

She put on her sweater and walked out of the room. I watched her the entire time, my gut throbbing. I could feel that she wasn’t telling me something. Maybe I was just imagining things, but I couldn’t be that delusional, could I?

The mate bond between us was strong, fresh, and right now it was panging. I could tell that there was something wrong with my mate, and this didn’t only have to do with my foolish suggestion to spend Christmas with my family. It was a very bad suggestion that I obviously shouldn’t ever have made, but there had to be something else there as well.

I stood up, rubbing my face before feeling the nervous energy inside me overflow. I started to pace, trying to think this whole thing through. When exactly had Violet started acting like this? I needed to mentally go through her every movement during the past few hours. I was ready to do just that when—

Movement from outside caught my eye.

My stomach dropped when I looked out the window. It was Violet, making her way across the yard and toward the trees. What the hell? She’d said she was going to go get water, not vanish into the night.

Confused and a little annoyed, I reached to open the window, to call to her and ask if she was going to pick up that water from a nearby pond or something. Hopefully not a haunted one. But she was already too far away. Was she just going for a run? But then why hadn’t she asked me to go with her? Or told me that she needed to be alone right now and would be right back, or whatever?

There was definitely something wrong here. And if Violet was lying to me—lying badly, at that—then it had to be very serious. Her excuses had never been weaker.

I hurried downstairs and outside, heading to the spot where I’d seen Violet disappear into the woods.

It wasn’t that I didn’t trust my mate—it was that I was certain that she was in trouble and hadn’t told me the truth. I needed to be there for her.

I would always be there to help her. She was my mate. My true love. I’d never stand by when she was in danger.

I sniffed the air, taking in a deep breath.

And then I immediately took off, following her scent.

**Episode 2014**

XAVIER

This place was gaudy as fuck.

It reminded me of a mansion, a palace, a castle, and a museum all at once. It had to be at least thirty feet tall, with three turrets on either side. Grecian pillars decorated the entrance, with stars and other celestial shapes carved into the pure white marble. Huge flowerbeds of white roses started from the gate and led up to the main entryway, while the entire estate seemed to be surrounded by a mazelike garden.

It was so over the top that it fucking annoyed me.

But of course, what else had I expected from Lucian?

If anything, this was a show of opulence and wealth, and everybody knew that money meant power.

With this estate, Lucian declared his force to the world.

Scowling because of the pure arrogance of it all, I held Cali’s hand—I was on her left, Greyson on her right—and slowly, all three of us walked up the stairs. Marble steps, of course, with some carved golden moon-shaped details on the tiles, because why *wouldn’t* you step on gold?

This was ridiculous.

Cali and Greyson were on guard, too—I could feel it through our bond. Greyson, in particular, was taking everything in with an impassive expression that hid a lot of apprehension.

Looking at my brother reminded me that I wasn’t only responsible for Cali’s safety tonight. I had to keep an eye on Greyson too, since he had those black veins. I needed to be in top form and prove to both of them that I could be the Alpha, times a hundred.

*We’ve got this*, I told the other two through our mind link.

Their responding nods made me feel more grounded.

We reached the inside of the house, and the ceiling was at least twenty feet tall. And then, of course, there was more marble all over, and a huge double staircase. The tiles on the floor still had those golden details, just to match the look of the silver filigree on the indoor railings.

*This is the epitome of extra*, Greyson mind linked. *How many chandeliers is too many for a single foyer?*

Cali snorted, glancing up. *I think we have surpassed that number.*

*Where the hell has this gigantic estate been hiding this whole time, though?* I asked. *I’ve lived in this area my whole life, and I’ve never seen this place, or even heard of it.*

*Me neither*, Greyson noted.

*It’s actually very weird*, Cali said, her grip on my hand tightening. *It’s as if the Vanguard pack just dropped it in here with a giant helicopter.*

“Champagne, sir?” a passing waiter asked me. I picked up a glass and nodded my thanks. We were supposed to have manners in here, or whatever. Neither Cali nor Greyson took a drink, though, and I noticed Greyson giving me a look. I ignored it. One glass wasn’t going to affect my focus.

I needed to be focused, even though I was starting to feel the pressure.

A few feet away, I could hear laughter, conversations, and clinking glasses, along with the soft sound of string music. I wondered how many people Lucian had invited here tonight. I swallowed roughly, and Cali squeezed my arm in reassurance. I recalled that my mate and my brother could sense my emotions through the bond, and I told myself to calm the hell down. I didn’t want to worry Cali.

All three of us walked into the grand ballroom, or whatever it was called. At the entrance there was bald guy, probably a butler or something, who had this snooty expression on his face. He looked between all three of us, and in a—I shit you not—British accent, he asked, “Good evening. Your names?”

I frowned in confusion. But my older brother, always ready for this kind of bullshit, smoothly said, “The Alphas of the Redwood pack, and their Luna.”

Looking pleased, the bald butler turned around to the dance floor and announced us like this was the goddamn eighteenth century or something. He repeated Greyson’s words with a flourish that deserved an Oscar.

“The Alphas of the Redwood pack, and their Luna.”

I could actually feel Cali standing taller at the sound of her title. I looked down at her, and she smiled up at me so beautifully that it took my breath away. She loved being called my Luna, and I had to admit that it was amazing for me to hear it, too.

If I ignored the Greyson aspect.

Of course, I knew that this was only for one night. There was no way I was going to let Cali risk her health and safety to truly become my Luna. Not until we figured out how to deal with the *due destini* and making sure her half-Fae blood didn’t react badly to the Luna ceremony. But still, that didn’t change the pride I felt to have her by my side right now.

All three of us walked into the giant ballroom.

*What a shocker*, Greyson said dryly. *Even more fucking chandeliers.*

Both Cali and I suppressed laughter. There were lots of people here, milling about, champagne glasses in hand. The laughter and conversation pierced through my ears, a busy beehive looking me straight in the eye.

And then, a familiar face came up to us.

“Look what the cat dragged in,” Mace said. He was the same as ever, but much better dressed.

“Good evening, Mace,” Greyson said.

“You guys look alive and well,” Mace commented.

“Hi, Mace,” Cali said, snorting. “You look nice too.”

“Not gonna lie, it’s great to see some familiar faces,” Mace said, earnestly for a change, looking at all three of us.

I nodded in acknowledgement. I’d immediately been taken aback to see Mace, but now I remembered that he’d been invited. As had Ava.

Had she arrived yet? Or was it possible that she’d decided not to come?

I was hoping for the latter. The last thing I needed tonight was Ava adding her chaos to the mix. But for some reason, even though I couldn’t see her, I could *feel her* watching me. It was fucking insane, and I needed to rein in my nerves. If not for myself, then for my Luna.

“Do you have any idea what tonight is all about?” Mace asked me in a low voice.

“Not sure,” I replied. “But I’m ready for anything.”

Mace nodded. “It’s suspicious that they’ve gathered so many Alphas in one place.”

All four of us looked around, and I realized the gravity of his words.

Cali swallowed audibly. “It does seem like the perfect situation for something to go down.”

Greyson shook his head. “We’re just going to have to wait and see what Lucian does next.”

Mace arched an eyebrow. “If he ever arrives. He’s already fashionably late to his own party.”

I scoffed. “Of course he is.”

Lucian struck me as someone who loved attention. And making a room full of Alphas wait for him seemed like a definite power play.

“I would’ve been more surprised if he was on time,” Greyson commented, and Cali snorted.

“I’m going to go see if I can get any information from the other party people,” Mace said. He looked between me and Greyson. “I’ll let you guys know if I hear anything that might be shady.”

I nodded as Mace melted back into the crowd. I took the opportunity to scan all the faces in the room, trying to see if I recognized anyone. Lots of people were staring at me and Cali and Greyson.

They looked intrigued by sight of the three of us together.

It wasn’t a secret that we were afflicted with the *due destini*, but these new faces didn’t know that yet. It made sense that we’d left an impression, though. That we’d shown up at this party as co-Alphas with Cali as our Luna had to be a juicy piece of gossip. I really hoped—for everyone’s sake—that we wouldn’t have to deal with any negative attention, though.

The idea of co-Alphas sharing a pack and a Luna wasn’t exactly traditional, and I knew that many people in here would probably frown upon it in the most prudish way possible.

Fuck them.

“Everybody’s staring,” Cali whispered, squeezing my forearm.

I looked at her, ready to soothe her nerves. “That’s because you’re the most beautiful woman they’ve ever seen.”

Cali blushed furiously, nudging me in an “aww shucks!” kind of way that made me smirk.

Greyson rolled his eyes. “That was my line, Xavier.”

All three of us exchanged a look, but instead of acting annoyed, I snorted at my brother’s sarcasm. Cali and Greyson grinned.

This felt good, actually.

All of a sudden, the music stopped, interrupting the moment between us. There was a loud creak as the double doors at the top of an elaborate staircase that led down to the ballroom opened. A new butler appeared and walked to the banister.

He cleared his throat loudly. “Announcing His Highness, the leader of the Vanguard pack, Lord of the Moonlight, Protector of the Pack, Prince Lucian! And his sister, Princess Aysel!”

Before I could comment on the “Lord of the Moonlight” part—seriously, this guy was delusional—Lucian appeared at the double doors. He walked to the banister, a pretty woman with long white hair at his side. She curtseyed and skedaddled.

Lucian was left alone, his bi-colored eyes sharp as he looked down at the dance floor. His gaze swept over the silent crowd and then landed on us.

On Cali, Greyson, and me.

Lucian offered a wolfish smile. And then he spoke, his gaze still fixed on the three of us as if we were the only people in the room.

“I’m sure you’re all wondering why I called you here tonight.”

**Episode 2015**

VIOLET

I ran through the forest, regretting not taking my jacket with me. I thought about shifting into a wolf just to warm myself up and get there faster, but I decided against it—it would be better to arrive at the theater as a human. I had no idea who this stalker was, but I didn’t want them to find out that I was a werewolf, just in case they didn’t know it already.

Good thing the theater was within the town limits and I didn’t have to go too far. Still, I’d never been around here before. The neighborhood was entirely quiet, eerily so. The road looked completely abandoned—there were cracks in the asphalt, and all the street lights were burned out.

All the buildings around here had long since been knocked down, leaving only rubble and overgrown vegetation. It also smelled very strange. Like someone had been burning herbs or something. The air was making my eyes sting. I was intimidated, but I was also determined. I had to figure out who this person was and what they wanted…

*Before* they dared go after my sweet mate.

I saw the dark outline of the theater a few feet ahead and approached it carefully, keeping to the rubble and overgrown bushes to hide myself from any watching eyes. Who could this person be? Why would they lure me out here? What could they want from me? Could it possibly be the MIB? We hadn’t exactly left them on good terms.

But that organization had definitely been more straightforward than this. They would never call me like a serial killer, or go out of their way to threaten Charlie. And then I realized—could this be all about him? Oh my god, what if the horrible werewolf who’d turned Charlie had a mate? We’d killed that guy, but if there was a person out there who—for some reason—had actually loved that horrible monster, then they could very easily be out for revenge.

I suddenly realized that I should *never* have left Charlie at the pack house. He could be in danger right now! Then the logical part of my brain reminded me that Charlie would be just fine in a house full of werewolves, and I was the one who was in danger right now.

Perhaps I should have thought of this sooner?

Hopefully I wouldn’t get murdered tonight.

*Ha ha…*

I heard a rustling sound and stopped cold, my heart pounding.

What was that?

I crouched behind a sparse bush, trying to make myself as small as possible, using the dark of the dusk to hide myself. I fought to sniff the air, to take in my surroundings just like Xavier had taught me to do. There was a familiar scent pouring through the burned herbs’ aroma, a scent that I hadn’t noticed before because of my anxiety and the strangeness of this place.

I took another whiff, and I was certain now. I knew this scent. I was ready to take a bigger sniff when my phone buzzed. Hands shaking, I pulled it out to see a text.

*Your time is running out. Go inside.*

I gaped and looked around, trying not to appear too frantic. There was no question—someone was watching me. Someone had noticed me, and all my stealth tactics were just foolish kiddy bullshit. I felt horrible, but at this point, I had no choice. Taking a deep breath, I pocketed my phone and hurried up to the building.

I hoped I wasn’t walking directly into a trap.

Though, let’s be honest, there was a high possibility of that. I could only hope that I would be able to figure it out before anything horrible happened. The windows were all boarded up, and the marquee only had a couple of letters hanging from it drunkenly. The light bulbs were broken and shattered. Horribly destroyed.

Who could have done this? What was going on with this neighborhood? Why was nobody living here?

All very spooky and valid questions.

Holding my breath, I walked through the ruined glass and approached the front door. It was chained up. I broke the lock easily, using my wolf’s strength without shifting, and then I pushed the door open. The burning herb stench was stronger in here, and some of the smoke remained in the hallways, wisps of it dancing through the air.

Whoever was in here did not want me to be able to smell them.

And they had thought this through extensively, unlike me.

*Wait...*

Could it be a vampire? Or something worse? If I had learned anything in the last few months, it was that I shouldn’t discount any myths or legends I’d heard as a child. I just hoped it wasn’t Bigfoot or something. Anything else, I could probably take.

Pushing down my nerves, I walked through the ruined lobby, where a beautiful chandelier still hung from the ceiling. It looked like it could fall on my head at any minute. The concession stand was empty, with broken display cases. Cups lay scattered everywhere. It felt like everything had been left in a hurry and no one had ever come back to clean it up. This entire place looked condemned, haunted.

And I could definitely feel a chill in the air.

I hoped this wasn’t *ghosts*, now that I thought about it. I wouldn’t be able to punch a ghost or stab a ghost or bite a ghost. I wished Marta were here, so she could tell me if there were any spirits. But wait—would actually knowing make me feel better or worse?

Ghosts liked Marta, but that didn’t mean that they would like *me*. Would I be able to sweet-talk them out of literally turning *me* into a ghost? Like, could I just tell them that I had a potential future sister-in-law who could speak to them?

This sounded ridiculous, and I was judging myself hard over my thoughts.

At this point, I reconsidered my entire approach to this mission. I should have brought Marta with me, or someone else—someone I could trust. Not my flaky brother who no longer had his wolf, though. And Marta had seemed a little tired after the Letifer fight, so perhaps she wouldn’t have been game.

I was back to square one now, somehow believing that my absurd decision to come here on my own had probably been the best one, considering the circumstances. I started to understand the way Cali felt whenever she ran off into the forest and did dangerous shit.

Ignoring my internal conflict, I looked around in the darkness. I thought about calling out, but I was worried about disturbing anything that lay dormant in here. Maybe someone was sleeping? Or something? I might not have been able to commune with spirits, but I could feel a dark energy just from being in this place, and I was pretty sure that if I did anything to stir things up, I would probably regret it.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I pulled out my phone and fired out a text.

*I’m here, now what?*

As the seconds ticked by, there was no response.

But out of the blue, I heard a sound.

The noise of machinery and then a flickering light coming from the theater.

*Oh my god, this is so creepy…*

Swallowing roughly, I walked hesitantly over, and I saw static being projected onto the screen. That was exactly what I needed in my life right now—a haunted film. I really hoped this wasn’t going to be like *The Ring.* The horror movie with the girl with the long black hair who climbed out of the TV and ate you.

These thoughts were one hundred percent not helping.

I walked in further, fighting to see into the projectionist room. Whoever was here would have to be lurking inside. At least in theory. I thought I might have seen a shadow in the little room, but the light was so bright that it was practically blinding, even for a werewolf’s vision. I blinked rapidly, trying to see more, but it was no use.

*BOOM!*

Suddenly, the speakers blared to life, and the static got so loud that I screamed. My ears, sensitive and attuned to everything, started throbbing. I covered them, feeling them burn from the noise, feeling my head drum in time with the horrible sound that pierced my eardrums.

But, amidst the static and the chaos of the noise, I could pick out another sound.

The sound of rushing, running footsteps.

Someone was about to attack me, that much I knew.

Adrenaline rushing through me, I shifted halfway and spun around, ready to pounce on my would-be attacker, reminding myself what my brother had said—I was a good fighter, I could do this. Xavier had trained me for this, and I’d fought in actual battles.

Terrified but also determined, I growled and was ready to attack when I faced the person behind me.

“Violet, it’s okay!” Charlie screeched in a way that I had *never* heard before. “It’s me!”

**Episode 2016**

I stared up at Lucian. He looked grand and handsome, standing at the banister. He was dressed in what looked like a prince’s outfit straight out of a Disney movie—golden epaulets and buttons, white gloves, and his hair pushed back.

“What is this? A costume party?” Xavier grumbled.

I nudged him with my elbow. At the same time, Lucian stared straight at me as he said, “I am pleased with your presence here. I know that many are wondering, why the grand festivities tonight? The truth is…”

I held my breath. Was he about to tell us some massive secret? Because this looked like a super shady situation that could have a lot of secrets involved!

“I merely want to celebrate the return of the Vanguard pack to its rightful home,” he said.

I blinked. *Say what now?*

He went on. “The Vanguard estate has sat here for hundreds of years. While we were away recently, the home had been cloaked by powerful witches, rendering it invisible to the common eye. And now that we have returned to the area, there is of course nowhere else a Vanguard wolf would reside other than our ancestral home. In fact, I see this grand building as proof of the Vanguard pack’s claim over this land.” Lucian smiled sharply. “With all that in mind, I decided that I’d like to get to know my neighbors a bit better, and I invited you all here tonight for an evening of beauty and friendship. I thank you for your presence. Enjoy the party.”

The end of his speech was followed by *very loud* silence.

And then the crowd burst into whispers while I didn’t even know where to begin. I could feel the surprise and frustration coming from both Greyson and Xavier.

*How long could have these wolves been away? And why are they coming back now?* I thought, my brows furrowed. *Oh my god, the suspense is killing me…*

Lucian signaled for the orchestra to start playing again. A fast, jazzy, sexy tune floated through the air as he started to descend the stairs. It was like he had his personal Bond villain soundtrack.

I would have rolled my eyes if I hadn’t been certain that he would notice.

*Better to remain diplomatic for now... I can unleash the sass later.*

The moment he was on the dance floor, some of the more curious wolves approached Lucian to greet him.

*Stay back*, Xavier mind linked. *Let him come to us.*

*Lucian’s speech sounded pretty and fancy, but there was definitely an underlying threat*, Greyson noted. *It’s as if Lucian is trying to stake his claim on this land while hiding it with a cloak of hospitality.*

I swallowed nervously. *You really think so?*

Greyson shot me a sideways look. *The fact that Lucian is already treating all of the local packs like they’re guests in their own territory is pretty worrisome, Cali.*

Well. When he put it that way, we were all fucked.

Xavier stared at me. *Greyson is right. We need to take advantage of being inside the enemy’s home tonight. We should investigate as much as we can without drawing attention to ourselves.*

I cocked an eyebrow. *You do realize that everybody is staring at us all the time, right?*

*I agree with Xavier*, Greyson said. *His plan sounds good. Maybe we should split up.*

I snorted. *Splitting up? That is* exactly *what a pretty white person says in a horror movie before everybody dies, Greyson.*

Greyson frowned, and Xavier nodded at me. *Cali is right.* *It’s not a good idea to be out of each other’s sight right now. Don’t be an asshole about this, Greyson.*

Xavier’s tone was sharp, and Greyson clearly didn’t like it. I was ready to play interference here, but then I remembered that this was *Greyson* we were talking about. He wouldn’t lash out at his brother in front of everybody.

*Under normal circumstances*, Greyson said calmly, *I would agree with you. But we don’t have that luxury right now. We have to gather as much information as we can, and the easiest way to do that is go in different directions and talk to different people. And in the meantime, we’ll have Kira’s spell to connect us.*

Xavier was scowling. Contrarily to Greyson, I *did* expect him to snap at his brother in public. That was basically Xavier’s brand.

*You know what?* I spoke up. *When Greyson puts it that way, I have to agree with him. I hate the idea of not having you guys by my side, but I know that right now, we* *have to do what’s best for the pack. As co-Alphas and your Luna tonight, we need to think clearly and place protecting the Redwood’s territory above all else.*

Greyson smiled a little. *That’s my girl.*

Xavier looked really annoyed, but in the end he huffed his agreement. *Fine.* He stared at me. *Stay in the general ballroom area, Cali. That way at least there will be a crowd to provide you with some safety.*

I nodded.

“See you both later,” I said, leaning in to kiss each one of their cheeks. I knew that Aysel had to be watching, and I remembered Lola’s advice to show her that these men were mine. The faintest hint of red lipstick remained on Greyson’s skin, and I was proud of my handiwork.

*We’re going to be fine*, I said.

My mates nodded.

And just like that, we all moved off in separate directions.

I saw Mace by the bar and realized it would be safe enough to go there. The Blue Blood Alpha was a little rough around the edges, much more like Xavier than Greyson, but I knew that he appreciated the Redwoods after we’d supported him through losing Pip. The two packs had gone through a lot over the past few months, and that had brought us all closer together.

Pretty happy with my idea, I was making my way toward the looming Alpha when someone blocked my way.

Andrei.

He was one of those men who was hot, but also so obviously creepy. *Be gone, you werewolf creeper!* I thought, glaring at him.

“Caliana,” he said, clearly not hearing my internal curse. “You look delectable tonight.”

*And you look very sleazy, but what else is new?* I said in my head while he took me in like I was a piece of meat.

I smiled tightly. “Maybe take a picture. It’ll last longer.”

He laughed at my sarcastic tone. *Douchebag*.

“Anyway, you’ll have to excuse me,” I said, about to walk away, when I felt someone pulling on my hand.

When I turned around, I came face to face with Lucian.

The guy was giving off some very strong “I’m interested in world domination” vibes, but it was hard not to notice how gorgeous he was. Classically beautiful.

He stared at me, smiling. “May I have this dance?”

Fighting shock, I scanned the room for Xavier and Greyson. Were they seeing this? Were they watching me? I didn’t dare allow myself to show my surprise. That would give Lucian too much of an advantage, and he already had that in his own home. In the end, I decided to give him my best smile and play him in the same way that he’d been playing everybody tonight.

With lies.

“I would like that,” I said.

Preening like a peacock, he led me onto the dance floor.

I recognized the song the orchestra was praying as a waltz, and suddenly I wanted to tell him that this was probably not a good idea, after all. I was really hoping for the best here—the last thing I needed was to step on a prince’s feet. Or face-plant on the floor in front of everybody while my boobs popped out of this teeny tiny strappy dress.

Fortunately, though, I managed to find the beat of the dance, and then I allowed myself to face Lucian fully. He was already staring, his touch on my hand and back gentle but steady.

“You’re looking lovely tonight,” he said. “I knew this dress would suit you.”

Well then. We were back to creepy territory, weren’t we?

“It was an unnecessary gift,” I said, keeping that smile on my face.

“I love beautiful things, so it was as much a gift to myself as it was to you.”

Did this guy just call me a beautiful *thing*? An *object*? Wasn’t that just great!

*Why are men—*

Shoving down my need to get into a debate with him, I kept that smile plastered on my face and changed the subject.

“Your home is beautiful,” I said. I could do this. I could do small talk until this dance was over and escape without seeming rude.

“It’s my favorite among the Vanguard pack’s many estates across the globe,” he replied, looking super pleased with himself. “It is most important and precious, as it constitutes our ancestral home.”

This sounded like crucial information that I needed to file away for further investigation later on.

“You know,” Lucian went on, “I had been wondering if the three of you would actually come together. You are a most curious group.”

I blinked. “Oh?”

Lucian arched his eyebrows slightly. “Two Alphas and one Luna. A rarity.”

I shrugged, pretending that this was totally normal to me instead of a last-minute ruse meant to trick him and his pack. “This dynamic works well for the Redwood pack. In fact, having two Alphas means our pack is twice as strong.”

I loved myself for that last line. Was I getting good at this diplomacy thing? *Yay me!*

“Is that so?” Lucian said. He smiled down at me. It felt predatory. “But it must be so hard to stand between two such strong personalities. It makes one wonder if there’s ever an imbalance…”

I played dumb. “What do you mean?”

Lucian laughed, a charming melodic sound that ended with yet another smile, though this one was full of teeth.

“You must forgive my curiosity, but I have to know,” he said, dropping his voice conspiratorially. “Is there one that you prefer?”

**Episode 2017**

GREYSON

I was making my way along the edge of the ballroom when I felt shock coming from Cali through Kira’s spell. A vivid feeling that made me turn and look at her. She was being pulled onto the dance floor by…

*Lucian*.

Anger rippled through me, hot and sudden and a little feral. Unable to think for a tense moment, I started forward toward them.

Xavier mind linked with me instantly. *What are you doing? Leave it for now. We’d only put her in danger by insulting Lucian.*

I continued to step forward.

*Seriously, what the hell is wrong with you?* Xavier snapped. *And you say* I’m *hotheaded.*

He was right. What the hell *was* wrong with me?

Suddenly, there was a pang of pain in my chest, as if in answer to the question. The veins were throbbing, which meant they were spreading, which meant that for a moment there, my mind had blurred. I pulled back. I couldn’t let my rage feed them. I couldn’t let them get the best of me, not tonight.

Not when Cali was here.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I forced myself to a random side exit and left the ballroom quickly. I didn’t need to see Cali with that asshole, and at least I was certain that Xavier had his eye on her. It felt good to trust my brother when it came to that.

This hallway was much quieter, anyway, with only a few people. I heard voices and laughter coming from a doorway and approached it. When I walked into the room, I was immediately enveloped in the scents of mahogany, leather, and cigar smoke.

There were floor-to-ceiling bookshelves and comfortable-looking couches and chairs, but what took up most of the space in here were the three giant pool tables. Two of them were occupied by people already in the middle of a game.

I couldn’t even hear the music from the ballroom in here.

There was a chance that I wouldn’t be able to hear Cali if she mind linked me.

I had to pull myself together and return to the main area where I could make sure that Cali was okay, right along with Xavier. I was ready to go back out when I noticed the portraits hanging along the walls. This looked like a fucking *goldmine* of information.

I remembered Cali’s agreement with my plan.

We were supposed to split up. We were supposed to investigate. I was supposed to think with a clear head and do what was best for the pack in the long run. I reminded myself, yet again, that Xavier would keep an eye on my mate, and that this was what I had to do. This was what Cali would want me to do.

Swallowing, I walked up to the group of portraits to study them.

They seemed to be going back to what looked like the early nineteenth century. Each one of the paintings had the Vanguard mark on the bottom right corner, and I had no doubt that these were pictures of the oldest Vanguard wolves. These were Lucian’s ancestors.

The wolf had been telling the truth. He and his pack had been in this area for a long time.

But how come I’d never heard any stories about them? Lucian had mentioned something about witches hiding this estate, but rumors couldn’t be hidden, could they? Perhaps my mother might know something about them—though if she had, she would have told me by now.

My mind fleetingly went to Silas.

My father always seemed to know everything about everything, and an icy feeling settled over me. There was no fucking way I’d even attempt to ask my father’s spirit about the Vanguard pack. I didn’t trust that bastard, not even dead. He’d proven time and time again that the only thing that mattered to him was to spread death and chaos.

I just hoped that Lucian wasn’t Silas’s brand of a villain.

“Cigar, sir?” A pretty girl in a maid’s outfit held out a wooden cigar box toward me. I shook my head and was opening my mouth to say no when an elegant hand, with perfect red manicured nails, reached inside and plucked two out.

I looked up and found myself face-to-face with Aysel.

“You are excused,” she told the maid with a wave of her hand, dismissing her while staring at me.

Aysel was as pretty as I remembered, her long white hair framing her face beautifully. But the fact that she was hot obviously didn’t mean I could trust her. She was Lucian’s sister, after all, and she had her eye on me. Being here alone with her now made me uneasy.

“Having fun?” Her smile was inviting as she held up one of the cigars to her lips to light. She stretched the other one toward me.

“Thank you,” I said and accepted the cigar. It would’ve been rude to refuse. I had to keep a low profile here and make small talk, and at least I knew I was good at that last part.

Then again, I doubted that having the attention of the lady of the estate amounted to keeping a low profile. She seemed to think the exact same thing, her smile mischievous, her eyes crinkling at the edges as she took me in, bringing the cigar to her mouth again to take a drag.

“Do you play?” she asked, her gaze sliding to the one unused pool table.

I did not want to get caught up in this. I had to figure out a way to gracefully escape. But at the same time, saying that I didn’t know how to play would probably just make her want to teach me. Which would be even worse, because then she’d probably rub herself all over me while showing me how it was done, and then we’d have other problems to deal with.

I wasn’t being cocky here. I fucking knew that look on her face.

“I know how to play, yeah,” I admitted, and she beamed at me in triumph.

I was screwed either way, wasn’t I?

Making a come-hither move with her index finger—so subtle—she moved to the pool table. I followed and told myself that this was a way to gather extra information on her brother. I had to remain in control.

Aysel racked up the billiard balls and looked up at me, resting her hand on the edge of the table. There was a sexy energy to her that was hard not to notice.

“You should break,” she said.

I paused for a second too long, at least for her tastes, and she leaned in.

Smirking, she said, “If you don’t know how, I’m happy to teach you.”

I had totally seen this one coming. I offered her the coolest, most unaffected smile I could muster. “Don’t worry. I know exactly what I’m doing.”

She arched an eyebrow, chuckling. If this whole situation hadn’t been such a mess—and if I’d been single—I might have been flattered by her obvious attention.

“This house is beautiful,” I commented, moving forward to play.

“Thank you, Greyson.”

She said my name with a purr. A *purr*.

“I was unaware that your family had ties to this area,” I went on. “Why did you leave?”

Aysel shrugged. “The Vanguard pack has reach far across the globe, and sometimes our attentions are needed elsewhere.”

This was the vaguest reply she could have cooked up. She knew what she was doing, too.

“Makes sense,” I said. Even though it didn’t make any sense at all. “Are you planning to stay in the area for long?”

Aysel smiled. “We will stay for as long as it takes.”

I tilted my head to the side, resting the pool stick on the ground. “As long as what takes?”

Aysel approached me, letting her pool cue fall to the table, messing up the order of the balls. She leaned on it, clearly trying to get me to peek at her impressive cleavage.

I forced myself not to glance down.

“I’m bored with this game,” she said simply. “I want to go somewhere else. Somewhere more private. If you have more questions, you’re welcome to ask them there.”

This felt like a trap. This *was* a trap.

Aysel smirked at me, walking past me and running a finger down my arm as she turned to leave. I watched her go, swaying her hips, contemplating my options. Aysel was Lucian’s sister—if I refused her invitation, it could theoretically cause issues with Lucian, him being the host and all that old etiquette bullshit. Aysel seemed to be playing nice for now, but I didn’t doubt that she would stab me in the back without blinking.

I couldn’t risk us getting kicked out before we found more information.

Telling myself to get on with it, I followed Aysel across the hallway and into what looked like a study. She closed the door behind me and turned the lock.

Seriously?

I wanted to laugh at her. *Please*, I knew how to hold off a woman’s advances. I knew how to deal with Aysel, because I knew how to deal with women. I was a powerful, smart, and diplomatic Alpha, and that—

“You’re so gorgeous it takes my breath away,” Aysel murmured, suddenly stepping so close that her torso touched mine. Before I could even move, she rested her palms on my chest and whispered in my ear. “Have you ever had your hands on royalty before?”

Her touch on my chest made a tingling sensation start spreading. The black veins reacted to her in an instant, growing stronger in seconds. But the feeling wasn’t painful.

It was almost… *euphoric?*

I was *not* attracted to this woman—I belonged to Cali, always.

But the veins on my chest had very different ideas. They were drawn to Aysel for some reason, and the sensation they created inside me was so strong that I suddenly felt suffocated. Lured into some sort of cage where I was no longer in control, and magic had taken over.

*Again*.

This was *not* going to fucking happen again.

I reached for Aysel’s shoulders, pushing her away, but she did not budge.

It was as if her power had multiplied all of a sudden.

Staring at my lips, she murmured, “I know you’re tied up in something messy with your brother and your Luna. But perhaps I can help you out of that situation. Would you like that?”

**Episode 2018**

MARTA

After escaping from Big Mac, I managed to make it downstairs to the kitchen without running into Lilac. I knew this was counterproductive, as I’d told the witch I’d find him, but I was *not* ready to talk to him. I knew I needed to talk to him about being a character witness for my upcoming necromancy trial, but I knew I should probably deal with this “are we boyfriend and girlfriend?” thing first.

But I just couldn’t. My stomach clenched at the thought. Any courage I’d started out with when I’d left Big Mac and Mrs. Smith had faded as I considered what the conversation would even *sound* like.

Maybe I just needed something to charge me up. One of Mrs. Smith’s white chocolate mochas sounded good—caffeine and sugar should do the trick.

The kitchen was empty—which was unusual—and I stood at the espresso maker in contemplative silence, thinking about what I knew I needed to do. I let myself mull over the words I wanted to say as I poured warmed milk into my mug, but none of them sounded quite right. My connection with Lilac was hard to put into words—I hadn’t yet been able to do it—so I wasn’t sure how I expected *him* to define it either.

I poured in the two shots of espresso and added the white chocolate sauce, then wrapped my hands around the warm mug with a sigh. I was just going to have to figure this out.

On my way to the stairs, the twinkle of lights caught my eye and I moved to the doorway of the living room. The Christmas tree stood near the windows, its fairy lights reflected in the glass, making them twice as bright. The tree was huge—nearly brushing the high ceiling—and it had been trimmed to perfection. I hadn’t seen a Christmas tree in decades. Bert hadn’t understood them and had never allowed one in his house. Seeing one here—after all this time—nearly brought tears to my eyes.

The tree was beautiful, but it was more than that. Seeing it made me realize how many holidays I’d missed.

Feeling almost mesmerized by the lights, I stepped forward. I was reaching out to touch a delicate silver ornament when a voice near my shoulder nearly made me jump out of my skin.

“Marta.”

I spun around. “Torin,” I breathed, clutching my mug. “You startled me.”

He smiled sheepishly. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to.” He held out a small, gift-wrapped box. “I have something for you.”

I stared down at the box, which was wrapped in shiny red paper and tied with a golden ribbon. “For me?”

Torin laughed. “Yes, Marta. For you.” I reached for it, but Torin pulled it back, laughing again. “Hey, you have to wait until Christmas. That’s how it works, right?”

“Yeah,” I said quickly. “That’s how it works.” I could feel my cheeks growing hot. I hadn’t gotten a gift for Torin—or for anyone, for that matter. “Thanks, Torin,” I murmured as I turned to leave.

But just then, Lilac walked in.

I turned on my heel and circled the tree, looking at it closely, examining every ornament as though there was going to be a quiz on them later. *Anything* to avoid making eye contact with Lilac. Maybe if I just looked busy enough, he would leave, and I could avoid him altogether.

After what felt like an eternity—but was probably more like three minutes—I peeked out from behind the tree, a sparkly pickle ornament in my hand in case I had to look very interested in something quickly. But to my relief, Lilac was gone.

“Thank god,” I muttered.

Now was my chance. I sped out of the room, making a break for the stairs.

“Marta!” Lilac said, appearing from nowhere and stepping toward me.

I put on the brakes, but it was too late. I slammed into him and spilled my mocha all over his chest.

We both stared down at the stain creeping across his white T-shirt.

“Lilac,” I started, horrified, “I’m so sorry—”

He swiped a finger across the mess and licked it. He frowned. “Is that Mrs. Smith’s white chocolate mocha?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I’m really sorry. I’m sure it’ll wash out. I’m really sorr—”

“You should be sorry, Marta. That was a waste of a perfectly good mocha,” Lilac said with a grin.

I looked down into the mug in my hand. There were still a few inches of liquid left. “You can have the rest.”

“Thanks,” he said, accepting the cup and taking a sip. “So,” he continued casually, “why are you trying to avoid me?”

“What? I—I’m—I—” I stammered. “I’m not.”

He gave me an even stare. “Come on, Marta. I saw you duck behind the tree as soon as I walked into the room.” He tipped his head. “Are you mad at me?”

I could feel my cheeks flaming with heat. “Why would I be mad at you?”

“I’m not sure,” Lilac admitted, his gaze assessing. “My only theory is that it’s because I called you my girlfriend and it freaked you out.”

I dropped my eyes to my feet. “What? *No*.”

“Marta,” Lilac said, and I looked up. He waved his hand. “Follow me.”

“Lilac!” Torin stepped out into the hall. “There you are. I got you a present, too!”

“Thanks, man. Put it under the tree,” Lilac called over his shoulder.

“I won’t until you promise not to open it until Christmas!” Torin sang after us.

“I promise!” Lilac opened the front door and led me onto the porch. He handed me the mocha. “It’s cold out here.”

I reached for the cup again, but when Lilac’s fingers brushed mine as he handed it to me, I nearly dropped the mug.

Lilac frowned at me. “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” I said quickly.

“I can take it back.”

I looked up at him. “The mocha?”

“No, I mean about you being my girlfriend. I can take it back if you want.”

“Oh.” My face burned even hotter in the cold air. “I don’t think it works like that, Lilac. You can’t just take something like that back.” I wrapped my hands around the cup, but it was cold too, and my teeth started to chatter.

“Do you *want* me to take it back?” Lilac asked.

I hesitated. I wasn’t sure how to answer.

Lilac looked at me curiously. “It just seems like ever since I brought it up, you’ve been really weird. You’ve been avoiding me. I just want things to be like they were, Marta. So if you’re not cool with being my girlfriend, just say so, and we’ll go back to whatever we were before.”

I clenched my jaw, trying to control my chattering teeth, but it was no good. My whole body felt tense with cold.

Lilac finally seemed to notice this and put his arm around me, pulling me tight against him. “You’re freezing. Let’s go inside.”

I nodded vaguely. The minute he’d pulled me close, I’d felt a surge of warmth through me.

“Come on, let’s get you inside—”

“I think it happened too fast,” I blurted out, cutting him off.

Lilac looked down at me, surprised. “Seriously?”

I nodded.

Lilac let out a gusty sigh. “Thank god.”

I stared at him, surprised. That wasn’t the response I’d been expecting. “You know, if you didn’t *want* me to be your girlfriend, Lilac, you could have just said so before now. You didn’t have to—”

“Marta.” Lilac put his hands on my shoulders and looked into my eyes. “I’m teasing you. I asked you to be my girlfriend because I wanted you to be my girlfriend, but I’d be happy just hanging out with you. And we can call whatever we have anything you want, as long as we can still be friends.”

“Friends?” I asked weakly.

Lilac nodded. “Yeah, friends. But not like regular friends…” His face flushed. “But not like friends with benefits, either. I mean, like—we’re connected, you know? I mean more than friends—whatever we were before. Does that make sense?” he finished, looked panicked.

I looked at his startled eyes and considered that. I didn’t know how to define what we were—that was what had been making me feel crazy—and if Lilac was okay with keeping it undefined, then I could accept that, too. At least for now.

“Yeah.” I nodded. “That’s fine. It makes sense. Friends.”

Lilac grinned, looking relieved. “Great. Now can we please go back inside? I’m freezing my ass off out here.”

“Hang on,” I said, grabbing his hand as he reached for the door. “There’s something else I wanted to talk to you about.”

He turned. “What’s up?”

“Remember my trial?”

Lilac smirked. “Do I remember it? Come on—one doesn’t typically forget a summons for unlicensed necromancy.”

I rolled my eyes. “I need someone to vouch for me at the trial. Will you be my character witness?”

**Episode 2019**

The stare I gave Lucian must have made it look like I didn’t understand his question, because he smiled.

“There’s no need for discomfort, Cali. I simply have to wonder—which Evers is your favorite Alpha?”

“I-I don’t have a favorite,” I stammered. “I *don’t*,” I insisted when he looked incredulous.

“Come now,” he said, his expression amused.

“I really don’t. And even if I did, I couldn’t answer a question like that.” I could feel my cheeks burning. I wished this dance would just end and I could get away from this guy. How long was this song, anyway?  
 Lucian was a very good dancer and an excellent partner—he twirled around the highly polished floor with perfect grace, holding me fast in his arms. “All the same, I think we both know your heart must beat faster for one of them. That’s just human nature.” His eyes glittered. “Maybe you need to stop denying it and face facts.”

I gritted my teeth. “I love them both. That’s a fact.”

He raised a perfectly shaped eyebrow. “One of these days, you will have to make a decision.”

The music slowed, and, with the last few excruciating notes, came to an end.

Lucian eased his hold on my waist and took a small step back. “Please excuse me, Caliana. Perhaps later we will find a moment to speak further, but for now, I must attend to the rest of my guests.” He bowed gracefully, brushed a kiss onto the top of my hand, and—with one last look at me—moved off.

Flustered by our exchange, I stared after him for a moment. When he’d disappeared into the crowd, I turned and looked around for Xavier and Greyson. Before I could spot either of them, I felt another hand at my elbow.

“My turn.”

I looked up to see Andrei standing beside me, looking down at me with a smile. And before I could object, he’d pulled me back onto the shining dance floor.

“I hope you’re having fun tonight, Cali. Though it’s got to be hard.”

I frowned up at him. “What? Why?”

Andrei laughed. “You don’t have to pretend with me. You’re a Luna to two Alphas. That’s got to be rough.” He glanced down at my dress, his eyes making their leisurely way the way down the length of me. “Though I get why you would draw the attention of two Alphas.”

My face flushed, and I glanced away, eyeing the exits.

“But I do wonder how it works,” he added thoughtfully.

“How what works?” I snapped.

“You know.” He shrugged. “Is it every other day? Do you have a weekly schedule? Who gets you when?”

I stopped dancing and planted my feet—or planted them as best I could in my sky-high heels. “I’m not talking about this with you. Or with anyone,” I growled, my face burning like lava.

Andrei took in my flashing eyes and flushed face and laughed. “Oh, maybe you’re all still working it out.”

Anger flashed through me. “I said I’m not talking about it.”

Andrei smirked, and he looked like he was about to say more, but Xavier appeared beside me and put his hand protectively around my waist.

“I’d like a dance with my Luna, if you don’t mind.”

Andrei looked like he *did* mind, and there was a moment of electrified tension as he and Xavier glared at each other.

A flash of panic jolted through me. Were they going to fight?

But then Andrei took a step back with a smile that couldn’t have been less sincere. “Of course. She’s all yours.” His smile stretched into a grin. “Well, she’s *half* yours. I think the other half belongs to Greyson.”

I clenched my fists, ready to throw one right in Andrei’s smug face. I’d had more than enough of this guy.

*Don’t let him bait you. He’s just trying to rile you up.*

I let Xavier’s words echo through my head and took a deep breath, trying to calm down. Xavier was right, of course.

Andrei winked at me and sauntered away, reaching for the hand of a stunning woman with long red hair and pulling her onto the dance floor.

If the red-headed woman was surprised at being pulled away from her conversation for a dance with Andrei, she didn’t look it, and smiled up into his ruggedly handsome face as he spun her across the floor.

Xavier took me in his arms. He was moving in time to the music, but his embrace felt more like a hug than a dance. “Are you okay?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but before I could, I felt a strange tingling sensation in my chest. I was here, wrapped in Xavier’s arms, but I was thinking of Greyson.

“Cali?” Xavier asked, gently lifting my chin with his finger. “Are you there? Are you okay?”

“Have you seen Greyson lately?”

A look of surprise passed across Xavier’s face, then he scowled. “No,” he snapped. “He wanted to split up, remember?”

“Yeah, I know, but…” I trailed off, shaking my head.

“But what? What’s wrong?” Xavier asked.

“I don’t know,” I admitted, trying to shake off the strange sensation. “I just had a weird feeling, that’s all.”

Xavier frowned. “My brother can take care of himself. Trust me.”

Before I could respond to that, there was the deep blare of trumpets, and I jumped in surprise. On the far side of the ballroom, a pair of massive double doors were being pulled open by uniformed servants, revealing a dining room with an enormous table, set for dinner. It had to have been thirty feet long, with dozens of chairs ringed around it.

The party guests moved from the ballroom toward the table, where they were shown to their seats by the servants. And—even as I watched—another parade of servants came in through a far door in the dining room, all carrying trays laden with food.

“No,” I said, passing a hand over my eyes. “I didn’t know this was a dinner party. I’m not hungry at all. I couldn’t even think of eating right now.”

But refusal did not seem to be an option.

A servant wearing the dark grey uniform of the house stepped toward us. “Right this way,” he said, leading us into the dining room.

The dining room was just as opulent as the ballroom. The table was set with fine white china, and the silver and crystal sparkled like diamonds. White roses were arranged in silver vessels along the center of the table, and the room was lit by candle-filled chandeliers hung from the towering ceiling above.

Xavier and I ended up at two empty chairs near the head of the table. I was about to slip into mine when I heard a voice to my left.

“No, Caliana. *This* is for you.”

I looked up to see Lucian smiling at me, gesturing toward the empty seat to his right. I froze, looking at him. My hand was still clasped in Xavier’s, and I realized I was squeezing it with a death grip.

*It’s okay*, he said steadily. *I’ll be right here.*

I swallowed and released my grip on his hand, then moved around to take the seat beside Lucian. Xavier’s eyes never left me.

Lucian gave a satisfied smile as I sat. “We are so glad the Redwood Alphas have joined us on this festive occasion. Though…” He frowned slightly. “I do wonder where Greyson is.” He gestured to the empty seat next to Xavier.

I glanced over at Xavier, who was watching Lucian carefully.

“And I notice my sister Aysel is absent as well,” Lucian added airily.

My heart stuttered in my chest. I *knew* something was up with Aysel! I just *knew* it! Had she made a move on Greyson?! I was kicking myself for not taking Lola’s advice. I should have stayed glued to Greyson—I should have marked my territory.

*Greyson? Greyson! Where are you?*

Before I could even listen for a response to my mind link, I felt Lucian’s hand on mine.

“Don’t worry,” he said, smiling. “I’m sure it’s nothing more than a coincidence. I’m sure they’ll both be joining us shortly. Don’t you think?” His eyes flashed. “Then again, my sister is always getting distracted by shiny new things.”

I took a deep breath, fighting the urge to push back from the table and go searching for Greyson. The weird tingling in my chest had grown more intense, almost painful.

“Besides, even without your other mate, you shouldn’t worry, Caliana,” he said, his voice sliding sensuously over my name.

I looked at him quickly. “What do you mean by that?”

“I promise, you will be well taken care of tonight.”

This didn’t clear anything up for me. “What do you mean?”

He laughed—the sound light, like bells—and his hand closed over mine. “Surely you didn’t think I would invite the Redwood pack’s Luna and not insist she spend the night? What kind of host do you think I am?”

**Episode 2020**

LOLA

I narrowed my eyes as I looked at Jacqueline. I didn’t like the mischievous twinkle in her eyes. Everything in me told me it meant trouble. “Come with you where? What are you talking about?”

Jacqueline shrugged airily. “I can’t tell you.”

“Why not?” I demanded.

She rolled her eyes. “Um, because it’s a secret? Ever heard of those, Lola? You’re just going to have to trust me on this one.”

“Are you kidding me?” I asked incredulously. Did she think I was an idiot? A minute ago we’d been at each other’s throats, and now she thought I was just going to follow her to a secret location? “I’m not going anywhere with you until you tell me what the hell this place is.”

Jacqueline huffed. “Fine, spoilsport. It’s kind of a blood bank.”

“I’m not going to break into a hospital, Jacqueline—”

“Ugh, gross!” Jacqueline made a face. “Who said anything about that? Who wants to drink sick people blood?”

“Okay, that’s not at all how blood banks work—” I started, but Jacqueline waved her hand, cutting me off.

“It’s an underground blood club, if you really must know.”

I stared at her. “Excuse me?” I pictured a seedy bunker, deep in the earth. Kind of like a fall-out shelter—but with vamps.

“It’s not actually underground,” Jacqueline said, looking at me like I was an idiot. “It’s like a bar, only you have to be a vampire to get in.”

“Oh, that makes more sense,” I muttered, starting to feel foolish. “But where does the blood come from?”

“I don’t know,” Jacqueline said dismissively.

“What do you mean, you don’t know? It has to come from somewhere.”

“I suppose it does, but I don’t know where that is,” Jacqueline said. “It’s a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy.” Her eyes narrowed, and she took a step closer to me. “Listen, if I take you there, don’t start asking a bunch of dumbass questions or do anything embarrassing, or I swear I’ll feed on *you* instead.”

*This* was the girl I remembered meeting at Tottenville. But we weren’t at school anymore, so I took a step closer to her, getting right in her face. “*If* I agree to go with you, will you stop acting like a stuck-up mean girl?”

A surprised expression passed across Jaqueline’s face. I got the feeling she wasn’t used to being challenged. She rolled her eyes and took a half-step back. “Fine, whatever.”

“Fine,” I said icily. “I’m going to go tell Jay—”

“Are you *stupid*?” Jacqueline grabbed my wrist as I turned to leave. She spun me back around to face her. “Didn’t I just say it was a secret, underground club? You can’t tell anyone.”

“But… it’s Jay,” I said weakly.

Jacqueline scowled. “I’m going with or without you, Lola. It’s your call.”

I hesitated. I wanted to tell Jay, but while Jacs and I had been talking about blood, that familiar craving had come rushing back, making my mouth water. Yeah, the deer blood had filled my belly and given me energy, but it wasn’t satisfying like Jay’s blood had been, or Cali’s.

I’d hoped having my wolf back again would change these desires—that I’d be able to live as I had before—but that didn’t seem likely. There was no denying the allure of fresh blood.

I ran an agitated hand through my hair. “I can’t just run off without telling Jay. We’re mates,” I said. “We’re supposed to be open and honest with each other.”

Jacqueline smirked at me. “You two are disgusting. You know that, right? Just tell him we’re going to get blood. Ease your little conscience without getting into any of the sticky details, okay?”

“I don’t know,” I said, still unsure.

She rolled her eyes. “Okay, he’s your mate, fine. I get it. But does that mean you’re not allowed to do what you want? You’re not allowed to go where you want? He gets to have a say in *everything* you do?”

I didn’t like her tone at all, and I set my jaw. “I can’t lie to Jay. I *won’t* lie to him. I’m going to tell him where I’m going, and if you can’t deal with it, then you can go feed on your own.”

Jacs stared at me, and I met her angry glare.

There was a moment of tense silence, and then she looked away, frustration apparent in her eyes. “Fine,” she snapped. “Whatever. But you can’t tell him which bank we’re going to.”

I goggled at her. “Wait, there’s more than one?”

She raised her eyebrows. “No telling which one. Deal?”

I gritted my teeth. “I don’t even know where this secret blood club is. It’s not like I could give Jay the directions, even if I wanted to,” I grumbled. “I’ll be ready to go in five.”

I turned and set off to find Jay.

I found a group gathered around the Christmas tree and walked closer. “Hey, do any of you know where Jay is?”

Torin turned. “I think he’s outside.”

“Okay. Do you know where?” I pressed. Around here, “outside” was kind of a broad term.

Torin shrugged. “I don’t know. I think he said something about doing some waxing?”

“What?” I gasped. “*Waxing?*”

“That’s what he said. He said he wanted to give it a try—where are you going, Lola?” Torin called after me as I sprinted from the room.

What was Jay *thinking*? Why would he *wax*? I loved his body just the way it was!

I hurried out of the house and onto the porch. Where would he wax? The only option was the garage, so I raced toward it. “Jay!”

Jay looked up from where he was standing, waxing a snowboard. “Hey, Lola. What’s up?”

I was breathing hard from my run, and from relief. I put my hand on my chest and felt my heart beating hard. “What are you doing out here? Since when do you snowboard?”

Jay looked down at the snowboard, which he had resting upside down across two sawhorses. “Since I found this buried in my closet. Thought I’d give it a try. I think I saw another one in there, too.” He grinned. “We can try it out together.”

“Sure,” I said. “When were you thinking?”

He shrugged. “How about now? It’s a nice night, and the snow looks good up in the hills.”

“Oh,” I said flatly. “I… can’t.”

Jay frowned. “Why not?”

“I’m going somewhere with Jacqueline.”

Jay stopped waxing the board and looked up at me, his expression skeptical. “You and Jacqueline are going somewhere?”

“Yeah,” I said, shifting uncomfortably.

“Together?” he said, raising an eyebrow.

“I know it sounds weird—”

“It does.”

“—but Jacs and I are trying to put the past behind us, and we thought we might go do something together.”

Jay did not look convinced. “Do you really expect me to believe that?”

“Um…”

He put down the tin of board wax he was holding and crossed his arms over his chest, staring at me beadily. “Why don’t you just tell me what you’re really up to?”

“What makes you think I’m up to anything?” I asked nervously, shifting my gaze away from his. “Can’t a couple of vampires just have a night out?”

“I guess,” Jay said slowly. “But I know you, Lola. What’s really going on?”

The garage was silent for a moment, and then I cracked.  
 “Fine! We’re going on a blood quest, okay?”

Jay looked surprised. “A *blood quest*?”

“Yeah, Jacs isn’t satisfied with the animal blood, so we’re going to this underground bar thing she knows about.”

“Underground bar?” Jay asked.

“Yeah, it’s for vampires only, and there’s blood, and…” The more I spoke, the worse it sounded, so I clamped my mouth shut.

“Let me see if I’ve got this straight,” Jay said slowly. “You and Jacqueline are going to some sketchy underground bar to get human blood?”

It sounded a hell of a lot worse when Jay said it.

I swallowed nervously. “Um…”

“This sounds like a really bad idea, Lola,” Jay said, shaking his head.

“I know, but I have to go,” I insisted.

“Why?”

“Because if I don’t, Jacs will go without me—”

“So let her go!” Jay said. “Why does what she does have to involve you?”

“It’s not just that,” I said quickly, looking down at my feet on the dirty garage floor.

“Then what is it?” Jay demanded.

I took a deep breath. I needed to be honest with him.

“I’m hungry, too,” I admitted, looking up at him. “And I could use a little pick-me-up. The kind I can’t get from animal blood.” Jay opened his mouth, but I spoke over him. “And I can’t drain any more from you. It’s not right, Jay. I can’t do it.”

Jay was quiet, and he seemed to be considering this. Finally, he shook his head and reached for his coat, which he’d tossed over a chair. “Fine. But I’m going with you.”

**Episode 2021**

GREYSON

I kept my expression neutral, but my mind was working fast. It was obvious Aysel was trying to lure me in, but I could use this moment to my advantage. As long as I could pretend to be interested in her, I might be able to get some of the answers I was after.

I smiled coolly. “And what makes you think I want to get out of my messy situation?” I shrugged casually, like I didn’t have a care in the world. “Maybe I like it.”

Aysel laughed, the sound like tinkling bells. “I wouldn’t believe you for a moment. But still…” She gave me an assessing look. “I’ve never encountered anyone quite like you before.”

“That can’t be true,” I said mildly. “You’re surrounded by werewolves, and I’m just another werewolf.”

“No.” Aysel shook her glorious head. “You’re not. You’re unlike anyone I’ve ever known. You’re a co-Alpha, for one, and you share your Luna. With your own brother. Quite unusual. And even before that, you had quite a reputation as a Rogue.”

“Has my reputation preceded me?” I asked.

“Something like that,” she murmured, her eyes trained on me. “First a Rogue, now an Alpha. There’s no one else here who can claim such a turnaround. Not even my own brother.”

One thing was perfectly clear: Aysel had done her research on me.

“And what about your brother?” I asked. “What’s his deal?”

“What do you mean?” she asked, her delicate brows furrowed.

“Come on,” I said with a smile. “He calls himself a prince. What’s up with that?”

Aysel dropped her sultry look for a moment and stared at me, clearly shocked. “Are you joking?”

“No,” I said warily.

She took a step back from me, her face flushing. “Lucian and I are descendants of Seluna, the moon goddess.”

It was clear from her tone she absolutely expected me to know who Seluna was, and to be impressed by the information about her ancestry, but she was wrong on both counts.

“All right,” I said with a shrug. “But I’ve never heard of this Seluna person. And as for the moon goddess stuff, that sounds like the kind of thing that would make for a good bedtime story. It sounds to me like you’ve been reading a few too many fairytales.”

Anger flashed across Aysel’s eyes, but it was gone in a moment and she regained her cool, confident composure. She stepped forward again and placed her hands on my chest.

Beneath her hands, I felt the black veins tighten painfully.

“I can assure you that my family are not characters from the Grimm brothers’ tales. Seluna is the moon goddess, and she bestowed upon her royal descendants various gifts. Each of these gifts is represented by the phases of the moon.”

“Is that right?” I asked skeptically. “I’m not quite sure I follow. You think I could get an example of one of those gifts?”

Aysel’s eyes flashed again, and it occurred to me that she didn’t like to be questioned. But she pointed to the wall, where there was a framed image of the moon. It sparkled in the lights of the room like it was encrusted with diamonds.

But then I leaned closer, and—oh shit, it *was* encrusted with diamonds.

“The full moon gave us the shift,” Aysel was saying, her voice low and musical as she looked at the glittering moon. “The half-moon heals our wounds—”

“Hang on,” I said, holding up my hand to stop her. “This sounds nice and everything, but why do you believe you have anything to do with this so-called moon goddess?”

Aysel sighed. “Yes.” She nodded. “This is why my brother felt it was time to return. I didn’t see it at first, but I do now. We returned to remind the kingdom of where you come from.”

A laugh burst from me. “Okay. Well, good for you.” I glanced at the diamond moon. “But you might have a hard time convincing the rest of the packs of that.”

She shook her head sadly. “It’s clear you have lost your way, Greyson. Like the others.”

What was going on? What was her game? Was this a ploy? I looked into Aysel’s face, trying to figure out if she was messing with me, or if she actually believed this bullshit.

I narrowed my eyes. “You seem to know an awful lot about me. How is that?”

“Of course I do,” she said quietly. “I had to. You’ve been kissed by the moon.”

“Okay.” I took a step back, away from her. I’d had more than enough of this insanity. “Maybe we should get back to the party.” I started toward the door.

“You don’t believe me.” Aysel stood where I’d left her, staring at me like I’d wounded her.

I rounded on her, frustration building in my chest. “You told me you wanted something, and you’d let me know what that was at the party. I’m here. What is it that you want?”

Her slow smile returned, sliding smoothly across her beautiful face. “I hope I didn’t overestimate you.” When I didn’t respond she tipped her head to the side. “I hope you’re not that dense. I thought I’d made my intentions toward you pretty clear, Alpha Greyson.”

Her eyes were boring into mine, and when she took a step toward me, I held up my hands to stop her.

“Let’s get something straight, Aysel. I have a mate. *Cali*. She’s my Luna.” My words were a shock to my system. I so badly wanted the last part to be true. I loved Cali, and I would’ve given anything for her to truly to be my Luna. I’d nearly lost it when I’d seen the mark on her shoulder after Kira’s spell. The desire I’d felt for her in that moment had almost overwhelmed me. It’d suddenly seemed like something tangible. Not a fantasy.

I shook my head and looked back up at Aysel. “You can just stop the royal seduction treatment. It isn’t going to work on me.”

Aysel gave me a long look. She took a small, careful step toward me. “I know you believe that to be true, Greyson—that Cali is your mate.”

“What the hell does that mean?” I snapped.

She looked thoughtful. “Have you ever asked yourself what a mate truly is?”

I shook my head. “What the hell kind of question is that?”

“Do you believe a mate is part of your destiny?” she asked.

“I’ve had enough of this,” I growled. “I don’t have to listen to this insanity.”

But as I turned to go, Aysel called after me. “Destiny is just a choice someone else has made for you.”

I stopped and turned. “What does *that* mean?”

Her eyes steady on mine, she walked toward me and took my hand. The veins in my chest constricted at her touch.

She leaned in, her eyes blazing. “What if you made your own choice, Greyson?”

Instinct—and common sense—told me to pull my hand away from her and get the hell out of there, but something stopped me. Something pulled me in. Something in her eyes.

Aysel—noticing my hesitation—nodded. “So you *have* thought about this,” she said softly, her voice almost a whisper.

“No,” I said, but the sound was barely audible. My voice was too hoarse.

“Too often we werewolves believe that we are bound by things we don’t really understand—things we don’t even necessarily believe. Come, look at it again,” she said, tugging on my hand. She led me back to the sparkling portrait of the moon. “Look at it, Greyson,” she urged.

I looked. When I looked past the blinding sparkle of the diamonds, I could see the details of the portrait—the shadows and shades of the moon that the artist had created. It looked so lifelike. I stared at it, almost as though I couldn’t look away. And for a brief moment, the pressure from the veins in my chest seemed to relax.

Aysel leaned closer, pressing herself against my side, and her breath was hot in my ear as she whispered. “So much can change for you, Greyson. If you want it to change.”

There was a strange, suspended moment where neither of us moved. I didn’t even think I was breathing.

Then I thought of Cali—her beautiful smile and the way I felt when she laughed. I thought of her eyes and the feel of her hand in mine. And I thought of the witches, who had offered me a way to change things. *So much can change for you, Greyson. If you want it to change.*

A warmth spread through my chest. Hope.

But before I could move a muscle, two things happened very quickly: the door to the billiard room burst open, and Aysel shoved me against the wall.

Before I could react to either event, my eyes went to the door, then widened in shock. Because standing framed in the doorway was Ava.

**Episode 2022**

XAVIER

Anger coursed through me as I looked Lucian dead in the eyes.

“Cali isn’t staying anywhere tonight,” I growled.

Lucian’s eyes widened, and then he laughed. “Oh, not *just* Caliana, of course! All of you must stay! I would never expect my guests to indulge as they do without extending the offer to them to spend the night.” He looked at me, and his cool smile widened. “So the Redwood Alpha should stay, enjoy the evening and all it has to offer.”

I glared at him, blood pounding in my temples.

Lucian tipped his head as he looked at me. “Or perhaps I should address you as *co*-Alpha?” He smiled. “It’s really all so unusual, one really doesn’t know what to say.”

My hands were clenched into fists, and I had to force myself to take a breath, but when I spoke, I managed to keep my voice even.

“Alpha will do fine,” I growled. I glanced out at the ballroom. “And what kind of evening are you planning, that people will have to sleep it off?”

Lucian smiled. “This evening can be whatever you’d like it to be, Xavier Evers.” He paused. “Or *whomever*.” His gaze slid back to Cali.

Fury bloomed in my chest again, and Cali shot a glance at me, looking baffled.

Lucian laughed lightly. “But we’re getting ahead of ourselves.” He gestured to the table. “You should enjoy the feast!” He reached for his fork and dug into his plate, which was heaped with turkey and roast pork, browned potatoes, and gravy poured over all of it.

I looked at the platters in front of me on the table and felt my stomach clench. The food looked decadent—just like the rest of the place—but I wasn’t hungry. The thought of this ball turning into some kind of werewolf swingers party turned my stomach.

Bringing Cali here had been a mistake, and I was furious at myself for falling into the trap Lucian had set for us. Greyson and I should never have allowed her to come.

*Are you okay?*

*I’m okay*, Cali assured me, *but I’m starting to get really worried about Greyson. Where is he?*

I wasn’t usually all that concerned about Greyson, but even I had started to wonder where he’d gone. *I don’t know, but let’s just play along with Lucian. For now.*

With a sigh, I reached for a silver serving spoon and started to dish up dinner.

I only picked at my food—and I saw Cali was doing the same—but around us, the other guests were drinking more and more, and growing louder and louder. Down the table, there was a crash and the sound of breaking glass.

Lucian looked up and laughed. He snapped his fingers at a servant. “More wine! It looks as though that gentleman’s glass has broken.”

I kept my eyes steadily ahead as the rest of the table laughed and cheered and continued to drink even more.

Greyson still hadn’t returned.

The string quartet that had been playing through dinner stood and walked into the kitchen, and almost immediately the heavy bass thump of house music started to pulse through the room. I looked around in surprise. The dining room and ballroom were so grand and traditional, but apparently, they’d been wired with a kickass sound system.

The drunken guests cheered and stood—half of them knocking their chairs over in the process—then sprinted back to the ballroom to dance. Though some stayed to dance at the table, their wine glasses still in their hands.

Through the maze of people, I was surprised to see uniformed servants erecting what looked like stripper poles in the middle of the ballroom. They looked insanely out of place in the stately room, but the werewolves went crazy at the sight of them. A red-haired Luna I didn’t recognize swung herself to the top of one with surprising speed, then slid slowly back down—upside down. Her dress fell away, revealing her long legs and bright red thong.

I was distracted from the sight of her when the ballroom doors opened. A man and a woman walked in, wearing what were probably supposed to be fig leaves that just barely covered their important parts. They were both tall and beautiful, and glistening, like they’d been slicked down with oil.

“Oh my god,” Cali murmured, looking over at them.

The man was leading a tiger on a leash, and the woman held another leash with a sleek black panther at the end of it. They stopped at the center of the room, and the tiger and the panther shifted to human form and were met with shrieks and cheers from the crowd.

The doors opened again, and a woman dressed like a belly dancer walked onto the dance floor, a six-foot python draped around her shoulders. There were wolf-whistles and cheers as she started dancing with the snake.

Waiters passed through the crowd, holding trays of glass that flamed and smoked blue.

I pushed back from the table and got to my feet. I’d seen enough, and I wanted to get Cali out of this place. What was going on wasn’t enough to shock me—I’d seen more than my share of debauchery while I was a mercenary with Colton and Gabriel. In fact, Colton probably would have loved this scene. At least before he’d run off with Maya… and gotten her pregnant.

But all this was way out of Cali’s league.

“Come on,” I said, reaching for her hand. “Let’s go look for Greyson.”

Cali looked at me—wide-eyed—and gripped my hand. “Yes, please,” she whispered, standing up.

I chuckled to myself as I pulled her to my side and led her out of the room. She was still so innocent sometimes. It was kind of adorable. Though, now that I could feel the way her body felt close to mine, I started thinking of maybe finding an empty room and seeing if I could get her a little depraved.

But as we finally made it out of the ballroom—a haze of smoke from some hallucinogenic herbs was now hanging over the crowd—my thoughts turned to wondering where the hell Greyson was. He’d been gone for ages.

*Greyson. Where the hell are you?*

Nothing.

“Xavier,” Cali said, gripping my suit jacket. “I’m worried.”

I tightened my grip on her waist. “As long as you’re with me, there’s nothing to worry about. Okay?” I looked down at her.

She looked up and nodded. “Okay. Thanks. So will you help me find a bathroom then and guard the door while I’m in there?”

“What?”

“I *know*.” Cali looked pained. “I knew I should have gone before we left, but I drank a lot of water at dinner, and I’m about to burst.”

The miserable look on her face made me laugh. “Okay, let’s find one.”

The long corridor we were in was nothing but doors, so I pointed to one. “Maybe there?”

“Let’s hope so,” Cali breathed, rushing past me and slamming the door behind herself.

Shaking my head, I leaned against the door with a smile on my face. Cali sure was something.

The corridor was quiet, the only sound the thumping bass coming from the ballroom. But after a moment I heard murmuring voices. I looked up and from around a corner, a small knot of partygoers appeared. Ava and Andrei, walking side by side, were at the front of the group.

Ava’s red dress was so tight it looked like had been painted on, and I felt a strange flash of something hot in my chest, seeing her at Andrei’s side. But that was probably just annoyance because she was here at all, and because Andrei was a dog—in more than one sense of the word.

Ava looked up, and when her eyes met mine, they widened in surprise. She looked over at Andrei. “Will you excuse me for a moment?”

Andrei accepted this with bad grace, and watched her carefully as she walked toward me.

“Using me as an excuse to get away?” I asked as she stepped toward me.

Ava gave me a tight smile. “Something like that. I heard Cali’s a Luna tonight. Interesting. I wonder how that happened.”

Every hair on my body stood on end. “If you say anything—”

“I won’t,” she said, cutting me off. “You can trust me.”

I snorted. “Right.”

“You never texted me back.”

I narrowed my eyes and shrugged. “What was there to say?”

“Xavier—”

“Why would I come to this place to see you?” I asked, speaking over her. “It’s time to move on, Ava. I’m not going to be your excuse. Just tell Andrei you’re not interested and leave.”

Ava gave me a hard look, then took another step toward me and leaned in, close enough that I could smell her perfume. It was Chanel, her signature scent. I’d have recognized it anywhere. I’d bought her a bottle for the last of her birthdays we’d celebrated before I’d… For the last birthday we’d celebrated together.

“Maybe I hoped you’d change your mind,” she whispered.

I looked at her coldly. “I thought I made myself pretty clear. I’m not interested.”

Ava’s eyes tracked over my face, then down, taking in my suit.

And—dammit—I looked at her, too. My gaze swept down the length of her, taking in that red dress that hugged every one of her curves. I hated that I was even looking at her in this way, but it was like I couldn’t stop myself. Why couldn’t I?

“Xavier,” Ava purred, her lips close to my ear. “Tonight’s a special night. It’s a night where we can explore things we might not otherwise. Give in to our deepest, darkest desires…”

“What the hell does that mean?” I asked gruffly.

“We need to figure out if our mate bond still binds us.” Her eyes flashed as she took a step closer to me. “And I know the best way to do it…”

**Episode 2023**

VIOLET

For a long moment, I stared at Charlie, totally baffled. It was like I couldn’t process what was happening, and—still on alert—I couldn’t retract my claws.

Then, finally, I shoved Charlie off and shifted my hands back to human. “What the hell are you doing here, Charlie?’

Charlie stood, wild-eyed. “I could ask you the same question, Violet. This is a long way to go for a glass of water. Why’d you lie to me?”

“I-I-I didn’t lie,” I stammered. “I just… changed my mind. And forgot to tell you.” My excuse sounded weak, even to my own ears.

Charlie goggled at me. “You *forgot*?”

My stomach twisted painfully. I wasn’t a bad liar, but when it came to lying to Charlie… I hated it. But the message had been clear—come alone, or Charlie would die.

I looked around nervously. I *had* come alone. I hoped that counted for something. I wasn’t my fault Charlie had followed me. I hadn’t asked him to tag along. But what if they thought I’d brought him? I could feel myself starting to panic.

“I came alone!” I shouted. My voice bounced around the empty, ruined theater. I waited to hear anything back, but my only answer was the echo of my own voice.

Charlie grabbed me by the shoulders, and when he spun me around to look at him, I could see the fear in his eyes. “Who are you talking to?”

“You shouldn’t be here!” I snapped, breaking free from his grip. “You should leave.”

Charlie stared at me. “What’s going on? You’re acting so strange. It’s really starting to freak me out.”

I hesitated for a moment, then shoved Charlie, trying to push him toward one of the exit doors. “You can’t stay here.”

“Violet—”

“He’s going to kill you!”

“*Who?*” Charlie turned to look at me. “Violet, you’re not making any sense. Whatever brought you here, whatever’s scaring the shit out of you—let me help.”

I shook my head. “No! Just leave.”

“I’m here,” Charlie said, taking my shoulders and looking into my eyes. “I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere. You hear me?”

“No.” My pulse was racing in my ears. “No, Charlie! You have to go. Please. You have to get out. You’re in danger here.”

But Charlie folded me into his arms, pressing me against him. “Violet,” he said, his voice catching, “please. Please just tell me what’s going on.”

My whole body felt as tight as a coiled spring. I was so scared and so nervous, and—as much as my instincts were telling me to protect Charlie—I let myself melt into his arms.

“Violet,” he murmured, “*please*.”

With a shaking sigh, I pulled back from his embrace and took my phone from my pocket. “I got this message. It was really specific, Charlie. And I knew if I told you, you’d insist on coming with me. And I had to protect you.”

Charlie looked at my phone, reading through the threatening words I’d been sent. I watched his eyes grow wider with surprise.

He looked up at me. “I wish you’d told me about this, but I get why you didn’t.”

The knots in my shoulders seemed to relax a tiny bit. “Thanks,” I whispered.

Charlie nodded. “But the important thing now is that we just get the hell out of here.”

“Yeah,” I agreed.

We clasped hands, but as we turned toward the doors, the flickering light on the screen changed and gave way to actual film. We turned to watch it. It was a series of clips, messily cut together. They were old—badly made B-movies from decades ago—and each one depicted the gruesome killing of a werewolf or a vampire. There were stakes, silver bullets, decapitations, burnings—all of them intensely gruesome. Music pounded through the speakers of the theater, and beneath the thumping bass, we could hear the screams and howls of the on-screen creatures as they met their end.

The volume got louder and louder until it was nearly unbearable. I covered my ears and closed my eyes. I couldn’t look at the screen anymore. It was making me sick to my stomach.

What kind of psychopath would do this? And why was he targeting *me*? What the hell was going on?

I could feel myself starting to panic when I heard Charlie’s voice in my head, his tone strong and steady.

*Stay with me, Violet. Stay calm. These are just pictures. All we have to do is walk out of here. Okay?*

I nodded. *Okay.*

He grasped my hand and gave it a tug, pulling me toward the exit. We both pushed on the door, but it was locked.

Dammit.

Charlie rammed his shoulder into the door, but it didn’t budge.

It was too loud to be heard, so I tapped Charlie’s shoulder and pointed to another door, across the theater. Charlie nodded, and we jogged toward it.

The theater seats—once a plush red velvet—were ruined, like everything else in the place. The wooden armrests were broken and splintered, and the faded velvet had been chewed through by rodents. Stuffing poured out, dirty and decaying. I tried to hold my breath as we sprinted through the seats, but stopped suddenly when Charlie tripped over a broken seat. He went flying and landed on the filthy floor.

“Charlie!” I gasped, hurrying toward him.

He groaned and lay still for a moment. Then, to the left of him, there was scurrying movement, and a pack of rats darted out from the shadows beneath a seat and scuttled across his back.

I clapped one hand over my mouth to stifle my scream, and, with my other hand, yanked Charlie to his feet.

*Move.*

Charlie nodded, and we headed toward the exit.

We pushed hard, and for a moment I thought it was going to open, but it caught and we heard a rattling sound. I pushed again, frowning.

“Oh god.” The rattle we were hearing was the rattle of chains. Someone had chained the door from the outside.

I looked up at Charlie, who had apparently come to the same conclusion.

*Lobby doors*, he said.

I nodded, and we sprinted up the center aisle. I kept my eyes down as we ran—I did *not* want to step on a dead rat. But when I glanced up, I realized something that stopped me in my tracks. I grabbed Charlie’s arm. The lobby door was closed.

Charlie looked up at the door. *Is that bad?*

*When I got here, I left it open. Someone must have closed it.*

Charlie didn’t answer for a moment. The music kept pounding through the speakers, and pain spiked through my head with every pulse.

*It was open when I came in, too*, he finally said.

We walked slowly toward the door and cautiously pushed, though I didn’t think either of us were surprised to find it locked. And there was the distinctive rattle that told me it had been chained, too.

I turned, looking around the theater for other options. On the wide movie screen, a female werewolf was being burned at the stake. She was screaming in pain.

I flinched and looked away. I’d had nightmares about dying, and the worst ones always involved fire.

Then, abruptly, the images on the screen cut out, leaving the screen a strange half-lit grey color. The sound ended as well, leaving a pulsing silence that was almost more agonizing than the noise had been. Charlie and I looked at each other warily.

“There will be a brief intermission. Please proceed to the lobby to purchase concessions.”

The voice came suddenly and made us jump. It was high and sounded amused, not to mention bone-chillingly creepy.

I narrowed my eyes. “I think it’s coming from up there,” I said, tipping my chin toward the front of the theater.

Charlie looked grim but shrugged. “Let’s go look.”

We walked toward the screen, both of us scanning the dimness for any sign of movement.

“That voice sounded like the guy I talked to on the phone,” I whispered.

A muscle in Charlie’s jaw twitched. “Okay.”

“Could he be here?” I asked quietly. “Now? Watching us?”

Charlie swallowed hard and shrugged. “I guess it’s possible—”

Before he could finish speaking, the light on the screen went dark. We turned around and saw that the light from the projection booth had done dark, too, as though someone had just stepped in front of it, blocking it.

And there, silhouetted in the light, was the form of a person, turned toward us. *Watching us.* To what end?

My heart raced with fear as a chill ran down my spine.

Charlie grabbed my arm. “Whoever it is, he’s up there. Let’s go!”

We raced toward the back of the theater and the stairs that led to the balcony. But before we reached them, the projection light went out completely and there was a screeching rumble from just over our heads, like bolts being sheared.

We looked up and saw the grand chandelier begin to shake—the hundreds of tiny crystals shivering. Then, as we watched in horror, the thing burst into flames. It turned into a fireball faster than I would have thought possible, and I screamed as it came falling toward us.

**Episode 2024**

I opened the door gratefully, but instead of finding the bathroom I’d been expecting—and desperately hoping for—I found a long hallway, like the one I’d just left.

Shifting uncomfortably, I looked right and left. Okay, which way was I supposed to go?

I figured there probably wasn’t a map handy, so I took a guess and turned to the right. The hallway was long and devoid of people, but lined with paintings in ornate gold frames. At first glance, they looked like normal oil paintings, but on closer inspection, I saw that they actually depicted the people in the paintings in various stages of—um—*graphic* carnal delights.

Looking determinedly forward, I turned on my heel on the shining wooden floor. Wherever this hallway was leading, I *didn’t* want to go.

I walked for a while longer, until finally—to my *immense* relief—I spotted a grey-uniformed servant coming into the hallway, his arms filled with empty serving trays. I ran toward him.

“Hey!” I called, waving. “Hey! Excuse me. I’m looking for a bathroom. Can you point me in the right direction?”

The servant looked a little startled, but shifted his trays so he could point through an archway. “Of course. Right through there. Third door on the left.”

“Thank you!” I breathed. I’d never known finding a bathroom could be so damn challenging.

I jogged through the archway. Wait, did he say the *third* door? On the right? No, it was the left.

Grabbing the knob of the door I thought he’d pointed to, I pulled the door open.

Then I stopped in the doorway. Either I was in the wrong room—*again*—or this was the biggest bathroom I’d ever seen in my life.

I looked around the pristine marble room with its long row of narrow stalls. Why did the Vanguard pack need such giant bathrooms? How many people here needed to pee at the same time?

Whatever. I didn’t have time to ponder that question at the moment.

The click of my heels echoed up to the lofted ceiling as I hurried toward the closest stall and locked the door with a huge sigh.

But when I got out and washed my hands, I realized I had another big problem. The white marble room was massive, and there were four identical doors leading out. I couldn’t remember which one I’d used when I’d walked in, so I didn’t know which one to take to go back the way I’d come from. I’d been in a such a hurry when I’d run in, I hadn’t paid any attention.

As I looked around, trying to figure out which way to go, I couldn’t help but wish I’d never come to this crazy party. I’d had nothing but weird vibes since I’d arrived. I mean, yeah, it had felt nice to draw a little attention. And the dress Lucian had sent did seem to make others take notice of me—but I’d had enough. It was time to collect my mates and get the hell out of this weird place.

I narrowed my eyes as I stared at the doors. I’d come in through the one on the left—I was almost certain.

Or had it been the one on the right?

They both looked the same. This was impossible.

Whatever. I had to choose one, and I was just reaching for the one on the left when I heard voices from behind the one on the right.

Curious, I opened that door and peered in.

The large room just beyond it was lit by a soft, bluish light. The people in the room were gathered close, and for a moment, I had the wild thought that they were playing a board game. But, as my eyes adjusted to the dim light, I felt them go very, *very* wide.

The group of people were all naked, and given the way they were touching each other, and the sounds they were making, it was pretty clear they *weren’t* playing Parcheesi.

I gasped, and one of the men in the group pulled away from a kiss with a blonde woman and looked up at me curiously. His eyes slid over me, and he gave me a welcoming smile.

Stumbling backward, I slammed the door shut.

What the *hell* was that?

Was *that* what Lucian had meant when he’d talked about taking advantage of what the evening had to offer?

He’d looked *right at me* when he’d said that—and if *that* was what he’d had in mind, then he could forget it. He might be easy on the eyes, but he wasn’t my mate.

Which reminded me: I *had* to get back to Xavier, find Greyson, and get the hell out of here.

Filled with fresh determination, I yanked open another door and hurried through it—then collided with something solid.

I stumbled back and looked up at a tall, beautiful woman.

Aysel.

She frowned as she looked down at me. “Where are you off to in such a rush, Caliana?” She went on without waiting for me to answer. “If you’re looking for your Alpha, you just missed him.”

Instinctively, I bristled. I didn’t like this woman telling me *anything* about Greyson. And why did *she* know where he was? Was she implying that she’d just been with Greyson? Or that she’d been with Greyson the whole time he’d been missing?

I fought to keep my expression neutral. “Do you know where he went?” I asked, playing it cool.

Aysel laughed, but the sound was filled with derision. “You don’t let your mate stray too far off his leash, do you, Caliana?”

“I don’t know what you’re—”

“You know what they say,” she said in a voice dripping with false concern, “the shorter the leash, the further they stray.”

Anger sparked through me. I trusted Greyson, but I’d never trust this cut-rate princess in a million years.

Aysel—looking profoundly unconcerned by my stony silence—let her eyes wander down the length of me, taking in the silver dress. “It looks good on you,” she admitted with bad grace. “I wasn’t sure it would, since it’s the one I passed on.”

I glared. What the hell was up with this girl? Was she trying to start something? Right here in the hallway, during the party?

I narrowed my eyes. “Look, do you know where Greyson is or not?” I snapped.

Aysel smiled frostily. Her charming manner was without a crack, though my gut told me it was just a well-polished front. I’d known plenty of mean girls in my time. “I can certainly understand why you’d be worried about Greyson, Caliana. I don’t blame you for a moment.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” I demanded.

“Well.” Aysel shrugged her narrow shoulders delicately. “You must have noticed that he’s drawn quite a bit of attention since he arrived here.”

My pulse throbbed in my ears. For a moment I forgot that I was a head shorter than this woman, and that she was a werewolf and I was not. For a moment, all I remembered was the anger surging through me, and I took a step toward her. “Listen here. You can insult *me* all you want, but when it comes to how you talk about Greyson, you’d better watch yourself. He’s *my* mate, and he will never be yours.”

There was a flash of something like shock behind Aysel’s shimmering eyes as she looked at me, but she blinked, and it was gone. She smiled, but it was so cold I could practically feel the icicles forming.

“Whatever you think, Caliana.” She pointed one long, delicate finger down the hallway. “Your mate went that way.”

I rolled my eyes and spun on my heel, anger pulsing through me as I stormed away. And then—possessed by something that felt out-of-body—I turned back to glare at her. I couldn’t contain my anger. Who did she think she was to talk to me that way?

“You know, Aysel, you may have passed on this dress,” I said, “but it’ll be on Greyson’s bedroom floor later.”

Aysel’s mouth was a tiny, perfect “O” when I turned my back on her, and I tried to stand as tall as possible as I strode down the hallway, but my insides were churning.

I could not *believe* I’d just said that. What the hell had gotten into me? I had to get a grip on myself.

I could still feel the woman’s eyes on me, so I kept it together until I rounded a corner, then collapsed against the wall, feeling suddenly and completely overwhelmed. The wallpaper I was leaning against was deep purple and flocked with fleurs-de-lis, but I barely had time to take any of this in, because—just as I leaned my weight against it—the wall gave way.

I gasped and reached out, but there was nothing to grab onto, and before I could process what was happening, I was tumbling into total darkness.

**Episode 2025**

LOLA

“Jay,” I said firmly, “you are a *werewolf*. And I don’t think I need to remind you what happened when you showed up at Tottenville. You should know better than anyone that bringing you to a bar filled with vampires is probably not going to end well.”

Jay didn’t respond to this, but he looked a little hurt, so I stepped toward him and kissed his cheek.

“You know I can take care of myself,” I said softly.

“I know,” Jay admitted.

He looked me over, and I felt my vampire heat flare to life. I gritted my teeth against it, even as my whole body started to grow warm. I couldn’t give into it—not now. I didn’t have the time.

But Jay looked *so* sexy right now…

I forced myself to take a step away from him and took a deep breath.

Jay reached for my hand. “Just be careful, okay?”

“I will.”

“And you’ll let me know if you need me?”

I nodded. “I will. But Jacs and I will be back before you can say *hybrid werewolf-human-vampire*.”

Jay snorted but smiled. “Okay. I’m going to hold you to that.”

I stood on tiptoe and gave him another peck on the cheek, then hurried back out to find Jacqueline.

When I found her inside by the front door, she looked deeply annoyed. She was pacing, and when she saw me, she rolled her eyes with an aggrieved sigh.

“What the hell took you so long?” she demanded.

I gave her a quick once-over. She wasn’t looking so great. I mean, Jacs was beautiful, so she always looked good, but she looked tired and drawn. Her cheeks were pale, and there were dark circles beneath her eyes.

The lack of blood must have been affecting her more than I’d realized. I’d had some of Jay’s blood, which must have given me a boost. Jacs hadn’t had any—and there was *no way* I was going to offer.

“What are you looking at?” she snapped.

“Nothing,” I said quickly. It didn’t feel wise to bring any of this up to her. “Let’s get going and get some underground blood.”

Jacqueline rolled her eyes and reached for the door. “The blood’s not underground, the club is.” She shot a glance at me over her shoulder. “When we get there, you’d better not embarrass me.”

I stared at her. “Damn, Jacs,” I said quietly.

She closed her eyes for a moment. “I’m sorry,” she muttered. “I’m just hungry. I get cranky when I’m hungry.”

I looked after her as she walked out the door. She must have had an insatiable appetite then, because that girl was *always* cranky.

We stood in the driveway for just a moment before a black car slowly pulled up.

“This is us,” Jacqueline said, striding toward it.

But as we slid into the back seat, the driver eyed us warily. “You two live here?”

I glanced at Jacs, then back at the driver. “Yeah. And? What’s weird about that?”

“No, nothing,” he said nervously, but made no move to start driving. “I just thought it was the wrong address at first. I was about to drive away.”

“Why would you do that?” I wondered out loud.

“You know.” The driver shot me a furtive look in his rearview mirror. “It’s all the way out here, in the middle of the woods. Nothing else around.”

“So?” I asked.

“And… You know…” He looked at me again. “I’ve heard that the place is haunted.”

Jacqueline groaned. “Oh my god. Can we just get going already?”

I shot a glare in her direction.

“No, no,” I said, turning back to the driver, “it’s nothing like that. It’s just a regular house. The owner just prefers a more… isolated location.” I smiled. “Too much noise bothers him. He’s kind of sensitive.”

Jacqueline stared daggers at me. *Just. Shut. Up*, she mouthed.

But the driver seemed satisfied enough with my story. He started driving, at any rate.

As he turned onto the road leading toward town, he glanced into the mirror. “And where are you two girls heading tonight?”

“Just out for a little post-Thanksgiving drink,” I said, trying to sound breezy.

“That sounds like fun,” the driver said. “I know how that is, wanting to get out of the house. I wasn’t supposed to work tonight, but I had to get away from my family.” He shook his head. “They were driving me nuts. You know how it is. My sister came over and brought all her kids, and they just go screaming through the house like they’re on acid. And then my mom starts in on me for watching the game and not helping out, and it’s just one thing after another…”

The guy didn’t stop talking as we drove through the quiet streets. I was just reminding myself to drop this guy’s rating when he pulled to a stop.

I looked up. I saw the address on the building, but there was nothing else. No sign or anything. Just a door on the side of a corner building.

But it must have been right, because Jacs reached to open the door. But the driver hadn’t put the car into park, so the doors were still locked.

He looked at me in the rearview mirror. “So maybe I’ll come in with you girls.” He grinned, and there was a strange edge to it. “You look like you know how to have a good time.”

My stomach clenched, and a warning bell went off in my head, but Jacs just rolled her eyes.

“Unlock the doors.”

The driver shifted his gaze to Jacs and then frowned, looking suddenly confused. He turned around and stared between us.

“What’s going on?” he asked angrily.

I looked up at the mirror. *Oh shit*. He hadn’t been able to see Jacs in the rearview mirror. Her reflection hadn’t been visible. I opened my mouth, ready to spin some excuse, but Jacqueline leaned toward him.

“I said unlock the door,” she hissed, then she grinned, flashing her fangs.

The guy flinched backward like he’d just been stung, and fumbled with his controls. The doors unlatched, and Jacqueline flung hers open. He had no idea who he was dealing with.

I’d barely stepped out of the car before it screeched away, the back door still hanging open.

Jacqueline laughed as she watched him peel out onto the street. “I hope that creep has nightmares for a year.”

I rounded on her. “I can’t believe you just did that,” I snapped. “What if he tells someone?”

Jacs shrugged. “Who’s he going to tell? His mom? And even if he did, who’s going to believe a weirdo like him?” She scrunched up her face in a cruel but accurate impression of the driver. “*She had fangs, and she tried to kill me while I was trying to hold them against their will!*”

Ugh, did she really not care? I had to admit though that she was probably right… *Luckily*. I shook my head, feeling irritated. Jacqueline took far more chances than she should.

Jacqueline stepped toward the door, and I followed, looking at it curiously.

“It doesn’t have a doorknob,” I pointed out. “How are we supposed to get in?”

She pointed to a small window in the middle of the door, over which there was a little cover, the same color as the door, so it blended in. “Haven’t you ever been to a speakeasy?”

Without waiting for an answer, she knocked on the door.

The cover over the window slid back, revealing a pair of dark eyes that stared at us accusingly.

“What?” demanded a gruff voice.

Jacqueline smiled, showing her fangs, then pointed to me. “She’s with me.”

The cover slid over the window again, and I could hear the tumble of locks as the door was unlatched. It opened, and we walked into a dim room.

I looked around, baffled. Was this *it*? I wasn’t sure what I’d expected to see, but I didn’t think it was this. There was nothing here. It was a just a small, empty room. How could this be a bar? Was this what *underground* meant?

A short man who was as wide as he was tall stepped out of the shadows. His were the eyes that had looked at us through the window, so he had to be the bouncer.

“This way,” he muttered, gesturing.

We followed him across the room and down a small hallway, lit only by a single, swinging, bare bulb. Past that, we came to a wide window that looked like a coat check area.

The man stopped and turned to us. “Welcome,” he said in that same gruff voice. “No phones inside, of course.”

“Why not?” I asked, earning a glare from Jacqueline.

The bouncer gave me a twisted smile. “We can’t have any pictures of the… uh… *specimens* falling into judgmental hands. Now.” His smile grew into a grin. “Are you ready to step inside?”

**Episode 2026**

XAVIER

I stepped back from Ava. That damn returning mate bond again.

When I’d talked to Kira about it, she’d warned me that if it felt like the bond with Ava wasn’t broken, it probably wasn’t. But fuck that. *Cali* was my mate—there was no doubt in my mind about that.

Ava tried to move closer to me again, but I put a hand on her shoulder, stopping her.

“Whatever it is you have in mind, you can just forget it,” I said flatly. “There’s nothing between us anymore. Just let it go.”

Ava caught her bottom lip between her teeth and looked up at me. “What makes you so sure about that? I can feel it. Are you telling me you don’t feel anything?”

I gritted my teeth. “I think you’re just mixed up, okay? You’re confusing your feelings for me for the feeling of the mate bond.” I took another step way from her, putting more distance between us. “I’ve moved on, Ava. You need to do the same.”

“*No*,” she shot back, her eyes flaming. “You’re wrong, Xavier. I know you are. I know there’s more to it than just my feelings. I can *feel* our bond keeping us together.”

I rolled my eyes. “And what makes you so sure about that?”

“I figured it out after Ravi,” she said.

I frowned. “What the fuck does Ravi have to do with this?”

“I slept with him,” she said haughtily.

“Yeah, I’m aware. So?”

A look of confusion passed over her face. “That… doesn’t bother you?”  
 “Why should it?” I demanded.

“I just… thought it might. Knowing I was with him,” she said, her voice a little less confident now.

“And was parading that in front of me supposed to make me jealous or something?” I asked, laughing. But the laugh was for show. The fact was, it did bother me, and that annoyed the hell out of me. Why was it, of all things, *bothering* me right now? Fuck whatever these emotions were. I didn’t want anything to do with them, not where Ava was concerned.

Ava lifted her chin. “I have no intention of trying to make you jealous, Xavier, but if that’s how you feel, then there’s nothing I can do to prevent it.”

She watched for the impact of her words. I tried to keep my expression blank, but she must have liked what she saw, because she stepped closer to me again.

“He was *amazing*. So passionate. So, *so* generous. He’s the kind of guy who really puts a girl first, you know?” she murmured. “And then second, and third. I almost came in fourth, but a girl’s gotta catch her breath sometime, you know?”

It was crystal clear that she was trying to get under my skin, and damn if it wasn’t working. I wanted to cover my ears. I was no prude, but I didn’t need to hear how great anyone was with my former mate.

“But afterward,” Ava continued, her face growing sad, “after the endorphins had worn off, there was just… *nothing*. No connection between us. There was nothing between us beyond the physical. And I realized why.” She looked up at me, her eyes pleading. “It’s because of you. I still have a connection to you, Xavier. We were mates. We still are. And when you’re ready to accept that, I want you to come to me, and choose *me*.”

I’d heard enough. I took a step away, wanting away from her. There was something in her logic that resonated with me, but there was *no way* I was going to choose her. It just wasn’t going to happen.

Ava moved toward me. “I think you’re ready, Xavier. Choose me, and there won’t be any more trouble. No need to share your Luna with anyone else. I’ll be all yours. You deserve that,” she said, her voice warm with passion. “It’ll just be the two of us—”

“Stop!” I snapped, shaking my head. I had been waiting to hear these words, but not from Ava—from Cali. Someday, when the stupid *due destini* curse was broken, I would hear *Cali* say that she’d chosen me.

I looked around. Where the hell *was* Cali? How long did it take to pee? I looked toward the door she’d disappeared behind and was just reaching for it to go look for her when a voice stopped me.   
 “That’s enough, you two, time to join the party.” Andrei was striding toward us, smiling widely. “Unless you’re planning on going somewhere… together?”

“We’re not together,” I muttered reflexively.

“These are for you,” Andrei said, handing us both black masquerade masks.

I looked down at the thing. It had black satin ribbons on each side. “What the hell am I supposed to do with this?”

Andrei slipped his own mask on and tied the ribbons. “You wear it.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m not playing dress-up. I have to find Cali—”

“Relax,” Andrei said, putting an arm around my shoulders. “Nothing’s going to happen to your girl while she’s under Prince Lucian’s protection.”

I tried to shrug Andrei’s arm off, but he held firm. *Cali! Cali, where are you? Greyson? Can you hear me?*

But there were no answering voices.

Ava slipped on her own mask, and Andrei whistled his approval.

He looked over at me. “Come on, Xavier. Don’t tell me that a big, bad Alpha is afraid to wear a little mask.”

His arm still firmly around me, he led me toward a doorway on the other side of the hall.

“Where are we going?” I demanded.

“Now you just hang on,” Andrei answered, grinning. “It’ll be worth it. For all of us.”

He let go of my shoulders and opened the door. It opened onto a big room, with several people inside. They were wearing masks, too, and sipping cocktails, and they looked over at us as we walked in.

A servant approached us, bearing a tray of glasses. “Cocktail?”

“No,” I said, glancing back the way we’d come.

“Come on, Xavier,” Andrei prodded. “Don’t be rude.”

“I don’t want one.”

He gave me a look. “Take it from someone who knows, man. You don’t want to get on the prince’s bad side.”

Ava took a drink from the tray. She raised her glass and placed a gentle hand on my arm.

“Whatever,” I muttered, grabbing a glass.

“That’s the spirit,” Andrei cheered. “How about a toast? Here’s to what brings us all together!” He clinked his glass against mine and took a sip of his drink.

I threw back all of mine, swallowing it in one gulp. I put my glass back down on the tray before the waiter walked away. “Okay, now what?”

Andrei looked confused. “What do you mean?”

“What now?” I asked again.

“I don’t understand,” Andrei said, shaking his head. “Doesn’t the Redwood pack ever lighten up? Was it my imagination, or did I first meet you all when I showed up to a Redwood party?” He gave my shoulder a shove. “I know you can party, so why don’t you just relax and have a little fun?”

I glanced over at Ava. Was she having fun? It was hard to tell with the mask on—I couldn’t see her expression.

“All right,” Andrei said, finishing his drink and motioning us toward another set of doors. “This way.”

I followed him but scanned the room as I moved. I’d been hoping Cali would be here. Where the hell was she? Was she looking for me? Was she worried about me?

I stopped for a minute as I swayed on my feet. That drink packed more of a punch than I’d thought, and I blinked hard to clear my vision.

Andrei grinned at me. “Now we’re getting somewhere. Those drinks are awesome, right? Secret Vanguard recipe.”

He pushed open the double doors, and we stepped into the next room, which was filled with people—and all of them were naked. Some were sitting on the low chairs and large pillows thrown around on the floor, leaning close and talking. Others were making out, and others were going a hell of a lot further.

My brain told me to get the hell out of there, but there was something else that drew me in.

A masked attendant, wearing the pants of the grey servant’s uniform, but no shirt, walked over. “You’re welcome to join, but you must remove your clothes to enter.”

“You’re joking,” I said flatly.

Andrei nudged me. “Come on, man. Loosen up. It’ll be fun.”

I shook my head and turned to Ava, ready to tell her that I was getting out of here, but when I turned, Ava’s eyes met mine.

She held my gaze and—without looking away—reached behind herself and pulled down the zipper of her dress.

“No, I’m sorry. I must have been unclear,” the attendant said, putting out a hand to stop her. He motioned between Ava and me. “You must undress each other.”

**Episode 2027**

I fell through the darkness for what felt like an eternity—though was probably more like three seconds—before I splashed into a pool of water. The water filled my eyes and ears and mouth, and I fought my way to the surface, coming up with a gasp. I looked around.

I had landed in a pool filled with warm, chlorinated water, and there was a huge skylight overhead. Looking up, I could see the moon through it. It wasn’t full tonight, but the sky was clear and the sight was still impressive. The room was big and echoey and softly lit, but I was struggling to stay afloat, and when my survival instinct kicked in, my eyes zeroed in on the edge of the pool. My heart still pounding, I headed toward it.

But the silver dress was acting like a sponge—it seemed to be absorbing gallons of water, and it was weighing me down. I could barely keep my head above water, and the slinky fabric twisted around my legs, making it impossible to kick. I yanked at the straps, pulling it down. I knew it was a risk—it had fit so tightly that I hadn’t been able to wear anything beneath it—but I didn’t see that I had a choice. It was either take it off and swim to safety naked, or keep it on and be found floating face down, fully dressed.

As soon as I’d wrestled it off, the dress sank like a stone to the bottom of the pool. I treaded water for a moment, looking down at the silvery mass. I’d really liked that dress. But—now that I knew it was Aysel’s second choice—maybe it was for the best that I left it to a watery grave.

I swam quickly to the side of the pool and hung on to the smooth cement, trying to catch my breath.

“Who the hell,” I muttered to myself, “puts a trapdoor to the pool house in their damn hallway? What kind of place is this?”

I was just about to pull myself onto the deck and start ringing water out of my hair when I heard a low laugh. I looked around, startled, and my face started to burn with embarrassment when I realized I wasn’t alone.

Lucian was on the deck, sitting on what looked like some kind of ornately carved wooden throne—or maybe just a really fancy lounge chair? His body was covered in an elaborate blanket, and there was a naked woman at his side. They were both looking at me curiously.

“Oh my god!” I screamed, covering my chest as I cowered in the water. “What the hell? Don’t look at me!”

Lucian laughed again and turned to the woman. He murmured something too quiet for me to hear, and the woman nodded. She smiled, bowed to Lucian, and swayed out of the pool room.

When the door had shut behind her, Lucian turned to me. “Caliana, do you always make such a splashy entrance?”

I narrowed my eyes. “I told you not to look,” I snapped.

Lucian made a show of looking away, though he was still laughing. “You must forgive me. It’s hard to keep my eyes off such a beautiful Luna.”

I ignored this and looked around, taking in my surroundings. There were wooden chairs on the cedar deck, but no towels, no robes. Nothing I could use to cover myself. Which left two options: either I could just climb out of the pool and walk out as I was, or I could try to rescue the dress from the bottom of the pool.

Neither seemed like especially great ideas, but the thought of parading naked in front of Lucian’s laughing eyes was just too much, so I took a deep breath and dove down after the gown.

It was so freaking heavy. What the hell was the thing made from? It was like trying to haul up an iron anchor, and I nearly drowned pulling it to the surface. I managed to get it to the side, but there I encountered another problem. How the hell was I supposed to get the sopping dress back onto my body, and then climb out of the pool? There was no way. It was just too heavy.

“Caliana,” Lucian called, sounding highly amused. “Take this.” He tossed his ornately embroidered blanket toward me.

“Thank god,” I muttered, and let the dress go. I pulled the blanket toward me and wrapped it around me as I climbed out of the pool.

“Better?” Lucian asked.

I nodded as I stood for a moment, catching my breath again. I swung my hair around to squeeze out the water, but as I glanced over at him, I froze. Lucian was *naked*.

Acting completely independent of my brain, my wide eyes roamed down his body, taking in his perfect, golden skin, his sculpted chest, and the kind of washboard abs you could bounce quarters off of. Finally—before I could look any lower—my brain regained control of my body and I turned away, my face burning with shock and humiliation.

Lucian chuckled. “I don’t understand how a Luna could be ashamed of the naked body. It’s the most perfectly natural thing in the world.”

I gritted my teeth. I wasn’t going to explain myself to him.

“Why are you here? Why aren’t you at the party?” I asked, turning back and looking determinedly at his face. “You are the host, aren’t you?”

He smiled. “Can I let you in on a little secret, Caliana? These parties aren’t really for me. I enjoy them, of course, but I throw them primarily because they please my pack. Still…” His eyes ranged down my dripping wet body. “I have been known to indulge in a few pleasures from time to time.”

I swallowed hard and pulled the blanket more securely around myself. I didn’t like the way he was looking at me. At all. His gaze was hungry, like he wanted to eat me up.

He stood, and I flinched back.

“Can you please not do that?” I asked, looking away.

Lucian smirked. “As you wish.” He turned and picked up a robe that had been draped over the back of his throne. He pulled it on and tied it loosely. He walked toward me, then around me in a circle, his intense eyes never leaving me. “I can help you find your way back, if you’d like.”

“Um, yeah, thanks,” I said, “but I don’t think I should go back like this.” I gestured down to my body, naked beneath the blanket. I looked desperately around the pool house again, like I was going to find a box marked “extra leggings and hoodies” that I hadn’t noticed before.

“Of course,” he said easily. “I’m sure my sister has something you can wear.”

I fought not to roll my eyes. “Right. Aysel. Great.” I shook my head. “What I really want to do is find my mates.”

He looked at me for a moment longer, then nodded. “This way.”

Lucian held open a door that led into a long corridor. He strode purposefully forward, and I trailed behind, clutching the blanket and frantically wondering if he was going to lure me into some secret room—or even a dungeon. This place had weird sex paintings and trapdoors—it could totally have a dungeon.

Before I could work out if palaces had dungeons or if that was only castles, Lucian stopped in front of a closed door.

He rested his hand lightly on my shoulder and looked down the length of me, taking his time to come back up to my eyes. “You are possibly one of the most beautiful women I’ve ever had the pleasure of meeting, Caliana.”

I stared stonily back. He was laying on the charm a little thick. “I think you’ve had too much to drink.”

Lucian laughed. “I don’t think I’ve had enough. I don’t exaggerate, and I don’t lie. The proof is already there. Surely you must see it.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, confused.

“You are a human Luna to two mates. That’s not only rare, it says something about the Luna herself. You’re unique.” He leaned toward me. “And I envy those who claim you as their mate.”

There was such a strange look in his eyes. He looked almost vulnerable, and I felt myself blush. What the *hell* was happening? I needed to get the hell out of there.

“Well, speaking of mates—” I started.

“I think you should know,” Lucian spoke over me, “that there has yet to be an Alpha’s Luna who hasn’t been willing to submit to me.”

I felt my stomach flutter as he leaned even closer. He put his hand on the wall next to my head, and his robe opened slightly at the chest.

“Now,” he said, looking down at me with his mesmerizing eyes, “do you want to go back to the party, or do you want to stay here?”

**Episode 2028**

VIOLET

I shoved Charlie out of the way, and our bodies tumbled to the ground in a heap of limbs. Pain barked up my arm—which took the brunt of my weight—and my carpet-burned hand. I didn’t have time to linger on those sensations though, because mere seconds later, a wave of heat washed over us as the chandelier crashed to the ground mere inches away.

That heat only intensified as the flames began to spread, across the carpet, over the seats, and just about anywhere that was even remotely flammable—which, in this old theater, was almost everything.

Charlie gently eased me off him, and we scrambled to our feet, stumbling away from the chandelier.

“We have to get out of here!” I called to my mate. “The fire is spreading!”

He led me farther from the flames with his hand on my arm. Sweat broke out on the back of my neck. The flames were rising along with the heat, and smoke was starting to fill the space. I tucked the neckline of my shirt over my nose as a sad excuse for protection against the smoke.

I thought back to everything I’d ever learned about fire safety from my parents.

*Fire can spread faster than you expect*, my mom had said. *But it’s not the flames that kill. It’s the smoke. Stay low to the ground, and try to find a way out*.

I swallowed roughly. Already, my throat felt raw from the increased smoke in the room. Tucking my shirt over my nose was doing almost nothing.

Behind me, Charlie slammed his body against one of the lobby doors. “Come on!” he growled. He raced toward it, his shoulder braced for impact. The *thud* of his body against the door made the walls rattle, but still the door didn’t give. It was either too strong to break through, or someone had braced it with enough additional strength to hold off someone with all the strength of a werewolf.

My stomach clenched at the thought that whoever had lured me here wanted to kill me. Had planned to trap me here, to set the fire and let me burn.

Panic threatened to smother my chest just as effectively as the smoke, but I forced myself to pull in a slow, deep breath. Then my chest spasmed, and I broke into a coughing fit.

*Okay, maybe now’s not the time for deep breathing!*

I cleared my throat. “Can we try to escape through the projection booth?” I rasped, looking up at the little window. With the door barricaded and the fire quickly spreading, that room was our only hope.

But it was so high up. Way, *way* out of reach.

“Get on my shoulders!” Charlie said. “Maybe you can pull yourself up through the window and find a way out of here.”

I blinked, my eyes tearing up at the increasing smoke. “But what about you?”

He didn’t answer. Instead, he hunched over and gestured at me. “Get on! Come on! We don’t have much time!”

I shook my head. “No! There’s gotta be some other way out of here. I’m not leaving you!”

“Violet, we don’t have time to argue!”

He grabbed my arm and pulled me close. Sweat was pouring down both our faces now. The smoke was thickening with each passing moment, and the room was sweltering. Charlie hugged me tightly. Too tightly. I tried like hell not to think about how much it felt like he was saying goodbye.

“You have to do this,” he whispered in my ear, his voice rough.

I pulled back long enough to look into his face. He was hell-bent, determined. There would be no convincing him of another plan. Not that we had any other options.

I looked up at the projection booth. With our combined height, I could probably make it. “But how will I break through the window?”

Charlie cursed and let go of me. “We need to find something to break it. Something small enough for you to hold onto without losing your balance, but strong enough to break through that glass.”

After a few precious minutes searching, he pressed a heavy chunk of metal about the length of my forearm into my hands. I recognized it as a piece of broken chandelier. “You can do this.”

Fear and panic and heartache were taking root inside my chest, whispering to me all the terrible things that could happen to Charlie if I left him alone. I tried to push them aside as I shoved the metal bit under the edge of my jeans so it pressed against my spine. I’d need both my hands for what we were about to do.

*If we don’t try this, we’re both going to die. I can’t save him* and *stay here with him.*

When Charlie lowered himself back down again, I didn’t hesitate to climb onto his shoulders. Grunting with the effort of holding me on his shoulders while the air was so hot, so full of smoke, Charlie lumbered over to the projection booth to position me as close to the window as possible. I could just reach the window ledge, and I curled my fingers into it as I lifted myself up. My muscles screaming, bracing myself halfway on the ledge with one arm, I reached back with my free hand, pulled the metal pipe out of the back of my jeans, and swung it against the projection booth window with all my might.

It shattered on impact, and broken glass showered down on me and Charlie.

I hazarded a glance down at him.

“I’m fine!” he shouted up at me. “Just get out of here!”

Breaking the projection booth window opened up a new pocket of air for the fire, and the flames billowed out with a vengeance. We didn’t have much time.

Broken glass bit into my hands and arms as I pulled myself into the booth, but adrenaline had rendered me numb to everything except that pulsing need to survive—and to get my mate the hell out of here too.

I fell into the booth in a crumpled tangle of limbs but immediately scrambled to my feet, looking around for something to help Charlie get up here on his own. Was it too much to ask for a ladder?

Apparently so, because all I could see was projector equipment and film strips.

I hurried back to the window. Smoke burned my eyes, and I could barely see Charlie down below.

Then an idea struck me. I brushed the remaining glass out from the window with my bruised, bleeding hands. “Charlie! If you shift, can you jump through the window?”

For a moment, all I heard was coughing. Then, in a rough, wheezing voice: “I’ll try! Stand back!”

I stumbled to the back of the projection booth, holding my breath. Suddenly Charlie, in wolf form, flew through the window, slamming into the projector and knocking both the machine and himself to the floor. His fur was smoldering on one side, and I hurried to pat it out with my jacket.

“Are you okay?”

His voice slipped into my mind. *I’ve been better, but I’m okay. Have you found a way out?*

I jumped into action. There was a narrow stairway at the back of the room that led to a small door. That was our ticket out. It had to be.

I descended the stairs in one jump. The door was locked.

“Fucking *gah*!” I cursed in a wild rage, slamming into the door. I was a werewolf for fuck’s sake! Why wouldn’t this budge?! The door gave a little but stayed shut. I glanced up at the booth, where Charlie was still sprawled on the floor, wheezing. He wasn’t strong enough to break the door down right now… Maybe if I had something sharp to trick the lock?

I looked around wildly, and my gaze landed on something shiny that glinted in the red light. At first I thought it was the chandelier piece I’d used to break the window, but upon closer inspection, I saw it was a knife.

I didn’t think twice before grabbing the hilt and working the blade into the door. With some finessing and one pointed jerk upward, the lock disengaged and the door fell open. I tumbled out, drenched in sweat, stained with smoke, my chest heaving and my heart hammering. Movement and a loud thump next to me told me Charlie had found his way out too.

My eyes still bleary from the smoke, I looked around.

We’d landed in an alley. Smoke was pouring out of the door I’d opened, and sirens sounded in the distance.

We had to get the hell out of here. Charlie couldn’t be seen as a werewolf, but if he shifted back now, he’d be naked. There’d be no easy way to talk ourselves out of this.

I pushed myself onto my hands and knees with a groan. “We have to get out of here.”

*Shift, and we can make it to the woods before the fire department arrives*, Charlie said through our mind link.

He didn’t have to ask me twice. I shifted, taking an extra few seconds to carefully grab the knife in my teeth, just in case, and we took off.

As we raced away from what could have been our grave, the building collapsed in an explosion of flame and smoke. We watched the fire department descend on the scene from the safety of the woods, horror washing over both of us.

Charlie mind linked with me. *Somebody wanted to murder you.*

It was sure looking that way. There was just one question. *Who?*

**Episode 2029**

XAVIER

My head snapped around to look at the attendance so fast I nearly gave myself whiplash. *Undress Ava? All for the benefit of this creepy-ass cult orgy? Hard pass.*

I scoffed. “Ava can undress herself. I need to find Cali and put an end to this crazy shit.”

His brows lifting into an unimpressed expression, Andrei shrugged and stepped aside. “You can leave anytime you want. I just thought you’d want to join in on the fun. Isn’t that the point of a party?”

He clapped me on the shoulder, and my hackles rose. If this guy didn’t get his fucking hand off me, I was gonna rip it off myself.

Andrei stepped back. “It’s your choice.” Then he turned toward the doorway and started stripping off his clothes before disappearing inside the room.

I was ready to tell him to fuck off, but the weight of Ava’s gaze stopped me. Our eyes met, and I recognized the look on her face. The unbridled hunger and longing, wrapped up in a heady dose of affection.

I’d seen that look before—long ago, before things between us had irrevocably fallen apart. I pried my gaze away from hers and looked at the attendant. “Why does Andrei get to undress himself?”

“Because he doesn’t have a…” He glanced at Ava, seemingly weighing his words carefully. “A *partner*.”

It was all too easy to read between the lines. The attendant was going to say *mate*, but that didn’t make any sense. *Ava’s not my mate. Cali is.*

Then a thought hit me somewhere between my chest and my stomach, a bittersweet concept that my current self rejected, even as some deeper, older version of myself welcomed it. *Maybe my mate bond with Ava is coming back. Just like Kira warned me it would.*

Slowly, like she half-expected me to lash out at her, but still couldn’t stop herself, Ava reached out and took my hand. Her eyes never left mine as she guided her hand to the thin strap of her gown. The pads of my fingertips brushed hot skin and cool silk, and the dichotomy of sensations sent chills down my spine.

I pulled back only inches before something dark and primal roared at me to touch her again. To see her. All of her. I moved closer, so that mere inches separated us, and slipped a single finger beneath the strap on her right shoulder.

Ava gasped in a hot rush of air, her skin pebbling beneath my touch, but I didn’t stop. She didn’t *want* me to stop.

I slipped the other strap down her arm and began to undress her. The sound of her dress pooling around her ankles went straight to my cock. She turned to face me, eyes alight and lids heavy with her own desire.

Seemingly without my conscious consent, my gaze traveled over her exposed body, drinking in her curves, the body I used to be so familiar with that once upon a time, I’d known it better than my own.

“Like what you see?” she asked. If she was going for sultry and seductive, her voice was too breathy to pull off the intended effect.

The “yes” was on the tip of my tongue, but I held it back and pressed my lips into a firm line. I shouldn’t be enjoying this. I shouldn’t even be looking at her. This had gone way too far already—I had to stop. I had to turn around, walk out of this room, and keep walking until Ava was no longer a temptation.

But I couldn’t. I didn’t *want* to look away. I wanted to stay here. And goddammit, I wanted Ava to see me the same way I was seeing her.

Slowly, Ava reached out, her fingers warm as they brushed against the thin fabric of my shirt. Then she began to undress me, one button at a time. When her fingertips brushed against my bare chest, I felt scorched where we were connected.

I caught her hand, a command to stop crawling up my throat, but again, I couldn’t quite force that single syllable past my lips.

From the other room, Andrei’s bellowing laughter joined the sounds of the other guests echoing out into the hallway. Even though I hated every single one of the Vanguard assholes inside the room, something tugged at me to join them. To have fun. To enjoy myself with the beautiful woman in front of me and forget everything and everyone else.

Ava made quick work of the remaining buttons and pushed my shirt back to expose my chest. Her gasp rippled through the hallway, and her voice slipped through the air like dark honey.

“Your chest,” she said, keeping her voice low so only I could hear her. “You never told me why you have those.”

“It’s nothing to worry about,” I murmured. The veins on my chest… weren’t great. But they were nowhere near as bad as Greyson’s. Why were his getting worse while mine stayed the same?

Ava pushed my shirt off my shoulder and started on my slacks. Her fingertips brushed against me as she unbuttoned those too, and all other thoughts flew out of my mind. I could worry about the veins later. Now, all I wanted to focus on was the gorgeous woman undressing me.

Moments later, Ava’s task was complete, and we stood in front of each other, completely bared.

The attendant gestured toward the room. “You may enter.”

Ava took my hand, threading our fingers together, and led me into the room. I leaned slightly against her side, like I was unsteady on my feet and needed her to keep me upright. I felt like I was walking through some kind of fever dream, but as we approached the other guests, the whole situation began to feel more and more real.

Andrei was standing off to the side now, stroking the face of a beautiful woman as he caught her lips in a kiss. Everyone else turned to face Ava and me as we joined the group.

A woman dressed solely in a gold mask stood up. “Welcome. Are you ready to play the game?”

My tongue felt thick and heavy inside my mouth, but I forced myself to shape the words pressing against the forefront of my mind. “What game? What is this all about?”

“It will become clear soon enough.” The woman smiled. “But first, the moon must select our partners. Please, everyone, form a circle.”

Once again, Ava led the way, pulling me over to our spot in the circle. As we circled up, the woman raised her hands overhead, and within seconds the ceiling above us parted to reveal the night sky above.

A beam of moonlight illuminated the floor in the center of the circle, and an attendant stepped up, carrying a large crystal on a pedestal. Clearly, they’d been through this routine before. Now that I thought about it, as I glanced around the room, it seemed like everyone except Ava and me knew what to expect. There was no wonder, no surprise or confusion. Just patience and low-simmering desire, like they knew exactly what was coming next.

Once the pedestal was set up, the gold-masked woman stepped up and spun the crystal, sending multicolored fragments of moonbeams spinning around the room. The light blinded me as it passed over me, and I slammed my eyes shut.

*What the hell?*

I opened my eyes again. The crystal had stopped spinning, and two shafts of light had landed on two of the guests.

“Seluna has chosen your pairing,” the masked woman declared. “Please, step aside.”

The man and woman, also masked, stepped out of the circle and waited together for the rest of us to be paired up. The process continued for a few more rounds until one of the beams of light finally landed on me.

Its twin landed on the gold-masked woman.

She held out her hand with a small smile. “Join me.” With her free hand, she spun the crystal again.

I moved closer to the woman, and she was even more striking up close. Her skin seemed to shimmer in the moonlight. She almost didn’t even seem real.

The crystal came to a stop, pairing up the last two people. Ava and Andrei.

My jaw tightened, and a low growl rumbled deep in my chest. *That bastard doesn’t deserve anyone.*

Andrei smirked at Ava as he approached her, and she backed up.

“I don’t need the moon to tell me who I want to be with.” Ava brushed past Andrei and pressed herself against my side.

Andrei’s eyes widened, and a quiet murmur rippled through the group.

The gold-masked woman held up a hand to silence everyone. “Although the moon goddess has spoken, she will allow this change.” She beckoned Andrei over, and he approached her.

Ava took my hand, threading our fingers together again. Relief slipped down my spine at her touch—along with a sudden craving for my former mate.

“Everyone, introduce yourselves to your partners,” the woman called out before she caught Andrei in a deep, passionate kiss.

Around us, everyone else followed suit. My heart hammering in my chest, I turned to fully face Ava and pulled her toward me.

**Episode 2030**

MARTA

Lilac’s face twisted into a laugh, and he let out a not-so-cute little snort. “You want me to a be a character witness? What does that even mean?”

Well, this was off to a *great* start. The one person I’d asked to stand up for me and confirm that I wasn’t actually a paranormal troublemaker had just literally laughed in my face!

I sighed. “I’m not entirely sure, but I think you’d just need to appear before the judge, or whoever runs the trial, and essentially tell them what a good person I am.”

He shook his head, his lips twitching. “You realize you’re asking me to perjure myself?”

I blinked. *That little—*

“Seriously?” I demanded. “You’d better be joking right now, because—”

He burst into another bout of laughter. “Of *course* I’m kidding,” he said, like I was an idiot to have believed otherwise. “And of course I’ll testify. But if you expect me to say nice things about you, you’re going to have to make it worth my while.” He waggled his eyebrows at me.

I pulled in a slow, deep breath through my nose. He was kidding. He was on my side. This was *Lilac*, after all. He was basically a teddy bear with an obnoxious sense of humor. But a teddy bear nonetheless. He wouldn’t just leave me hanging.

But this wasn’t a joke. This was my future. And if there was an option to skip all these funny little hoops Lilac wanted to me to jump through, you could bet I’d choose it.

I eyed his face and fought the urge to snap at him. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He pretended to consider my question. “Maybe you can bribe me with something?”

“Uh huh. Something like…?”

“You’ve gotta come up with that one yourself.” He shrugged. “I mean, I’m the one testifying. My hands are a little full right now.”

Despite myself, I cracked a teeny, tiny smile. A dry laugh scraped against the inside of my chest.

Right. *This* was why I spent so much time with Lilac, why I cared about him so deeply—even though sometimes it felt like pulling teeth just to get him to do something for me. He was always happy to help—just as long as he got to play things his way. And I did mean *play* literally.

It was exhausting sometimes. But there was no denying that Lilac brought a hell of a lot more fun to my life than I could have ever provided on my own.

I reached out and playfully smacked his shoulder. “Tell me, Mr. Busybody. What do you want me to bribe you with?”

He stroked his chin. “This one’s a real puzzler. I’ll have to think about it. But I’m sure I can come up with something.” Another wag of his eyebrows.

“I have complete faith in you,” I deadpanned.

He laughed again, completely at ease somehow, even though I’d literally just asked him to speak on my behalf during my witch trial. How did he do that? How did everything just seem to roll off him? Was it because he used to be dead? Perhaps now that he’d been given a new lease on life, he knew what was worth worrying about and what wasn’t?

Even more inconceivably, I felt my own shoulders relaxing as I listened to him laugh. Something about his laugh never failed to soothe me, to remind me why I’d wanted him back from the spirit world. Lilac was everything I’d never had when I’d been trapped in Bert’s house. Warmth. Joy. Hope.

I’d been locked in there for so long I sometimes wondered if I was even capable of feeling those things anymore. But Lilac always made me remember how. And even in the face of a trial for crimes I hadn’t purposefully committed, he was reminding me now that there was still hope for me, still plenty of reasons to laugh.

A chill ran down my spine, despite the warmth in my chest. I rubbed my arms. “It’s kind of freezing out here.”

“Yeah, why are we standing out here? I’m gonna have to tell that judge that you tried to freeze me to death.”

I rolled my eyes. “You were the one who brought me outside.”

“Well, let me fix that.”

He wrapped an arm around me and led me back inside. We stopped just inside the foyer, and he caught my chilled hands and began to rub some warmth into them. My bracelets rattled with the movement, an inescapable reminder of what lay ahead. A new set of chills pulled goosebumps to the surface of my skin.

I swallowed with some difficulty, my eyes locked onto the stain on Lilac’s shirt. “Maybe you should grab a clean—”

“There you are!” Big Mac stalked toward us, her eyes narrowed. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you, Marta. I wanted to talk to you about finding a character witness.”

Lilac dropped my hands and puffed out his chest. “You can both stop looking. I’m here now, and I’m going to defend Marta’s honor.”

In the silence that followed, I could have heard a pin drop.

“Defend her honor?” Big Mac’s brows rose, and then she rolled her eyes. “That’s not how this works. Marta’s *honor* isn’t being called into question here. She’s being charged with unsanctioned necromancy and a slew of other things—these are serious charges, and you both need to understand that.”

The chill in my bones, the one that didn’t have anything to do with the temperature outside, dug its claws in deeper. I’d come to realize that Big Mac didn’t like to beat around the bush, but sometimes I wished she would. Even just a little bit.

Lilac’s smile faded. “I understand. And I promise to do whatever you need me to do.”

“What I need you to do is tell the truth about Marta. Warts and all.”

His brows knit together, and he looked at me incredulously. “I didn’t know you had warts.”

“Oh my god.” Big Mac pulled in a slow, deep breath. “All I’m saying is, if you gush about how perfect she is, nobody on the council will believe you. The most important thing is for you to be honest about Marta, even if it doesn’t paint her in the most flattering light. If you’re caught in even one lie—”

She stopped suddenly, but her message couldn’t have been clearer. I didn’t like the sound of it.

“What will happen to Lilac if he lies?” I pressed.

The witch cleared her throat. “If he sticks to the truth, there’s nothing to worry about.”

With that comforting and super informative bit of advice, Big Mac turned away.

“If you’ll excuse me, I need to go find Sabine,” she said.

I blew out a breath as I watched her go.

Lilac cleared his throat to get my attention and then tugged meaningfully at his stained shirt. “Want to help me pick out a new one?”

I followed him back upstairs to his bedroom, and he pulled off his shirt before the door was even closed behind us. I pushed it shut, leaning against the wooden panels as I took in the bare expanse of Lilac’s chest.

I swallowed, feeling heat spread across my cheeks and down my neck. It hadn’t been all that long since I’d last seen his bare chest, but suddenly it was all I could think about. I forced myself to look away.

Lilac started pulling shirts out of his closet at random.

“How about this one?” He held up a yellow plaid button-up, then grimaced. “Nah, too warm.” He tossed it back into this closet and continued his search.

I tried to weigh in, but I was distracted, and not just because of his body. Big Mac’s words echoed in my mind.

*If he sticks to the truth, there’s nothing to worry about.*

I swallowed roughly. “Maybe I should find someone else to be my character witness.”

Lilac stopped, a light blue shirt emblazoned with a phrase I didn’t recognize clutched in his hands. “What? Why?”

“I’m worried about what Big Mac said. What if you get caught in a lie? She implied it would be bad for you, and I don’t want to risk getting you in trouble.”

He tossed the shirt behind him and closed the distance between us, his hands resting warm and firm on my shoulders. “Nothing’s going to happen.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because, with you, I won’t have to lie about anything. I was just teasing before. Maybe we haven’t figured out the whole boyfriend-girlfriend thing yet, but I want you to know how much I care for you. That I’m here for you, and that even if all I do is sing your praises… Well, it won’t be a lie. Not coming from me.”

I pulled him into a hug. My belly flip-flopped at the heat of his bare skin pressing against me. “Thank you. I’m sorry I dragged you into this.”

He pulled back. “Stop. If you hadn’t literally dragged me along, I’d still be stuck in the spirit world.”

Our eyes locked, and I couldn’t resist diving in for a kiss.

*Why should I resist? He might not be my boyfriend, but he cares about me.*

And that was all that mattered.

One kissed blurred into another, and then we were peeling each other’s clothes away, stumbling back toward his bed.

There was nowhere else I wanted to be.

**Episode 2031**

GREYSON

Even though this seemed to be a genuinely legit palace that had a whole army of servants to tend to the various mundane tasks of running the place, “Princess” Aysel herself had decided I needed to go on a tour of her giant-ass house.

I wasn’t sure why. I hadn’t asked for a tour, though I could see now how it might be useful for gathering intel on the Vanguard pack. Maybe she wanted to get away from the party? Maybe she wanted to brag about being a rich princess who lived in a goddamn fairytale mansion? Who was I to question her royal intentions?

And, to be fair, she might have explained her rationale at some point, but I hadn’t been paying attention for most of our tour.

“And these are portraits of Seluna throughout her cycle, which shines on us tonight.” With a flourish, Aysel directed my gaze to a series of moon paintings on the wall. “She’s beautiful, isn’t she? True proof that there is a time for all things over the course of one’s life.”

“Uh huh.”

Honestly, I didn’t get the moon thing. I mean, I *got* it. The full moon was intrinsically tied to our abilities as werewolves. But I’d never thought of it as a deity having a name. It was a big chunk of rock out in space that, through some crazy magic I didn’t really understand, triggered a werewolf’s shift.

Big whoop.

And sure, there was the Luna ceremony, and the moon played an important part in that. But again, it wasn’t like… werewolf Jesus or something.

Of course, if I told that to Princess Moonshine here, she’d probably have me kicked out of her palace, and that would ruin all our careful plans for the night.

As Aysel waxed poetic on Seluna’s maternal light, my mind shifted back to the way Ava had caught us earlier. Well, “caught us” wasn’t the right way to describe it, because Aysel and I hadn’t been doing anything. But I was certain it hadn’t looked that way to Ava. I could only imagine what she thought she’d seen. Maybe “caught us” didn’t even begin to cover it.

Either way, it didn’t take much of a leap to assume she’d tell Cali. Ava loved stirring up drama in the Redwood pack, especially when it hurt Cali. Even though it seemed Xavier had done everything short of spraying Ava with a hose and telling her “No!” his former mate seemed as fixated on getting him back as ever.

Why on earth anyone would want to be with the person who’d brutally murdered them in a vicious rage was beyond me, but that was none of my business.

Unless she exposed Cali and her fake Luna marks…

Caught up in my own thoughts, I bumped into Aysel when she stopped in front of a doorway.

“Oh, sorry,” I mumbled.

Her eyes narrowed. “You’re not listening, are you?”

I snapped back to attention. “No, I’m listening. Big, fancy house. The moon is our lady and mother and savior and… other stuff.” I cleared my throat. “Anyway, great tour. We should probably get back to the party.”

“The party will go on all night—there’s no rush.”

“But—”

She sighed. “Oh, I see what’s happening. You’re worried about what Ava will say, aren’t you?”

Damn. Was I really that transparent? “I just don’t want people to get the wrong idea.”

Aysel laughed. The sound was delicate and melodic, like tinkling chimes. God, it was annoying.

“People?” she repeated. “You mean Calina. Your mate.”

“It’s *Caliana*,” I said hotly.

She ignored this. “I thought you understood—you needn’t be bound by your beliefs tonight, or any other night.”

*What the hell is that supposed to mean?* It *sounded* like she was saying that my bond with Cali was optional, that I could just toss it away whenever I felt like it, but I was sure Aysel couldn’t actually be that stupid.

“Cali and I are mates,” I pressed. “I know it. It’s not a question of belief—like whether or not there’s some lady made of cheese living on the moon and telling werewolves what to do—it’s a *fact*.”

Her lips thinned. “I promise I’ll return you to the party whenever you want, but first I have something to show you.”

She opened the door to reveal an elegant bedroom. A bedroom fit for a princess.

I froze. “Maybe this tour has gone far enough.”

She eyed me with a smirk. “I don’t think it’s gone *nearly* far enough.”

She stepped into the bedroom, pulling me along with her.

I looked around. The space definitely had the feel of a royal bedroom, with tapestries hanging on nearly every wall and a prominent four-poster bed taking up most of the room, with sheer hangings shrouding the bed.

After looking around, I found Aysel watching my face expectantly. “Um, can I help you?”

“Do you approve?” she asked.

“Of… the room?”

“Yes.”

I shrugged. “It’s nice, I guess.”

“You haven’t even seen the best part yet.” She walked over to the wall and pulled on a braided cord hanging next to a tapestry of a crescent moon over a white palace.

The ceiling opened up over the entire bedroom, revealing the shimmering moon and a dark sky filled with twinkling stars.

*Of fucking course they have a retractable ceiling. Because why the hell not?*

Aysel’s face took on a dreamy expression as she looked up at the sky. “I sleep like this every night, cast in Seluna’s glow.” Then she strode across the room to where a gigantic, steaming bathtub waited, filled to the brim with bubbles.

A million questions slipped into my head.

*When the hell did that get filled? Do the servants just keep it that way all the time? How much do these royals spend on hot water every month? And, my god, wasteful much? Haven’t they heard of climate change?*

A tray was set up next to the bathtub, holding a bottle of what looked like champagne, and two goblets. She poured some pale, bubbling liquid into a goblet and presented it to me. “This is from my private collection. I only share it with special guests. Drink.”

I raised the glass to my lips. The scent was intoxicating, a mix of vanilla and fruity notes. A warm tingle teased my lips as I took a sip.

Aysel smiled. “You like it, don’t you? I knew you would.”

I belatedly remembered that my whole purpose here was to question her. That I needed to be learning as much as I could about the Vanguard pack. But suddenly I was much more interested in learning about Aysel, the princess.

I followed her as she stepped out onto a balcony overlooking a lush, vast flower garden in full bloom, complete with a hedge maze.

*How is this possible? It’s almost December. Nothing blooms this time of year.*

She let out a happy sigh as she drank in the moonlight and the blossoms. “I love to surround myself with beauty, so I had the witches create this garden for me.”

“Witches?” I repeated. “You have witches on your staff?”

I tried to imagine describing Big Mac or Kira as part of the house staff. I couldn’t. Besides the fact that my mother would never let me hear the end of it, it just wasn’t true. Neither of the witches were in my employ. They both did whatever the hell they wanted, *when*ever the hell they wanted. And if their wants sometimes lined up with the pack’s needs? Great. But there were no guarantees, and they certainly wouldn’t be caught dead doing something so frivolous as making a garden that bloomed year-round.

“Witches can be somewhat disagreeable at times,” Aysel conceded, clearly thinking along the same lines, “but they do have their uses.” Then she turned to face me. “Would you care to bathe with me?”

I blinked. “No. I have no intention of bathing with you.”

She frowned. “You shouldn’t be so quick to refuse. Have you ever had a moon bath?”

“A moon bath?” I looked back at the bubbling tub. It looked like a hot tub, honestly. A fancy hot tub, but nothing to write home about.

Aysel drifted back over to the tub and refilled our glasses. She took a sip from her goblet. “The water is restorative, blessed with Seluna’s healing powers. I think it will do you some good—I know you could use some healing. Even the toughest Alphas need to be healed sometimes.”

She set her goblet down and slid into the bubbling tub.

I took a long pull from my goblet. *This princess is crazy. I need to get the hell—*

Aysel held out her hand. “At least touch the water, just where the moonlight touches it. See what it can do for you.”

Hesitantly, I reached out and touched her fingers. They were warm and wet. Suddenly, a gentle heat radiated up my arm and toward my chest, further easing the pain I felt from the veins.

She smiled. “I told you I can heal you.” Her fingers wrapped around my wrist, and she pulled me toward her as she rose out of the water to meet me, her lips just a breath away.

**Episode 2032**

Even though my brain was short-circuiting from the overload of “Oh, hey, I’m Lucian, prince of werewolves, professional sexual partner of literally every Luna, won’t you let me bang you?” and his freaking robe parting open, mere inches away from flashing me AGAIN, I didn’t hesitate to answer his question.

“I want to go back to the party!” I blurted out.

If I was having this crazy of a time, tucked away from the main revelry of the party, who even knew what my mates were dealing with? It had been far too long since I’d last seen them, and I had no way of knowing what had happened to either of them.

*Could this all be part of some bigger plan to separate us? To trap us?*

I eyed the prince, who still hadn’t tightened the belt of his robe. It didn’t *seem* like he was trapping me. I was free to explore the palace, and he was giving me the choice to return to the party—or not.

But then again, the White Rabbit hadn’t seemed like he was trapping Alice in Wonderland, and it had still taken her ages to find her way home.

I glanced around the room, from the palatial trappings to the hole in the ceiling that I’d fallen through, and the moon-lit pool. Suddenly, I had a lot of empathy for Alice. She wasn’t the only one who knew what it was like to fall down a rabbit hole and not know the way out.

If this was part of some bigger plan to separate me from Greyson and Xavier, I couldn’t see what the Vanguard pack would have to gain. What was the endgame here for them? What were they planning with this huge, elaborate party? Was it a trap for the leaders of other packs?

I bit my lip. At least if Lucian tried to hurt or restrain me, I still had my Fae powers. He might’ve been a prince, but I could still knock him into next week if I had to.

Oh, but I really hoped I wouldn’t have to. This place was absolutely crawling with Vanguard pack members. It was practically an army hiding in plain sight, and I… I was no one-woman army. I couldn’t take all of those werewolves myself.

But still, I wasn’t going to fall for Lucian’s charms. It was up to him to act the gentleman and good prince he claimed to be. After all, he was really pretty—like, fairytale *prince* pretty—and his chest was the kind of perfect you could only see on marble sculptures, but I wasn’t going to jeopardize my pack or my mates by screwing around with this royal fuck boy.

Disappointment flashed across Lucian’s face, but he quickly mustered up a smile. “As you wish.”

He reached for a nearby door, and I forced myself to ask, “Lucian, may I ask what you meant before?”

He paused. “What I meant about what?”

I swallowed audibly. “When you said there has yet to be an Alpha’s Luna who hasn’t wanted to submit to you. Do you mean… every Luna you’ve met has *betrayed* her Alpha for you?”

I half-expected him to laugh, or to get that cocky, self-satisfied smirk so many men had when they thought they were hot shit. Lucian merely nodded, his expression still placid. “Every last one.”

The thought was as incredible as it was horrifying. How was it that not a single Luna, of all the Lunas he’d met in his life, had ever turned him down? He couldn’t be telling the truth. And while I considered myself a good and upright person, it seemed inconceivable to me that I was the first Luna who’d ever said no to him.

A small smile turned up his lips. “Are you offering…?”

“*No!*” At his shocked face, I paused and cleared my throat. “I mean, no, thank you. I have no intention of submitting to you, or anyone. Ever.”

He nodded. “I understand. And please do not think me untoward in my behavior. I was simply trying to prepare you for the inevitable.”

My brows rose. “The inevitable?”

“Yes. Sooner or later, my dear Caliana, you will want to serve me. It may not be tonight, it may not be tomorrow—it may not be for a year. But you will. Every Luna does, and there’s nothing you can really do about it.”

My jaw dropped, and quite suddenly I was *done* giving this guy the benefit of the doubt.

*Is he for real?* Laughter bubbled up my throat and slipped out. “I’m so sorry to disappoint you, but *no*. That’s definitely not going to happen.”

I reached for the door, and Lucian caught my hand in his, cradling it gently but firmly.

“Why?” he asked.

“Why what?” Was he trying to piss me off now?

“Why are you so sure of yourself? I’m telling you now that every single Luna I’ve ever met has chosen to serve me. Why should you be any different? Do you think yourself superior to every other Luna?”

I shook my head. “No, that’s not it at all. I can’t speak for the other Lunas you’ve known. I don’t know them, or their situations, or what led them to make the decisions they made. But I do know myself, and I know my mates. I’m bonded with my Alphas. I’m their Luna. I love them—why would I give myself to you when I have so much to lose?”

The prince was quiet for a moment. It seemed as though he’d genuinely never considered it from that perspective.

“Forgive me,” he said after a moment. “I’m not sure how to answer that, simply because it’s never happened. Every Luna I’ve ever encountered has desired me. It’s been like that for every male in my bloodline.”

“Well, that’s not going to happen with me. Maybe you should try to accept that.” I paused. “I hope that won’t be a problem.”

I pushed open the door to reveal a winding staircase and then turned back to him, noting the astonished look on his face.

Good. The guy needed to be taken down a few notches.

“This way leads back to the party?” I asked.

Lucian nodded, and I started up the stairs.

*If only I had known this night would involve trap doors, swimming pools, and endless stairs.*

Once I reached the top, I paused, glancing down to see if Lucian had followed me up. To my immense relief, the stairs below me were empty. Thank god for that. This whole night was already extra enough without Prince You’re-Destined-to-Do-Me hanging around.

The top of the staircase led to a doorway, and I could hear music and laughter and the dull roar of the party through the door.

*I’m one stairwell closer to finding my mates. Here goes.*

I took a deep breath and opened the door.

I surveyed the room with dismay. The party had definitely leveled up and become a lot more intense. The music was loud, the bass vibrating through the room. People were dancing, drinking, and having a wild time. But I didn’t see Xavier or Greyson anywhere.

I reached out with the mind link.

*Greyson?*

*…*

*Xavier?*

*Guys? HELLO! Can you hear me?*

Apparently they couldn’t, because neither of them answered me. *Should I try to find my way back to the bathroom? Would Xavier still be waiting for me?*

As for Greyson, I didn’t have a clue where to find him, and this palace was so big, I wouldn’t even know where to begin to look for him.

I passed a statue of two lovers I hadn’t noticed before. They were naked and entwined in a kiss. The craftsmanship was absolutely stunning, because they both looked almost lifelike. In fact, I could have sworn they moved.

*Must be the lights. Or I’ve had too much to drink.*

I stepped away from the statue, and Lucian appeared beside me. “Do you like that statue?”

I held back a scream. *Where the hell did he come from? Did he take some kind of secret passage to get here so fast? The stairs were empty! I know they were!*

Completely oblivious to my breakdown, Lucian gestured at the sculpture. “It’s the joining of the dark side of the moon with the light, making her whole again.”

“It’s remarkable,” I conceded. It really was beautiful, and I could see how it could be intoxicating. “But I really need to find my Alphas.”

Suddenly, the prince didn’t seem so harmless anymore. I’d thought I’d won the conversation when I’d told him I would never submit to him. He’d seem shocked and chagrined, and I’d assumed that was the last I’d hear of it. But now he was here, apparently just popping up out of nowhere, completely at ease, and I was reminded of exactly whose home this was, and who held all the power.

With a soft smile, Lucian moved closer, leaning down to whisper, “I know you’re not a Luna.”

**Episode 2033**

LOLA

I took a deep breath and swallowed roughly while Jacqueline, grinning, pulled me through the doors of the club. The bouncer held out a broad hand for our cell phones, which we passed over. He pulled out a basket from beneath the ticket table, dropped them in, and then handed us each a ticket.

“You can pick up your phones on your way out,” he said, opening the inner door that separated the entrance from the rest of the club. “Welcome, and enjoy.”

“Thank you! We plan to!” Jacqueline said in a sing-song voice, and continued to pull me along.

The heavy, pounding bass of the club vibrated across the floor and up my legs as Jacqueline led me toward a staircase. From the top of the stairs, the club opened up into a warehouse-sized space. There was a dance floor crowded with writhing bodies, and a bar set away from the action with a few tables and booths scattered around it.

The music was even louder here, and the scent of hookah smoke burned my nose. Dancers were decked out with neon glow sticks, and a few of them were tucked beneath black lights, their blue-white fangs flashing along with the glow sticks in the darkness.

*Oh my god. Glow sticks?! For real?*

Jacqueline’s eyes widened in delight, and she licked her lips. “I’m dying for some O negative. I hope they have it on tap.” Then she looked up at me. “Come on! We’re blocking the stairs.”

I stumbled after Jacqueline, too busy taking in the rave to focus on my footing. I’d been to my fair share of college parties back in Minnesota, and I liked to consider myself adventurous and open to trying pretty much anything, but I’d never seen anything like this. It was like something out of an urban fantasy film, like *Buffy* meets *Euphoria*.

The clientele here seemed to come from all walks of life… or afterlife. They wore everything from emo to formal attire, and while some were shaking it and grinding on the dance floor, others were clustered around the bar tables, smoking or sipping a dark liquid I could only assume was blood.

Despite myself, my hackles rose as I looked around the gigantic yet packed space. I hadn’t seen so many vampires in one place since Tottenville. A few months ago, this would have been my worst nightmare.

But I wasn’t that person anymore. In fact, I was a vampire too. So there was no reason for me to worry.

*I belong here*. The thought was accompanied by no small sense of wonder.

But it was a good thing Jay hadn’t come along. It wouldn’t have been safe for him.

Jacqueline pointed toward the bar. “Come on! This thirst isn’t gonna quench itself!”

Grabbing my hand, she pulled me into the thick of the crowd. To my absolute shock, most of the people out on the dance floor were dancing with their fangs exposed. My steps stuttered as I took them all in, a sea of flashing fangs—and yet everyone was having a good time. Just dancing, drinking, and socializing.

It made sense, the longer I thought about it. This was a safe place for these vampires to be their true selves, fangs and all, but it still weirded me out. For as long as I’d known vampires were more than just romantic leads and villains in books and TV shows, fangs had meant danger and violence and gore. Even in my own experience as a vampire, anytime my fangs came out, blood usually followed. One of the rules of conduct at Tottenville—another vampire safe haven, or so I’d thought—had been to keep fangs under the lip.

As Jacqueline pretty much dragged me through the crowd, new understanding began to overtake all my old notions about vampire life. I might’ve been be surrounded by fangs, but I wasn’t in danger. Most of the other people here hadn’t even noticed me.

“Lola, hurry your ass up!” Jacqueline snarled over her shoulder.

Okay, so there might’ve been *one* dangerous vampire here.

The closer we got to the bar, the more densely packed the crowd became, and before we realized it, we were pulled into a group dance. Someone draped a glow-stick necklace around my neck while two beautiful vampire women danced up on me from either side.

The one in front of me gave me a sultry grin, and I smiled back nervously.

*You know, this isn’t the worst sandwich I’ve ever been in…*

Strong fingers wrapped around my wrist and pulled me out from between the two women.

“Come on!” Jacqueline whined. “I’m so thirsty!”

Finally, we burst through the crowd and reached the bar, which was jam-packed with other thirsty vamps.

The music was so loud I had to cup my hands around my mouth and shout. “It looks like we’re going to have to wait!”

Jacqueline rolled her eyes and then muttered something I couldn’t quite make out over the pulsing bass.

“What?”

“I said don’t be stupid!” she shouted. “Haven’t you ever used what you’ve got to get what you want?”

I blinked. I must have misheard her, because she wasn’t making any sense. “What are you talking about?”

She rolled her eyes and scanned the bar before pointing to where two guys were seated together, not far away from us. “There’s our in!”

Before I could ask her to *loudly* clarify, she grabbed my hand and dragged me over to the two white guys. Then she “accidentally” bumped into one of them.

“Oh, I’m *so* sorry!” she said.

Both guys turned to face us, and Jacqueline pointed at me. “My friend really needs a drink!”

One of the guys stood. He was even taller than Jay, and his shoulders were as broad as a barn. *Holy crap. How did that guy even fit through the door?* He smiled, revealing gold-capped teeth and different colored contact lenses, one green and the other a bright yellow, that actually reminded me of a wolf.

“I’m Tracer,” he said.

The other guy, who had blond, spiked hair, metal chains dangling from his ears, and a full neck tattoo, stood up and grinned. “You can have my seat… seat. Call me Echo… Echo.” He looked from me to Jacqueline, his brows raising. “Who are these hot babes… babes?”

My brain stuttered to a halt, and I could only blink at them. Where could I even begin? *Tracer and Echo… What, did the universe run out of normal-sounding names? And what the hell is up with the echo? Who told this guy that was a cool idea?*

Jacqueline immediately hopped into one of the empty seats and slammed her hands down on the bar, drawing the bartender’s attention. She raised a pierced eyebrow and headed over. “What can I get you?”

Both Tracer and Echo were staring at me. I was still standing, even though they’d both given up their seats.

“Can I buy you a drink… drink?” Echo asked.

I shook my head. “No, thanks. I can buy one mys—”

“Of course!” Jacqueline cut me off. “You can both buy us drinks!”

Echo smiled, while the bartender just looked bored. “What do you want?” she asked.

“What do you have on tap?” Jacqueline asked.

The bartender pointed to the blackboard behind her. “Can’t you read?”

I skimmed the board, which was a menu of different blood drafts, detailing the ingredients and blood type. *Sweet Iron, Red Velvet, Red No. 5…*

“I’ll have a Sweet Iron,” Jacqueline called to the bartender.

I ordered a Red Velvet, since I’d always been partial to red velvet cake.

As the bartender turned away to make our drinks, Tracer leaned in close. “So, where are you fine ladies from?”

“Let me guess… guess,” Echo said. “You’re from Portland… Portland.”

I shook my head.

“She’s from Minnesota,” Jacqueline answered. “And I’m from all over.”

Tracer nodded. “We’re from all over too.” He smiled, his gold caps reflecting the light from the dance floor.

The bartender returned, put down our drinks, and moved on to fill another order. Jacqueline handed me my pint glass, which was full of a dark, thick liquid. The metallic scent of blood immediately rose up, making my mouth water, but there was something else in there too. Something sugary.

Jacqueline picked up her own drink and downed the whole thing in one long, slurping gulp. I lifted the glass to my mouth and tried to follow suit, but the thick, pungent flavor of the blood and the sugary notes from the Red Velvet turned my stomach. Most of my drink ended up spilling down my chin and onto my shirt.

Jacqueline gaped. “What’s wrong with you?”

I grimaced. “It’s… kind of gross.”

Tracer and Echo exchanged a look.

“Wow, you girls know how to party,” Tracer said. “I knew it the moment you walked in.”

I didn’t like the way he was leering at me. *I wish Jay had come. This loser wouldn’t dare say anything with my mate around.*

I wiped my chin, ready to beg Jacqueline to let us leave when I heard someone behind me say, “Do you smell that?”

A deep, loud sniff sounded nearby. “Yeah… Is there a werewolf in here?”

**Episode 2034**

XAVIER

The moment my lips connected with Ava’s, I felt a tidal wave of longing and lust slam into me that I had buried away. I pulled her closer, drowning in the taste of her mouth, the sweet sighs that slipped through her swollen lips, and the scent of her that wrapped around me, only enticing me even more.

With a growl, I deepened the kiss, pressing my body against hers like I was going to die if I couldn’t touch her, if I couldn’t feel the heat of her skin against mine.

I just couldn’t get enough of her. Ava. My once-mate.

*Maybe my mate all over again*, some small voice whispered in the darkest depths of my mind.

This wasn’t us picking up exactly where we’d left off, as if all the years and ugliness between us had never existed. No, this was penance and payment for all our sins, an accumulation of all the time we’d spent apart, all the unsatisfied longing, all the wounds that had never quite healed, melding together in one heady, cathartic explosion.

It was me and Ava, two imperfect halves, battered over time, bruised by all the things that had come between us, finally trying to reckon with it.

Ava’s fingernails raked down my back, scoring my flesh, and suddenly I was thrown back into a time before the pack wars, after I’d discovered Ava was my mate. Back then, it had felt as though the world opened up to me every time I touched her. I broke away from her mouth, panting.

*Am I going crazy? Am I just imagining this… this connection? Or is this really happening?*

Ava’s body pressed against mine, and a *very* real urgency simmered low in my belly. There was something both familiar and foreign about feeling her curves brushing against me, breathing in her scent, and anchoring my hands on her hips. Her skin was just this side of too warm, and the little hitch in her breath when I touched her made something snap inside me.

I caught her lips with mine, picking up right where we’d left off.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, in a whisper so soft I could barely hear it, a small ounce of reason—perhaps my last bit of reason—reminded me that I shouldn’t be doing this. Kissing Ava. Touching her.

But why not? My mind felt hazy with anger—this rage that wanted to show her with every touch how she’d hurt me.

The voice had no explanation to offer. It just kept whispering *wrong, wrong, wrong*, over and over. I shoved it away as I wrapped the long length of Ava’s hair around my fist and tugged, *hard*. Her low moan went straight to my cock, and I drank it down like I was lost in a desert and it was my last gulp of water.

No, this couldn’t be wrong. This *wasn’t* wrong. It was welcome. It was perfect. It was undeniable, inevitable, meant to be.

I would show her what penance meant.

Ava gasped and broke away from my mouth, her chest heaving, her lips so swollen and gorgeous I couldn’t think straight.

“Xavier, please,” she begged. “I need you.”

Hearing my name on her lips, even in that desperate tone, sent a jolt of recognition through me, and not the good kind. I blinked rapidly, dissipating some of the fog of lust that had settled over me.

Suddenly, I felt lost. Out of place. Out of my mind.

*What the* fuck *just happened?*

I looked around the room, where all the other partygoers were locked in one sensual embrace or another, fucking each other on or against whatever surface was most available. Then my gaze skittered back to Ava. She was watching me with a crease between her eyebrows.

“Xavier?” She formed my name with those swollen lips that suddenly weren’t so sexy anymore.

A sharp pain ripped down the right side of my chest, and I gritted my teeth, shuddering at the sudden agony. I didn’t have to look down to know it was the veins.

“What is it?” Ava asked. “What’s wrong?”

I took her arms and gently moved her away from me, so we were no longer chest to chest. “Get away from me. We can’t do this.”

She reached for me, her fingers digging into my biceps, not out of anger, but fear.

“Please, don’t do this,” she begged, tears welling in her eyes. “Don’t you see? This is how it’s supposed to be between us. You don’t have to fight this anymore.”

I shook my head. “I *can’t*.”

“This is a *sign.* This is proof that our mate bond is back, and stronger than ever.”

I froze. *Could she be right?*

As if in response, the pain in my chest flared bright and sharp, and I winced. I needed to get out of here. Maybe some fresh air would help clear my head. I backed away, and Ava’s gaze slipped down from my face to my chest. Her jaw went slack as she gasped.

“What’s happening to you?”

I turned away, ignoring her concern completely as I started for the doorway. I had two goals in mind: find my clothes, and put as much space between Ava and me as possible. I couldn’t trust myself around her right now.

My chest flared again. Maybe I couldn’t trust myself at all.

“Xavier, talk to me,” Ava pressed, following after me and grabbing my arm. “What’s going on with you?”

I couldn’t explain, because I knew she wouldn’t want to hear the truth. I knew what was happening here—Ava was right. This was a sign, but not a testament to the strength of our old mate bond. Instead, this was a deadly reminder of where my loyalties were supposed to lie: with Cali. My true mate.

My *only* mate.

I pushed Ava off and continued toward the doorway.

From behind me, I heard the gold-masked woman’s voice call out, “Alpha.”

I froze. Something in her voice sent a chill down my spine.

The woman approached me, passing Ava, who was still watching me.

“Are you not happy with your partner?” the woman asked, then turned to Ava before I could respond. “Perhaps you should have listened to Seluna.” The woman gestured to Andrei. “You will go with Ava. It is meant to be.”

Andrei gave Ava another wolfish grin, and with a sickening lurch of déjà vu, jealousy and anger coursed through me all over again. Then the pain in my chest dug itself deeper, and I forgot how to breathe.

Oblivious to the tug of war happening inside me, the woman held out her hand to me. “You will come with me.”

I shook my head. “No. I’ve had enough.”

A few feet away, Andrei sidled up to Ava and threw his arms around her, but she shoved him back.

“No!” she snapped. “I’m with Xavier.” She turned to me. “You’re the one.”

The woman looked at me, her head tilted to the side. “What is it that you want, Alpha?”

I pulled off my mask with a growl. “The *Alpha* wants to leave.”

I dropped the mask, stepped out of the room, and grabbed my clothes, which were still piled on the floor just outside the entrance.

“Xavier!” Ava called.

Something coiled tight around my gut and *tugged*, and moments later an echoing ache rippled through my chest. I ignored Ava. I couldn’t play this game with her right now. Maybe not ever.

As I pulled my clothes on in a series of jerky movements, I glanced at my reflection in one of the many mirrors that hung in the hallway. The veins in my chest were darker than ever and had spread to cover more of my skin, but the pain was subsiding. The ache was shifting from “oh my god I’m having a heart attack” to something resembling a bad case of heartburn.

Still, I felt *off*. Lightheaded, like my mind was wading through a thick fog. All the more reason to get the hell out of here.

Footsteps sounded behind me, and I wasn’t even a little surprised to see Ava following me out. She quickly dressed and then started toward me. I could see an argument waiting on the tip of her tongue. She was going to try to convince me to stay, that what we’d done—what we had been about to do—was good and right and meant to be.

Then her gaze landed on my chest between my unbuttoned shirt, and that determination in her eyes was replaced with horror. “Oh my god. They’re worse now. Why are they worse?”

“That’s none of your business.”

I stalked away before she could lure me in any more. I just wanted to get the fuck out of here. I should have known better than to let my guard down around Ava. I should have known that a single moment of weakness was all it would take for her to dig her claws into me all over again.

And even more maddening? I couldn’t find it in myself to regret what had just happened between us. What had come over me?

“We don’t have to go back in there,” she called after me. Of course she was still following me. “We can leave together.”

I stopped and turned to face her. “Why would I ever agree to do that? I’ve made my feelings clear—nothing has changed.” The words tasted like a lie, and that pissed me off even more.

Ava shook her head. “That’s not true. I felt what you felt.”

“I feel nothing now. Whatever that was, it’s passed. I’m going to find Cali.”

“Right, Cali. Your *Luna*.”  
 I hissed. “Keep your voice down.”

“You didn’t have those when we were together.” Ava pointed at my chest. “When you knew I was your mate.” She moved even closer, close enough to reach out and touch. “Don’t you see, Xavier? Cali is going to be the death of you.”

**Episode 2035**

My lungs froze, and my heart stopped beating—then tripped over itself with panic.

Lucian’s words echoed in my head like a death knell.

*I know you’re not a Luna.*

I blinked rapidly, forcing my mind to do something, forcing myself to do anything besides just standing here in shock at the mercy of this crazy werewolf prince.

“W-What do you mean?” I stammered.

*Oh god. Did the pool wash off my Luna marks? Was Kira’s spell not strong enough to keep them up for the full duration of the spell?* It took every ounce of self-control I possessed to not look back at my fake Luna marks to make sure they hadn’t come off like a cheap, temporary tattoo on my shoulder blades.

But maybe this didn’t have anything to do with the marks. Maybe something else had tipped Lucian off. I didn’t think I’d said anything to expose us. I’d been so much more careful about my speech than usual—and I didn’t see Greyson or Xavier blurting it out, either. They were committed to learning everything they could about the Vanguard pack to help protect the Redwood pack. And besides that, they were one hundred percent vigilant about protecting *me*.

They would never out me.

So how did Lucian know? Had he somehow just figured it out on his own? I didn’t know how that was possible, with the marks in place and Xavier, Greyson, and I each playing our parts, but then again, what did I know? I was a half-human, half-Fae, zero percent werewolf, non-Luna. A true imposter.

And Lucian was supposedly a prince among werewolves. Maybe he had some kind of spidey sense about this kind of thing.

My panic began to subside, and true, cold fear took its place. If Lucian really knew this was all a sham, would he punish Xavier and Greyson? Did he know I was part Fae? Questions and fears and a thousand what-ifs spun through my mind, ratcheting up my anxiety until I was sure everyone in the palace could hear my heart banging against my ribs.

Lucian reached out and gently stroked a finger down my cheek. “Oh, Caliana, please do not be afraid of me. All I meant was that you’re much more than just a Luna. Don’t you realize that? Because I do. I see you not only for who you are, but for who you could become. And when you finally submit to me, you’ll see it too. You’ll come to understand all of that untapped, blossoming potential.” He gestured to me. “*This* is just the tip of the iceberg.”

Relief flooded through me so fast I could have cried.

Lucian tsked. “I see I’ve upset you. Please, I do not mean to offend. You are exquisite now, of course—”

“I’m not offended.” I cut him off with a smile. “I… Thank you, Prince Lucian, for your kind words.”

If this was all about his mission to bang every Luna in the world, I could handle that. And to his credit, he did seem to genuinely believe everything he was saying. It was almost… redeeming. That genuine quality of his.

*Almost*.

But the important thing was, my cover was still intact. Lucian could talk all he wanted about icebergs. He could say whatever the hell he wanted, actually—overtly offensive or not. As long as my secret was safe. For now, the Titanic was still floating.

But I still needed to find Xavier and Greyson.

Lucian took my hand. “Tell me more about yourself, Caliana. I want to know everything.”

For a split second, I wanted so badly to get away from this obnoxious man, to finally be reunited with my mates, that I considered gnawing off my own hand and making a run for it.

*No such luck…*

“Um, what would you like to know?” I asked.

He brightened. This must have been the exact question he’d been hoping I’d ask.

“There must be something that you want, something deep and dark that you’ve been afraid to reveal.” He leaned in close. “Your secret will be safe with me.”

“Oh, that’s… kind. Thank you. But I really need to find my mates.”

He shook his head. “They’re not here. Perhaps they’re exploring their deepest, darkest secrets too.”

I did *not* like the sound of that. I didn’t know where they were, or what kind of trouble they might be in.

“Please allow me to offer my services in your search.” Lucian bowed, then took my arm and started leading me through the hallway. Apparently, my consent was not required.

“You’ll find there’s not another being in this entire palace with such a vast knowledge of the house and grounds.” He puffed up his chest. “We’ll find those wayward mates of yours.”

“Great.”

We reached a large, long hallway with doors flanking each side for as far as I could see.

“Why don’t we check every room?” he suggested. “Perhaps your mates will turn up.”

I tried not to despair at his suggestion. Checking every room could take all night. But as he led me toward the first door, it was painfully clear who was in charge of our search and rescue mission, and it wasn’t me.

He stopped in front of the closed door. “Brace yourself. This room may be the darkest in the entire palace.”

I took a deep breath. “I’ll face whatever I have to it if it means finding my mates.”

Lucian opened the door, and I was not remotely prepared for what I saw inside.

Two men were sitting at a small, round table, while a handful of others stood off to the side. They looked like spectators placing bets.

I glanced at Lucian. “Are they playing poker?”

He laughed. “Do you see any cards, Caliana?”

My eyes nearly bugged out of my head when one of the seated men raised a revolver to his chest, spun the chamber, and pulled the trigger.

My scream echoed through the room and down the hallway. My ears rang from the gunshot, and I covered my eyes. Groaning and laughter sounded inside the room, but I didn’t dare look. I didn’t want to see that man’s corpse.

*Why are they laughing?* I wanted to cry.

Warm, gentle hands rested on my shoulders. “It’s okay,” Lucian murmured. “You can look.”

I pried my eyes open. The man with the revolver was looking at the bloody hole in his chest while others exchanged money.

“I… I don’t understand. What the hell is this?”

Lucian ushered me out of the doorway and back into the safety of the hall. “It’s a version of Russian Roulette. Six bullets, but only one silver one. You’re welcome to watch more, if you’d like.”

I shook my head. “No. I’ve seen enough.”

My hands shook. I just wanted to go home, but I couldn’t leave without Greyson and Xavier.

I allowed Lucian to lead me through several more doors in our search for my mates. As we stepped inside, he explained the purpose behind each room, everything from a safe space for interested parties to live out their sexual fantasies to a quiet room in which to play a game of chess.

After a while, I declined to look inside the rooms. It was beginning to feel less like a search for Xavier and Greyson, and more like he was taking me on a tour, trying to impress me.

“Is there anything else you’d like to explore? There are more rooms on the upper level, or we could look through another wing on this level?” Lucian asked, when we finally reached the end of the hallway. Or, at least, *one* end of the hallway.

*This house goes on forever*, I thought with dread. *What the hell does a girl have to do to get out of this terrible place?*

“I’d like to find some clothes,” I said.

He nodded. “Let’s find my sister.”

Was there really nobody else’s clothes I could borrow in this entire gigantic palace? Before I could respond, I heard someone call my name.

I spun around. “Xavier?”

And there he was, standing only a few feet behind me. I broke away from Lucian and rushed into my mate’s arms.

He hugged me tightly. “Are you okay?” he demanded. Then he let me go and looked down at me. “Where’s your dress? And why’s your hair wet?”

I quickly explained how I’d gotten lost coming back from the bathroom, fallen through a trapdoor, and landed in an underground pool.

Xavier just shook his head with a small smile. “Of course you did.”

We were having a nice moment, so naturally Lucian decided to join us and ruin it.

“I loaned her the blanket,” he offered. “She looked so cold without anything on.”

Xavier’s eyes narrowed.

“I’ll give the blanket back,” I blurted out. “As soon as I find some other clothes.”

Lucian waved me off. “You can keep it as a souvenir of our night together.”

Xavier’s glare became more pronounced. Suddenly, I realized his clothes were askew. I straightened his shirt, then stopped when I realized two of the buttons were mismatched.

“What happened to you?” I asked.

He looked away. “It’s a long story.”

And yet, that wasn’t a real answer. “Where have you been?”

Ava stepped out from behind Xavier, adjusting the strap of her gown. “He was with me.”

**Episode 2036**

GREYSON

Aysel pulled me close and pressed her lips against mine.

I would have liked to say that I pushed her back, that I only allowed that one glancing touch and then put a quick end to her moon-eyed bullshit.

But that wasn’t what happened.

The truth was, the moment Aysel’s lips met mine, I was lost. The heat from the tub, the mouth-watering scent coming from her body, the soft warmth of her lips, and the bubbling drink in my stomach all mixed together in a heady, mesmerizing combination. She pulled me even closer, until her wet body pressed against mine, until I was practically in the tub with her after all.

When we finally broke apart to catch our breaths, my head was spinning. And for the first time in a long time, the pain in my chest was completely gone. I didn’t know why. Was it the moonlight? Was there something to this Seluna bullshit? I honestly didn’t even care. All that mattered was that suddenly, I no longer felt like I was actively dying.

Aysel rose from the tub like Venus in that classic painting, water dripping from her bare skin, illuminated in the moonlight.

“Join me, Greyson,” she begged. “Don’t you see now how I can be of help to you? Let the healing waters soothe you. Let me take care of you.”

There was a visceral tug in my chest, pulling me toward the tub, telling me to sink into that water with Aysel and forget about everything else, even if only for tonight. Still, I couldn’t quite bring myself to go through with it. Something was holding me back. Something important… Though, in that moment, I couldn’t remember what it could possibly have been.

Aysel gripped the back of my neck and pulled me into another mind-melting kiss. When we broke apart, she smiled. “I’m a princess, Greyson. It would be considered treasonous for you to disobey my request.”

Swept up in the softness of her lips, the heat of the moment, and the freeing sensation of not being in pain, I reached for the hem of my shirt, lifting it upward. Then I suddenly stopped.

Aysel dropped back into the tub with a sigh, beckoning to me. “Greyson, come join me. I am the Alpha’s prize. All you have to do is choose. So choose me. You know you want to.”

In that moment, I wanted to choose her. Maybe it was the champagne, or the kissing, or maybe Seluna herself was getting off her big white ass to prompt me into giving Aysel what she wanted. If nothing else, I was intrigued by her suggestion that destiny was nothing more than a choice.

But I wouldn’t choose her. I couldn’t. Not now. Not ever.

I let go of my shirt and stepped back. “I will never choose you, Aysel. I choose Cali.”

Her jaw dropped. “I’m sorry. I don’t think I heard you correctly. You… You can’t possibly be choosing that girl over me.”

“You heard right. Cali’s my choice, and she is nobody’s prize. She’s my mate, and I would never do anything to hurt her, or to hurt our bond.”

Aysel shot to her feet, her eyes flashing with fury. “Nobody quits me! I quit *them*.”

I shrugged. “I guess there’s a first time for everything, Princess. Don’t get me wrong—you’re a beautiful, tempting woman, but you’re not for me.”

I turned to leave. I’d clearly indulged Aysel for way too long, and I didn’t even have anything to show for it beyond a confirmation that, yes, these people were batshit crazy for the moon, and were apparently rich and powerful enough to employ witches as glorified gardeners.

Which was an interesting fact, but considering the obvious amount of wealth the pack commanded, it wasn’t altogether surprising.

*What a colossal waste of time.*

“Greyson!”

Before I’d refused her, Aysel had had a special way of caressing my name as she said it, like it was a sacred prayer in some old, forgotten language.

Now, she said it like a curse.

*That seems about right.*

I turned to face her.

“If you turn away from me right now, you’re finished,” she snapped. “Nobody says no to me. Nobody has *ever* said no to me. And if you do, I will never forget and never forgive.”

I nodded. “Do what you gotta do, I guess.” I turned back to the door and headed out of the room. With each step that took me farther away from Aysel, the tightness in my chest returned with a vengeance.

For a split second, I considered running back to her, if only to have some relief from the pain.

Then I thought of Cali. Her laugh. Her smile. Her courage and compassion. The fact that she didn’t throw a goddamn temper tantrum whenever anyone said no to her.

A fond smile tugged at my lips. My mate was more than worth the pain. And it wouldn’t be forever. One day we’d put all this curse nonsense behind us and finally have that happily ever after.

Still right now, in this moment, I had to brace myself against the wall and draw in short, shallow breaths to overcome the pain. What the hell was going on? Why had the pain returned in the first place? And why was it worse now? I could *literally* feel the veins spreading and tightening beneath my skin.

*Are they some kind of warning? Did I somehow do something to endanger Cali?*

“God dammit, Greyson,” I murmured. What had I gotten myself into with Aysel? I should have been smarter than that. I should have known not to even try to play her games. I should have known that the whole thing was rigged to get me to bend to her wishes.

And even though I’d denied her in the end, there was no question of whether or not I’d bent to the princess’s desires.

I needed to find Cali and Xavier.

I started down the hall and quickly realized I should have paid more attention to Aysel’s tour. I had no fucking clue where I was in this gigantic mansion. I could barely remember coming to Aysel’s room, and I had next to no trust in my ability to backtrack all the way to the ballroom.

I tried to mind link with Cali and Xavier.

*Guys? Cali?*

*…*

*Xavier?*

*Can you hear me?*

I got no response.

“Okay, fine,” I muttered. “We’ll do this the old-fashioned way.”

I broke into a run, or at least as much of a run as I could manage while my chest was tightening with each gulp of air. I reached an intersection of hallways, just as a gunshot broke through the peaceful silence of the house.

“What the hell?”

Deciding that going *away* from the gunshot was my best hope, I raced in the opposite direction until dance music reached my ears. Putting on a burst of speed, I headed toward the music and rushed through a door, so fast and so blindly that I nearly knocked over a statue of two entwined lovers.

Righting the statue, I ignored the curious glances of the other partygoers. Then I started to search the room for my brother and my mate. But if they were here, I couldn’t see them.

I rushed up to one of the attendants. “Excuse me, have you seen my brother? Or my mate, Caliana?”

The attendant nodded. “I believe I last saw the lady in the main corridor. She was being escorted by the prince.” The attendant pointed toward a set of double doors while my blood pressure skyrocketed.

Now Cali was hanging out with the prince? And where the fuck had Xavier run off to?

*I never should have left Cali in the first place. What a horrible plan.*

I hurried to the hallway and found her standing with Xavier, Lucian, and Ava.

*Well, this is a fucked-up mix.*

Cali caught my eye as I approached, and her whole face lit up with joy and relief. She ducked out of the conversation and rushed over to me. I realized suddenly that she was wrapped up in a blanket, and her hair was wet, but I didn’t question it.

First of all, this was Cali. There was no amount of trouble she couldn’t get into if she set her mind to it. But more importantly, I was just happy to have her back in my arms. That was everything I needed.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

I stepped back and nodded. “I’m fine.”

My eyes tracked over to Xavier, who was still standing with Lucian and Ava, but watching Cali and me like a hawk. He looked tense, and not in the normal way. Cali, I noticed as I watched her look back at the group, looked tense too.

Was she upset about something? What had happened while Aysel was playing mind games with me? I thought back to my whirlwind of a night.

*Does all this tension have something to do with Ava? Did something happen?*

Lucian smiled and beckoned us over. “It looks like a happy reunion for all. Not that any of you should be concerned—nothing will happen to you here that you don’t want or will regret. Seluna would frown upon that.”

*What a creepy slogan for a party*. I cleared my throat and mustered up my best Alpha voice. “I need a moment with Xavier and Cali.”

“Ah, of course.” Lucian nodded. “Excuse me.”

I turned to Xavier. “What the hell is going on?”

My brother glanced at Ava. “Nothing.” Then he turned to Cali and added, “Nothing you need to worry about, at least.”

Ava didn’t seem to have anything to add to this incredibly useless response. She just turned and followed Lucian back into the ballroom.

I sighed. “Okay, from now on, we don’t separate. Agreed?”

**Episode 2037**

VIOLET

As we watched the fire department put out the blazing ruins of the old movie theater, I felt Charlie’s confusion and worry echo down the mind link.

*I have no idea who might be trying to kill you*, he finally said, *but we can’t stay here. We’re hurt. We need to get back to the pack house and regroup.*

A shudder rocked down my spine. I still couldn’t believe this was happening. That it *had* happened to me. It had been bad enough just getting the creepy phone call and all those awful text messages, but to lure me here for the sole purpose of burning me alive? Who would do such a horrible thing? Who could possibly hate me so much they would try to do that to me?

My stomach twisted, and its contents threatened to come back up.

*Come on*, Charlie pressed, nuzzling at my neck in an attempt to comfort me. *Let’s get the hell out of here.*

We burst into a sprint, or as much of a sprint as we could with our lungs wheezing, Charlie favoring the side that had been burned in the fire, and my two front paws still healing from where the glass had cut into me. But our wounds would heal—probably by the time we got back to the pack house, if not shortly afterward.

But mending my wounds wouldn’t solve my problems.

I thought back to the phone call. The voice had told me to come alone, and I’d followed their instructions to a T. Even in my darkest, worst-case scenarios, I’d never considered the possibility that I was walking into my own execution.

*If Charlie hadn’t shown up at the theater, if he hadn’t followed me—*

Another wave of horror rippled down my spine.

One thing was certain: if I’d truly gone in there alone and followed the voice’s directions, I wouldn’t have made it out of there alive.

It was an indisputable fact, evidenced by the hell my mate and I had just gone through back at the theater, but still, my mind railed against it. Deep in my bones, I couldn’t believe that someone would try to do that to me. And not only that they would try, but that whoever they were, they had almost succeeded.

*Maybe whoever was on the phone didn’t actually mean to hurt me*. *Maybe the fire and everything else was just an accident. That place was practically falling apart to begin with…*

I huffed out a sigh.

As much as I wanted to believe there wasn’t a single person in the world who would want to kill me, there was no denying what had just happened. If they didn’t want to hurt me, why would someone have gone to all the trouble to set up the theater?

No, it had been a trap. And I’d walked right into it. It was only thanks to Charlie that I was even still alive to worry about it.

Charlie’s voice slipped through my mind. *When we get back, we need to tell somebody what happened. Maybe Xavier? I’m thinking about calling my parents, too.*

His parents? My gut clenched with a new wave of anxiety.

*I don’t think that’s a good idea*, I replied carefully.

*Why not?*

*It’ll only make them worry. You’re all the way out here in Oregon. What could they do about any of this? Besides, we still don’t know enough about what happened.*

I was proud of my ability to come up with a logical explanation for keeping his parents out of the loop, especially because my concern had nothing to do with their feelings. If we told Charlie’s parents what happened, that their son had almost died protecting me, Iris would absolutely lose her shit. And who knew what she’d do then? Force him to come back home? Come out to Oregon and set up a tent outside the pack house so she could protect him herself?

The woman was militant, unpredictable, and insanely protective when she wasn’t trying to kill her own son for the irredeemable sin of being a werewolf—and yes, I was absolutely gonna hold that against her forever. Basically, she couldn’t be reasoned with, and we had more than enough crazy going around already.

A dark, dreadful thought slipped in. *Is Iris behind this? Was this all part of some attempt to kill me so Charlie can be free of me?*

The thought made me want to vomit, but it didn’t seem all that likely. I hoped.

The knife rattled against my teeth, pulling me out of my increasingly dark thoughts. It wasn’t easy to carry the blade in my mouth while running—every time I planted my front paws on the ground, I inadvertently bit down on it. But something kept me from just dropping it.

This knife had helped save my life. If nothing else, I’d hold onto it for that reason.

As we approached the pack house, we slowed to a stop. Charlie shifted back, and I joined him a heartbeat later. Despite everything, my eyes still snagged on his naked body. We’d taken things up a notch in our relationship, and I couldn’t see him exposed without thinking of what we’d done.

Heat bloomed in my cheeks. *Come on, Violet. You were almost murdered. Focus on what matters right now!*

Charlie’s lips twitched. “You can take the knife out of your mouth now.”

I tensed and quickly dropped the blade into my waiting hands. “Right.”

Suddenly, Rishika and Artemis appeared on the porch.

“What are you two doing out here?” Artemis asked, her gaze lingering on the knife. “Going hunting?”

“Oh, we just escaped a house of horrors,” I deadpanned. Another chill slipped down my spine, this time because of the freezing night air.

Rishika frowned. “Why don’t you two come inside and tell us what happened?”

We followed them in, and—after filling them in on what had happened at the movie theater and promising Rishika that I wouldn’t take off on my own anymore, and would let her know if I got any more of those threatening calls and messages—Charlie and I were finally released to go upstairs and get cleaned up.

We stopped just outside my bedroom door.

I leaned in and brushed my lips over his. “Hey, thanks for saving my life.”

“I’d say it was nothing, but it was actually pretty scary.” The joke fell flat as his gaze softened. “If anything happened to you…”

His voice broke, and I smiled, tears blurring my eyes. I cleared my throat. “I, um… I’m going to take a shower. You should probably do the same. Maybe we can get some of Mrs. Smith’s white chocolate mocha after?”

Charlie agreed and headed off to his room. Even with my mate no longer looking at me like I held his world in my hands, the tears still threatened to spill down my cheeks. So I turned the shower on as hot as I could stand it and washed away the smoke and grime, trying like hell to purge myself of all the terrifying memories of the theater.

Which, of course, didn’t work. But A for effort.

I was getting dressed when I noticed the knife on my bedside table. It glinted in the light of my bedroom, and part of the blade caught my eye. There were letters, or a symbol, or something. I couldn’t quite make it out, but before I could examine it further, a soft knock sounded at the door.

“Come in.”

Charlie stepped in, his hair wet and a towel draped over his bare shoulders.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No, but taking a shower helped. How are you?”

Charlie let out a shaky breath and walked forward until his arms were sliding around my waist. His skin was warm and smooth and smelled earthy and fresh. Nothing like the smoke that had clung to his fur on our way home.

“I…” His throat worked for a moment. “When the fire started to spread, and things looked bad, all I could think about was you. How afraid I was that something would happen to you. How… How I had to make sure that you were okay, no matter what else happened, because I didn’t want to live in a world without you in it.”

My vision blurred as those tears came back full force. I threw my arms around his neck, and he hugged me tightly.

“Violet, promise me that if you ever get any more messages like that, you’ll come to me. Promise me. *Please*.”

I tipped my head back. “I promise.”

He caught my lips in a desperate kiss, and I poured everything I had into it. All my love for him, all my gratitude, all my hope that, despite everything, we would be okay as long as we had each other.

The kiss deepened, and Charlie walked me backward until the back of my legs hit my mattress. When I sank onto the bed, I pulled him down with me. We kissed until we were breathless, until we’d replaced all that fear with something heady, something hopeful.

It wasn’t lust.

It wasn’t a hunger that demanded to be sated.

It was love.

It was irrefutable evidence that I was here and healthy and whole, and so was he. Safe in this moment, our clothes were peeled away, and soft lips and clumsy, gentle fingers explored as breathy moans filled the air.

Charlie was completely focused on me, watching my face, listening to every hitch in my breath, every moan and cry like he was committing it to memory, and when he braced himself over me, just as exposed and fueled by desire as I was, he asked, “Are you sure?”

I placed the condom in his hand and nodded. “I’m sure. I want this. I want you.”

His smile set my soul on fire. “I love you, Violet.”

“I love you too.”

And then there were no words left—just our souls and our bodies becoming one. Just me and Charlie.

Just us.

*Finally*.

**Episode 2038**

I nodded, hurriedly agreeing with Greyson’s suggestion that we stick together for the rest of the night. Images of Lucian’s naked body danced through my mind. While he had nothing on my mates, there was no doubt that Lucian was an extremely attractive man. Confident, too. I cast a guilty look at Xavier and Greyson, hoping that they weren’t privy to my thoughts at that very moment.

“Yes. Definitely. Stay together,” I said distractedly.

I looked over my shoulder and watched Ava follow Lucian out, recalling the suggestive way she’d adjusted the strap of her dress while claiming to have been with Xavier. *Classic Ava, trying to get under my skin.* It might have been just another one of her stupid mind games… or not. Either way, I wasn’t going to let either of my mates out of my sight for the rest of the night, especially with Aysel and Ava on the prowl. Not one, but two annoyingly beautiful women who couldn’t be trusted? I cursed under my breath. *What luck.*

“Yeah, that’s a good idea—there’s a lot of weird stuff going on around here, and honestly, this whole setup is rubbing me the wrong way,” Xavier said, avoiding my gaze and shifting uneasily on his feet.

I looked at him closely, tempted to press him on whether any of that “weird stuff” had anything to do with Ava, but I didn’t want him to think that I didn’t trust him. Xavier had made it clear to me—and to Ava, for that matter—that he had no interest in being with her, and that their mate bond was broken. I recalled Kira’s warning, and I didn’t want to do anything that would cause doubt or break our Luna spell—especially when I knew deep in my heart that I *could* trust Xavier. In the same way, I also wasn’t going to rile him up by revealing Lucian’s attempted seduction—or whatever that had been. I knew that neither of my mates would take that news without getting upset, and I couldn’t afford to have them lose their cool here of all places. After all, we still didn’t know exactly what we were dealing with when it came to the Vanguard pack.

“So, should we get back to the party?” Greyson said, rolling his eyes as if that were the absolute last thing he wanted to do. I could relate.

“Sure, but I can’t go in like this.” I looked down at the blanket draped over my shoulders. Granted, it was a really fancy blanket, but a blanket all the same.

The three of us paused and looked between each other, trying to figure out how to tackle this latest problem, when an attendant approached. “Excuse me, I’ve been instructed to give this to Caliana.” The attendant held out a gown. “Prince Lucian picked it out himself.”

Xavier sneered. “Of course he did.”

“Thank you,” I said, taking the dress.

“You’re very welcome. Follow me, please.” The attendant led me to a door at the far end of the long hallway. “You can change in here.” He opened the tall mahogany door and bowed, waiting for me to enter.

I thanked him and went inside, Xavier and Greyson right on my heels. I held up my hand to stop them. “I think I’ll be okay to change without your help.”

Xavier sucked his teeth in annoyance. “We said we were going to stick together from now on.”

“I didn’t think that meant literally glued to my side while I slip on a new dress. I’ll change quickly and come right back out. Five minutes, tops. What could happen?” I flinched a little as I said the words, remembering how I’d literally fallen through a trapdoor into a pool not too long ago—which meant that anything *could* happen in this place. I made a mental note not to lean against any walls or otherwise let my guard down until we got the hell out of here.

I went inside and shut the door behind me, taking in the swanky décor, much of which looked antique. The room was a small library with floor to ceiling shelves filled with books that looked like they hadn’t been touched in a century or more. A fire raged in a fireplace that had an enormous portrait hung above it. Forgetting my plan to get in and get out, I moved closer to examine the portrait as I fluffed my still damp hair in front of the fire. It showed a serious-looking man wearing a gold crown, standing next to a beautiful woman wearing a crown of her own—hers was daintier and more intricate. She had a slight smile on her lips, but somehow she looked just as serious as the man beside her. Both of them had amazing posture and were draped in ornate fabrics. Seated in front of them was a boy and a girl—and their resemblance to Lucian and Aysel was unmistakable. *This must be the family portrait.* I wondered if their parents were still alive, and if so, where they were.

Lucian claimed to be a prince, and Aysel a princess—did that mean their parents were a king and queen? I moved to shrug off the blanket, but I stopped, unable to shake the feeling that I was being watched. I glanced around the room, my eyes lingering on the shadowy corners. Admittedly, the room was a little creepy, but I was alone. I glanced up at the portrait. *Wait, did the king’s eyes just move?* I stepped back and gathered the blanket even tighter around me. Maybe I was just being paranoid. So much had happened tonight, and I was definitely on edge. I shuddered. I hated the feeling of being spied on.

I moved behind a large chair and finally slid the blanket from my shoulders, keeping my eyes on the portrait as I stepped into my new gown. I struggled a little before I was able to pull the silky fabric all the way up and slide the straps over my shoulders. This gown was as tight as the last, and just as stunning. I caught my reflection in a large mirror mounted on the wall and spun around to admire every angle. *Does Lucian have an endless supply of impeccable gowns in my size?* *Or, rather, does Aysel?* I admired the fabric, liking how it hugged my curves, and then I shot another glance at the portrait. *Is the king* smiling*?*

I rubbed my eyes, shook my head, and looked again.

I must have had more to drink than I thought.The king had the same serious look on his face as before—of course. Portraits didn’t move, after all. I went for the door, taking one more look at the portrait before I left the room to rejoin Greyson and Xavier. Both men’s jaws dropped in awe when I stepped out.

Xavier blinked his eyes. “Cali, you look…”

“Yes, she does,” Greyson finished.

“Oh stop, you two,” I said, blushing and looking at the floor. I had to admit that I loved their attention. Even if this was one of Aysel’s gowns, my mates were with me, not her. *Take that, Princess!*

Greyson offered me his arm. “We should really get back to the party now.”

“Agreed.” I snaked my arm through his and then Xavier’s as he immediately offered his arm on the other side. I took a deep breath, shook my hair off my shoulders so that it fell down my back, and gave both of them a reassuring smile as we marched toward the ballroom.

*From now on, if anything unusual happens or if you see anything, let us know. With Kira’s connection, we can mind link amongst ourselves*, Greyson mind linked.

*If anything looks dangerous—even a little—we’re out of here. The important thing is that we stick together, no matter what*, Xavier added.

We drifted through the open double doors that led to the ballroom. I felt secure and safe with my mates on either side of me. All I could think was that we had to be quite a sight, the three of us coming in arm in arm like this. We were absolutely drowning in stares from all the guests. An attendant appeared in front of us with a tray of drinks. Greyson waved him off.

*We need to be clear-headed*, he said.

*Good thinking, brother*, Xavier replied.

The music halted, and the lights dimmed. I felt Greyson and Xavier tense beside me. What the hell was happening now? A spotlight clicked on, illuminating Lucian where he stood at the top of the curved staircase. My breathing quickened as, once again, I remembered all the things he’d said after I’d fallen into the pool and found him naked—and seemingly waiting for me. Now, he was adorned in a new royal-looking robe that resembled the one the king had been wearing in the portrait.

Lucian smiled down at his guests, his handsome face bathed brilliantly in the light. “We will now adjourn to the courtyard for the Moon Favor ceremony!”

**Episode 2039**

LOLA

I tensed up as someone repeated the question, louder this time. “Is there a werewolf in here?”

The other patrons at the bar turned in their seats and started sniffing the air.

“Yeah, I definitely smell a wolf,” someone else said, followed by a chorus of agreement from the crowd.

I nearly dropped my blood cocktail. *Did Jay follow me? Are they going to attack him?* It was one thing for him to take on the Tottenville vampires, but the rough-looking bloodsuckers in here weren’t the type you wanted to mess with. I stood frozen as news of the werewolf spread like wildfire through the bar, people getting up from their seats and looking around—some of them licking their fangs with hungry looks in their eyes.

“If there *is* a werewolf in here, I’ve got first dibs,” the goth bartender joked from behind the bar.

I leaned in to whisper in Jacqueline’s ear. “I’m worried that Jay followed us here. Do you see him anywhere?” I looked around, trying to see if I spotted a hunky guy with an eyepatch anywhere among these blood-crazed maniacs.

Jacqueline snorted, her voice barely a whisper. “*Shit*. It’s not Jay they smell—it’s you.”

I blanched. *Shit is right. Of course!*

“But… wait. I’m a vampire, too. Wouldn’t that like… I don’t know, cancel out?”

Jacqueline nearly choked. Well, whatever private joke she was having, I didn’t find it very funny at the moment. “Maybe in the pack house I became immune to the stench... But now, in here… Girl, you smell like ten wet dogs.”

I grabbed her hand. “Then we have to get out of here!”

I aimed my gaze at the floor, afraid to make eye contact in case anyone was looking right at me and wondering if I was the culprit.

Jacqueline yanked her hand free. “Don’t be stupid. If you up and sprint out of here, they’ll know for a fact it’s you and you’ll be drained dry before your body hits the floor—and I won’t be able to save you.”

I was starting to panic. “Then what do we do?”

Jacqueline smiled. “I got this.” She turned to Echo, who was sniffing the air like the rest, his eyes searching the bar as he licked his lips. “Hey, Echo. Is it true, what Tracer told me about you?”

Echo’s attention snapped to Jacqueline, and he gave her a perplexed look. “What… what?”

Jacqueline whispered something in his ear, and Echo tensed up, his face scrunching into a snarl. He reached across to grab Tracer by the collar. “You asshole… asshole!”

Tracer shoved him off. “Hey, what’s your problem, man?”

“You tell me… me!” Echo spat, yanking Tracer forward by the collar and slamming him against the bar, sending a stack of glasses crashing to the floor. Just like that, all hell broke loose. As if Echo’s attack on Tracer was the signal they’d all been waiting for, every vampire in the bar started throwing fists, elbows, chairs, tables—anything that was within reach. Even the bartender jumped into the thick of things.

“Can we get out of here now?” I asked, ducking low to avoid the flying fists and snapping fangs. I shrieked as someone shoved me into Jacqueline and we both nearly tumbled to the floor, which was fast becoming covered in broken glass and bloody cocktails.

“Yes, now would be a good time,” Jacqueline replied. She tugged me downward just in time to save me from being thrashed by a barstool that flew over my head and smashed into the wall of booze behind the bar.

“Thanks!” I said. I’d never seen anything like this in my entire life, and I’d seen my share of fights. What I was seeing now was a full-on Western-style bar brawl, everyone punching everyone as people randomly took sides, some of them still shouting about a werewolf.

I kept my head low as I sidled toward the exit, dodging more than a few flailing bodies as the barfight intensified. I nearly slipped in a puddle of blood, but I recovered and picked up speed. I was a few feet from the exit and almost in the clear before I realized that Jacqueline was no longer beside me. I turned back to face the unfolding chaos. I spotted Jacqueline slamming a bottle down onto some guy’s head. It shattered all over him as he fell to the ground, clutching his face and howling in pain. Without missing a beat, Jacqueline reached across the bar to grab a couple of bottles of blood liqueur before making a beeline for me.

“Let’s go!” she shouted, grinning like we were leaving a wild party rather than a deathmatch free-for-all that was growing deadlier by the second.

We linked arms and pushed our way through the crowd, dodging falling bodies, wild punches and kicks, and even a couple of jabbing knives and swinging chains. We broke through the tangle of scrapping bodies blocking the exit and raced up the stairs, both of us breathing hard—more from panic than anything else. I launched myself against the metal door at the top of the stairs. It wouldn’t budge.

“Shit! It won’t open!” I burst out. “It’s locked from the outside or something. What are we going to do now?”

We took a frantic look around.

“Look!” Jacqueline said, pointing. “There’s an exit sign, but it’s pointing to the other side of the bar.”

“Oh no, I’m not fucking going back in there.” We’d barely made it out in one piece in the first place, and I wasn’t one to press my luck.

She shrugged. “I don’t think we have a choice.”

We braced ourselves and dashed back down the stairs, grabbing our phones as fast as vampirically possible, and into the fray. It hadn’t calmed down even a little, and someone bumped into Jacqueline the moment we went through the doorway, causing her to drop one of her bottles. Blood and glass exploded on the floor, and Jacqueline stopped in her tracks. She grabbed the guy who’d bumped into her and headbutted him. “That’s for wasting my blood!”

The man screamed and stumbled backward, grasping at his head before sprawling onto the floor.

“Come on!” I screamed, yanking Jacqueline by her shirt.

“Can you believe the nerve of that guy? The clumsy asshole! He made me waste perfectly good blood! I was going to save that one for emergencies—stash it in the back of the refrigerator or something,” Jacqueline griped as we bolted for the other exit.

I stopped Jacqueline just as a body hurled by us and crashed into a table, shattering it.

“That was close,” I breathed.

After a few more frantic steps, we finally made it to the door. I breathed a sigh of relief as we pushed it open and a gust of fresh, cool air rushed in to meet us.

“There it is, the werewolf!” someone yelled from behind us.

I glanced back to see Tracer, his face battered and bloody, pointing right at me. Everyone stopped and turned to look.

“Let’s go!” Jacqueline hissed, yanking at my arm. We raced through the door and found ourselves in a narrow passage with concrete steps leading upward. Without missing a beat, we raced up them. The door slammed open behind us, and a stream of vampires rushed out into the passageway.

“They’re following us!” I shrieked.

Vampires were wicked fast, and I wondered if we’d be able to outrun them. I considered shifting, but I knew that might make matters worse—and even then, I would still have a hard time outrunning a pack of vampires. Plus, I couldn’t just leave Jacqueline behind.

Finally, we reached the top of the stairs and ran out into an alleyway. One side of the alley was blocked with a brick wall, and the end, which was farther away, opened out onto the street.

“This way!” I shouted, pulling Jacqueline as we ran toward it.

Suddenly, a car pulled into the alley, its headlights blinding us as it raced toward us at top speed.

“Shit, we have to turn back!” Jacqueline yelled, but that wasn’t an option. Vampires were pouring into the alley, their eyes shining in the night and their sharp fangs bared and ready to tear into us.

“We’re trapped!” I yelled. My life was actually flashing before my eyes. In that moment, death by vampire seemed like one of the worst ways to go—and it looked like that was where we were headed as the vampires closed in, their fangs glinting in the beams of the approaching headlights. The car came speeding down the alley. It was for sure going to hit us. There was no room to dodge even with our supernatural abilities. Oh man, this was so not how I wanted to go out…

Jacqueline and I went running first one way then the other, until eventually we both braced for an impact we knew was coming. To my immense surprise, there was no slam or crunch of my ribs as the car squealed to a stop inches from our bodies. I blinked in surprise while Jacqueline whooped. The car door was flung open, and there was barely any time to react.

“Get in!” a voice shouted.

I squinted against the lights, trying to make out who was at the wheel.

It was Jay!

**Episode 2040**

XAVIER

Cali turned to look up at me, her beautiful face etched with worry. “What’s the Moon Favor ceremony?”

I shook my head. I didn’t have the slightest idea, but based on what we’d experienced so far in this place, I wasn’t optimistic. I grabbed one of the attendants as she passed by. “Excuse me, ma’am, what’s the Moon Favor ceremony?”

The attendant gave me a surprised look. “It’s a tradition,” she said before hurrying off.

“Well, that was a big help.” I looked around for another attendant, but they were all busy tending to other guests—guests who didn’t seem the least bit curious or surprised about Lucian’s dramatic announcement.

“Seems like we’re the only ones in the dark,” Greyson said bitterly. Mace walked by, and he beckoned him over. “Hey man, any idea what this Moon ceremony thing is all about?”

Mace shrugged. “I have no idea. It could be anything. I’ve been watching, and the only thing I know for sure is that the Vanguard pack is the strangest I’ve ever come across—and I’ve seen plenty of strange stuff. I mean, I lived with you guys for a while after all.” Mace gave a good-natured chuckle.

“Ha ha,” I replied. I’d never thought of our pack as strange, but even if we were a little offbeat, we weren’t as odd as the Vanguards were proving to be—we’d never claimed to be royalty, after all. Hell, not even Silas had had the audacity to do that.

“No, but really, they’re an unusal bunch. Did you see what was going down in some of those ‘private’ rooms?” Mace asked, throwing up air quotes at the word private and waggling his eyebrows. “Who knows what this ceremony is all about? I wonder what Pip would’ve thought of all this.” Mace got a little choked up before he cleared his throat and regained his composure. “Anyway, all that to say, your guess about what these folks are up to is as good as mine.”

“So, what should we do?” Cali asked.

I looked around. Everyone started to file out with drinks in hand, even though many of them looked like they’d already had enough. I longed to be anywhere but here—preferably home at the pack house and in bed with Cali. I quickly pushed that thought away. It was a distraction, and I needed to stay on my toes, since it seemed like the night was only just beginning.

“I don’t think we have any choice but to join in,” I said.

“Agreed. But remember, we need to stick together,” Greyson said. He looked calm and collected, but I knew better—not to mention I could feel his emotions pretty strongly, thanks to Kira’s spell. He was as on edge as I was, and I knew he would be ready to strike the moment we encountered danger of any kind. I only hoped that if it came to that, we’d be able to hold our own, since we were severely outnumbered.

Mace led the way, and we merged into the stream of guests moving out of the ballroom and into a dimly lit corridor that seemed to stretch on for miles. I couldn’t help but notice the feeling of quiet anticipation in the air, and it made me even more uneasy.

*Maybe coming here wasn’t such a good idea after all*, I mind linked to Greyson.

*You think?* Greyson replied, his mental voice dripping with sarcasm. *I’m pretty sure it’s too late to back out now. I don’t know for certain, but I wouldn’t be surprised if there were guards or something posted at the exits.*

I nodded my agreement, feeling anxious. *We’ll just have to keep Cali close.*

Greyson and I exchanged a nod, and we both moved in closer to Cali, sandwiching her tightly between us as we made our way down the hallway. I linked an arm loosely around her waist, not caring if Greyson saw. Part of me wished that I was alone with Cali to help guide her through this bizarre place. At least I knew that Greyson and I were on the same page about protecting her, and that eased my nerves quite a bit. There were a lot of less than favorable things I could say about my brother, but one thing I knew for sure was that he was always a good partner to have in a fight. *As long as he isn’t under any spells*, I thought, remembering how he’d choked in our battle against Letifer when he was being influenced by the witch mark on his leg.

“Keep an eye on Andrei,” a low voice at my right said, startling me. Ava, dammit.

I scowled. God, if only she’d cut the creepy routine. I didn’t need her shit right now, and I only wanted to hear Cali’s voice that close to my ear. I couldn’t afford to let Ava distract me now. I needed a clear head for whatever was going to happen tonight.

“I’m well aware of Andrei,” I whispered back to Ava. “You need to focus on looking out for yourself.”

That was stupid thing to say, since looking out for herself was Ava’s default. She was the complete opposite of Cali, who always looked out for everyone else first—even when it put her right in the line of fire. I tore my gaze away from Ava and caught sight of Andrei just up ahead. He was talking and laughing with several other guys. Reluctantly, I decided to take Ava’s advice and keep an eye on him, but not because she suggested it. I remembered the way he’d been looking at Cali. I shook off the thought before it could progress.

A chill raced up my spine, and I realized that the temperature was dropping as we approached a curtained doorway that led to the courtyard. I didn’t like it—it was like we were being cornered or ushered toward a slaughter.

*Always be aware of the way out of here*, I mind linked to Greyson and Cali.

Cali nodded and shot me a concerned look. *Do you think something bad is going to happen?*

She had that worried look on her face again, and it pained me to see it. I would protect her, no matter what, but it still didn’t feel good to see her so afraid and uncertain.

*I don’t know, I’m just being tactical. We still have no idea what this ceremony is about*, I said.

We parted the curtains and stepped into the courtyard, which was enclosed by ornate red brick walls on all four sides. In the center of the large, well-manicured space was a large stone fountain, bubbling serenely in the near silence. Above us was the open sky.

“It’s beautiful out here,” Cali said, looking up.

“Sure is—not bad for a mousetrap,” I whispered.

As the last of the guests filtered out into the courtyard, Lucian took his place beside the fountain. He raised his hands, and everyone quieted down. I rolled my eyes. These people were behaving as if this guy was really some sort of prince and not just an asshole with a superiority complex.

“Thank you all for being here tonight,” Lucian began, flashing a thousand-watt smile. “And thank you all for taking part in the ceremony. Too many have strayed from the traditions that have bound our packs, and that is why my sister and I have returned.”

*Please tell me we aren’t dealing with another Manus Cruentae-like cult*, I mind linked to Greyson.

*I don’t know, but whatever they are, remember to keep Cali safe*, Greyson replied.

*I know that! I don’t need you to remind me*, I snarled back.

No matter what, Greyson always had to assert himself as the one calling the shots. It was one of my least favorite things about him, though I had a pretty long list.

*Stop it, you two!* Cali broke in. *Remember Kira’s warning about the Luna spell. We need to get along, or else.*

Lucian trained his gaze on us, and we snapped to attention and waited for whatever was coming next.

“We have some special guests from the Redwood pack here with us tonight, and I want to do all I can to make them feel welcome,” Lucian announced, pointing directly at us.

Polite clapping and murmurs rose up from the crowd. We nodded and smiled awkwardly. I could tell that Greyson and Cali wanted to bolt out of here about as much as I did. We’d already suffered enough special attention for the night.

*This guy is getting on my nerves*, I mind linked to Greyson, not liking the way Lucian’s eyes lingered on Cali.

“This is why I’ve brought everyone here for the Moon Favor ceremony,” Lucian continued. Oh terrific, that explained everything about what the fuck this stupid ceremony even *was*. He spread his arms. “Lunas, please take your places.”

Cali turned to look at me, the color draining from her face. I tensed.

Aysel swooped in out of nowhere and hooked her arm through Cali’s. “You heard my brother, Caliana. You must join the others.”

**Episode 2041**

MARTA

I pressed a kiss to Lilac’s lips before we both rolled onto our backs, spent. We were panting a bit, and both of us had smiles on our faces. I sighed and snuggled in close to him, throwing an arm across his lean chest as I thought about what Big Mac had said—that Lilac needed to talk openly about me to the council, and not be too complimentary. I trusted him, and as much as he tended to joke around, I felt confident that he wouldn’t intentionally damage my case. Still, there was one thing that was troubling me.

I nudged him, and he turned to look at me with a sly smile on his lips. “Oh, you want to go again?” His eyes brightened, and he threw back the covers and started to roll on top of me.

I splayed a hand on his chest to stop him. “No, I want to know about the warts.”

Lilac gave me a blank stare.

“What are my warts? You know—the bad things about me, the not so good things. If you go in to see the council and just sing my praises, it won’t go over well, just like Big Mac said.”

“Oh! Phew, for a minute there I thought you were talking about actual—Anyway, I get it.” He paused. “Honestly, I hadn’t really thought about it. Why would I want to spend time thinking about things that annoy me about you? Uh, and by that, I mean you don’t have anything wrong with you. Obviously.”

“Nice save, but come on Lilac, you *have* to think about it. There have to be a few things that you don’t like about me.” Under normal circumstances, I knew that it was dangerous to ask such a question of a love interest, but these weren’t normal circumstances, and I needed to be sure that his testimony was realistic enough to hold up in front of the council.

Lilac shrugged, clearly getting uncomfortable. “Do we have to talk about this right now? Right after we just—you *know.*”

“It’s better that we discuss it now than in front of the council.”

He yawned. “It’s so late, maybe we can do it in the morning?” He pulled the sheet up over his head, but I pulled it right back down.

“It’s not that late, Lilac, and seconds ago you wanted to have sex again.”

“Ugh, fine! What do you want to know?”

I sighed and threw my head back onto the pillow, frustrated as it became even clearer that he wasn’t taking this seriously. “I don’t know, Lilac, you’re supposed to tell *me.* What is it about me that bothers you? Or that you think I could do better?”

“I don’t know… Nothing. You’re perfect.” He moved toward me with his lips pursed.

“Lilac, come on,” I said, pushing him away. “I’m being serious here.”

“It’s hard! What if you had to do the same for me?”

I paused for a split second before doing just that. “For starters, you like to goof off all the time, and you can be really, really, annoying—it’s like you have a talent for it. Oh, and you don’t know when to be serious, like right now, for example. Um… Let me see, what else—”

“Okay, okay! I get it. But before I start, how honest do you want me to be, here?”

“I’ll take whatever you have to offer, and I promise that I won’t hold anything you say against you.” *At least I won’t tell you that I’m holding it against you.*

Lilac gave me a skeptical look. “Okay, here goes. Sometimes, you snore.”

I slid away from him in shock. “I do not!”

“Sorry to tell you, but you do. Loud, too. Really loud. Sometimes I have to wrap a pillow over my ears to get to sleep. A few times I shook you really hard to get you to stop, and that worked for a few seconds, but then—”

“Oh my god!”

“And don’t even get me started on how bad you are with vegetables.”

“Come on, be serious, Lilac.” I shuddered as the images of the vegetables that had rotted under my touch came to mind. It was just like Lilac to bring that up at a moment like this.

Lilac shrugged. “I *am* being serious. Ask anyone at Fairly Fresh and I’m sure they’ll agree.”

“That’s not funny, Lilac. If you’re not going to be serious about this, I’ll find someone else to be my character witness.”

It was a good threat, but it was also an empty one. The reality was, I didn’t know anyone else well enough to be able to actually fire Lilac from the task and replace him. Being trapped in Bert’s house hadn’t allowed for much in the way of socializing, and I was still fairly new to the pack and getting to know people. Lilac was pretty much my only option, but I wasn’t going to tell him that.

“Okay, fine, I’ll tell you. But don’t get angry, okay?”

“I won’t!”

“Promise?”

“I promise, Lilac.”

“Okay. Well… You worry too much. Some might say that you’re even a worrywart. See what I did there?” He chuckled, clearly pleased with himself.

I swatted him on the arm and started to object, but then I really took a moment to stop and think about it. *I do worry a lot.* *All the time, actually.* Since I’d escaped from Bert’s house, sometimes it felt like worrying was all I did. But who could blame me after everything that had happened? It would be weird if I *didn’t* worry. Still, it was something.

I slid out of bed, pulling Lilac with me. “Get dressed.”

“Get dressed? Why, why? Where are we going?” Lilac groaned as he slowly slid to the edge of the bed and slammed his feet to the floor in frustration.

“I need to talk to Kira and Big Mac and see what they think.”

“See, this is what I’m talking about,” Lilac said. “Going to talk to the witches is exactly what a worrywart would want to do.”

“Don’t push it,” I warned.

Lilac sucked his teeth and stood up. He moved slowly, literally dragging his feet, but he was doing as I’d asked. He picked up his T-shirt and jeans from where they lay on the floor and put them on. “See, now you’re worrying about me saying that you worry.”

“Come on,” I said, ignoring his complaints and dragging him downstairs.

“I don’t see why this can’t wait until morning.”

“Well, like you pointed out, I worry too much, and if I don’t resolve this right now, I’ll spend all night fretting about it.”

“I knew I should have kept my mouth shut,” Lilac grumbled.

I led him into the den where we found Kira watching Netflix with Torin, who was dabbing at his eyes with a tissue. “Dumbo really had such a sad life. Elephants are such sweet creatures and really, really deserve happiness.”

Lilac gave me a look.

“Hey, sorry to interrupt, you two. Kira, do you have a minute?” I asked.

Kira nodded, giving Torin a pat on the back before she came to join us. “Sure. What’s up?”

“I was wondering if maybe you and Big Mac might be able to put on a mock hearing—and put Lilac on the stand to testify.”

“Seriously?” Lilac moaned.

“Seriously. I don’t want to leave anything to chance. This is my life and my mediumship we’re talking about here.”

Kira cocked her head to the side and stroked her chin. “That actually doesn’t sound like a bad idea. The council can be pretty tough on witnesses.”

“Tough on witnesses? What’s that supposed to mean?” Lilac asked.

“Chill, it’s not like the Salem witch trials or anything. Well, actually, it kind of is, but there are more rules.”

Lilac’s eyes went wide. “*More* rules? And you just told me to chill?”

“Let’s run it by Big Mac, see what she thinks,” Kira said, beckoning for us to follow her.

“This is getting out of hand. I agreed to do this, but I don’t want to get reamed by the council—”

“Lilac, stop. It’ll be fine—and besides, that’s why we’re going to practice, so we can make sure you’re prepared. It’s as much for you as it is for me,” I assured him.

We found Big Mac in her room with Mrs. Smith. Big Mac didn’t even bother pretending she was happy to see us as we came through the door.

“What now?” she sighed, giving Mrs. Smith an exasperated look. “Can I ever have a minute without being bothered? Without someone coming to me and wanting something from me?”

*Did I make a mistake coming to them?* Maybe Lilac was right and we should’ve waited until morning. I didn’t want to get on Big Mac’s bad side, especially not right now, when I needed her so badly.

“Sorry to bother you. Marta just had an idea about setting up a mock trial, and—” Kira’s voice was drowned out by the sound of a car roaring up to the house. Everyone ran out to the porch just in time to see Jay, Jacqueline, and Lola bursting out of the car.

Lola’s eyes were wide with fear as she screamed, “Get inside, now! We got vampires incoming!”

**Episode 2042**

GREYSON

It took every bit of self-control I had to stop myself from pulling Cali back and out of Aysel’s grip. She shot a me a distressed look over her shoulder.

*I’m watching you, don’t worry*, I mind linked to her immediately. But on the inside, I was very worried. I had no idea where this was going, and I knew that if things took a turn, we’d have an uphill battle in front of us. This party was chock full of Vanguards, not to mention a bunch of other packs that seemed to be on board with whatever they were about to do.

Aysel turned back and glanced at me, a thin smile lingering on her lips as she led Cali toward the other Lunas. Was Aysel just doing what the ceremony required, or was this personal and fueled by the way I’d rejected her earlier? There was no way for me to know if Aysel was really as vindictive as she seemed, or to what lengths she would go in order to get Cali out of the picture. I took a deep breath and held it, afraid to breathe, afraid to move, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

*What are you freaking out about?* Xavier asked me, his expression neutral. I could tell that he was trying to keep his cool, but also that he was undoubtedly taking cues from how tense I’d become.

*I’m not freaking out*, I lied. I would never admit it to him, but I was already going over a plan of attack in my head and calculating how quickly I’d be able to cross the courtyard to get to Cali if I needed to.

*Bullshit, brother. I can feel you freaking out.*

*Maybe you’re getting your wires crossed with your own worry. I’m fine, I’m just concerned about being separated from Cali.*

Xavier snorted out loud and covered it with a cough. *Me, freak out? Nope. I’m calm, only surveying the situation. Believe me, I’m not happy about whatever this is, either, but nothing’s changed. We have to keep a close eye on her. If anything weird goes down, anything at all, we’ll shut this shit down. Moon whatever ceremony or not.*

*You just make sure to keep an eye on her*, we both mind linked at the same time.

We shot each other angry looks, and I gritted my teeth and tried to push my irritation away. I knew that if I wasn’t careful, I’d blow up the Luna spell and all hell would break loose. Xavier getting on my nerves was nothing new, so I couldn’t let that put us at a disadvantage—especially now that Cali was being put on the spot like this. It was such bad luck that this little ceremony was focused directly on the Lunas. Thank god Cali hadn’t gone through with merely drawing on her Luna mark with a permanent marker. I would’ve laughed at the memory of Cali attempting to do just that if I hadn’t been so stressed out. All I could think about was how much trouble we’d have been in right now if she’d gone that route.

I looked at Xavier and forced a smile. “We’re both looking out for her,” I said through gritted teeth. “She knows that.”

Just then, an eerie wind instrument started up and drew our attention to the fountain, where Cali was standing shoulder to shoulder with the other Lunas. A few of the other women looked a bit nervous, too.

Aysel moved away from the group and stepped into the fountain, letting the water splash down her back so that it wet her hair and turned the back of her clingy gown transparent. I couldn’t help but remember seeing her naked not too long ago. Tonight had been nothing if not eventful.

Attendants approached and instructed all of us—the spectators—to step back, ushering us into a large circle around Cali and the others.

Aysel turned to face the Lunas. “You all are here tonight because you are official Lunas of your pack. It is a great honor to hold that mantle—I hope all of you realize that.” Aysel’s voice echoed forcefully throughout the courtyard. “Now, I’m going to ask that you all join hands and form a circle around the fountain.”

Xavier and I moved so that we didn’t lose sight of Cali as the women followed Aysel’s instructions. I noticed that Ava was looking straight at me, and it made me uneasy. I couldn’t read the look she was giving me, which didn’t help. There hadn’t been time for me to talk to her about what she’d seen: me and Aysel, in what could only be described as a compromising position. I didn’t want it to become yet another thing that Ava could use to cause trouble. I could only imagine how pleased she would’ve been to share that kind of news with Cali.

Aysel raised her hands and turned her face up into the moonlight as the music from the wind instrument continued. “We’re gathered here to honor Seluna, and to ask her to bestow her blessing upon these worthy Lunas. Let her divine favor shine on the Vanguard pack to unite us all.”

She closed her eyes and paused—for dramatic effect, I was sure. But it was working. The courtyard fell into reverent silence, and no one moved or spoke or sipped from the glasses in their hands.

I glanced at Xavier. It was clear that neither of us liked the sound of this. Attendants stepped forward to hand each woman an item. One of the women got flowers, another a tangle of herbs, another a crystal, and so on. Then, each attendant moved to take the four cardinal positions on the compass. It was clear that they’d either practiced this quite a lot, or that the Vanguard pack put on these little ceremonies quite often.

“The moon goddess requires an offering,” Aysel continued, her voice louder now.

I definitely didn’t like the sound of that. Alarm bells were clanging like crazy in my head. I looked around, trying to see if I could get any cues from the crowd, but there were none. Everyone was staring at the women, absolutely rapt. Maybe I was being paranoid, but the “offering” part of a ceremony was typically when shit got weird. In my mind, the word “offering” was often used interchangeably with “sacrifice,” and there was no way in hell I was going to let my mate become anybody’s sacrifice.

*Be ready*, I mind linked to Xavier, who replied with a stiff nod. *We have no idea what that crazy woman is planning on doing. At least if things go south we can protect Cali.* It wasn’t often I was grateful to have my brother watching mine and Cali’s back, but tonight was definitely turning into one of those times.

“Tonight, the moon goddess will be presented with something special and rare—a Luna who serves not one, but two magnificent Alphas. Behold, Caliana!” Aysel said, setting off a wave of murmurs from the spectators.

I clenched my jaw. Every muscle in my body felt taut and ready to act. *What is Aysel up to?* Aysel stepped out of the fountain and approached Cali. I could feel her nerves going into overdrive.

*Keep calm*, I mind linked to her. Xavier started to step forward, but I reached out and put a hand on his chest, stopping him. “Keep it together,” I hissed.

Xavier strained against my hold, bristling in classic Xavier fashion. “If something happens to her—”

“I know,” I said. Then I mind linked, *But we can’t strike too early*.

Suddenly we both noticed movement on the balcony. It was Lucian in all his princely glory, crown and all. He stepped out of the shadows so that he too was bathed in the silvery moonlight. He looked down on us with a smile on his face, like we were his lowly subjects. At that moment, I would’ve given anything to knock that smile off his face—and that ridiculous crown off his head.

Aysel took Cali by the hand and led her to the fountain as two people approached—a man and a woman, both draped in glimmering robes. The two of them bowed before Aysel and let their robes slide off of their shoulders. Naked and staring straight ahead, they both stepped into the fountain.

“Step forward, dear Lunas, and present your offerings!” Aysel shouted.

Each woman took a tentative step forward and held their offerings out in front of them. After a moment of tense hesitation, Cali lifted hers—a crystal. It glittered brilliantly in the moonlight, and I wondered if I was the only one who noticed how badly Cali’s hand was shaking. I willed her to calm down, trying to send my strength to her so that she’d be able to keep her cool. *It’s okay, Cali, I’m here*, I thought, not wanting to mind link in case my sudden intrusion into her thoughts did more harm than good.

Aysel pulled a dagger from the delicate folds of her gown and held it in the air, raising her eyes to the moon. The blade glinted menacingly in the moonlight, and just like that, I was in panic mode. I tore my gaze away from Cali, just as Aysel spoke again.

“Seluna, please accept our offering,” she cried. Then she pointed the dagger right at Cali.

**Episode 2043**

I gasped, my eyes riveted to the glinting point of Aysel’s dagger. I looked at Aysel, but she was staring at the dagger, and I couldn’t read the look on her face. My mind immediately jumped to the worst-case scenario. Had Aysel figured out that my Luna mark was only a spell? Suddenly, the word “offering” took on a grave new meaning. Was I going to be sacrificed, right here, right now? Punished for my lie—for desecrating the sacred Luna mark—by being hacked to pieces and fed to some mad werewolf moon goddess? I shuddered against the chilly breeze that swept through the courtyard at that very moment, as if giving life to my fears.

I hazarded a glance at Greyson and Xavier. They were both restraining each other while doing their best not to draw attention to themselves. Should I do something? Use my Fae powers to blast the dagger—and Aysel—across the fountain? But then what? We were surrounded by the Vanguard pack. One wrong move would set off a pack war, and it would be all my fault. I couldn’t take that kind of heat. But then again, I was staring at a knife—a knife in the hands of a woman who I didn’t know, and who I certainly didn’t trust.

Aysel raised the dagger higher in the air and then lowered it three times in a strange, jerky movement, her lips moving silently. Then, to my surprise and overwhelming relief, Aysel directed the dagger to one of the other Lunas and repeated the movement. It was only a bit of pomp for her ceremony, not a threat. Yikes, my heart was pounding so fast I was a bit light-headed.

Aysel went around to each of the other women until she’d performed the strange movement in front of all of the Lunas.

“Now, place your offerings in the offering pool,” Aysel said, as soon as she’d pointed her dagger at the final Luna.

I did as she instructed, shuddering at the word “pool,” which reminded me of the hideous ghost pool that had brought so much pain, suffering, and chaos to the pack. Ever since our hard-won battle with Letifer, it seemed like we’d all taken pains to avoid bodies of water. It only took a moment to realize that the others weren’t being pulled into the fountain by a ghostly hand as they made their offerings. Breathing a little easier, I followed their lead. I bent down and dropped my crystal into the water. I didn’t take my eyes off Aysel’s dagger for even a second, which helped me avoid looking at the two naked people standing stock still in the fountain beside her.

*The Vanguards sure love nudity*, I thought to myself.

The other Lunas had stepped back into their places in the circle around the fountain after they’d dropped their offerings into the water, and I followed suit.

*Now what? Shouldn’t there be smoke or chanting or prayer? Something?* Part of me was a little disappointed at the thick, uneventful silence that followed. *This can’t be all there is to it, right?*

Aysel looked up to the sky again. “Seluna, please accept these humble offerings and look favorably upon the Vanguard pack.” Aysel closed her eyes and bowed her head, her hands clasped in front of her.

I braced myself. *This is it. This must be the moment.* I was so sure that the sky was going to crack open, or that there was going to be lightning or high winds, or that a bunch of ghosts were going to rise up out of the fountain. But again, there was nothing.

Aysel lifted her head and opened her eyes, and her expression was, dare I say, pleasant.

“The ceremony is complete!” Aysel called out. “The guests can now return to the ballroom for their assignments.”

*Assignments? What is this, school?* The crowd began to move back inside, and a moment later, Greyson and Xavier appeared at my side.

“What in the hell was the point of that?” I whispered.

“Beats me,” Xavier said. “Are you okay?”

I shrugged. “I think so.” I almost added that I was a little underwhelmed by the ceremony, but that would probably annoy them no end. I was sure they were just happy that the ceremony hadn’t required them to jump into an epic battle against droves of Vanguard werewolves.

“Do you feel anything? Did they use magic on you? Was that crystal enchanted?” Greyson took a quick peek into the fountain, where the crystal sat unassumingly under the water.

“No, looks like it was all a religious ceremony, not magical. I feel fine—though I have a feeling I’m going to have nightmares about that knife for a while.” I could have sworn I had seen the tiniest flash of real menace in Aysel’s eyes as she held the knife up to me. Maybe the atmosphere of this place was getting to me.

“You can sleep with me,” Greyson and Xavier said in unison, before exchanging a pissed off look.

“I mean, in case you have nightmares,” Greyson added.

“Maybe we should go inside,” I said. The intensity of both men’s attention combined was too much, and it made me feel a little flustered. I’d never thought I’d say this, but I was looking forward to the two of them not being quite so… on the same page. Another gust of wind blew into the courtyard, and I shivered. “It’s getting cold; we can argue over sleeping arrangements later.”

Ava slunk over to join us as we followed the others back into the palace. “Did I miss something, or was that just a silly ceremony of nothingness?” she asked, with one of her patented hair flips.

I rolled my eyes, wishing that she would just disappear. I had enough to think about without having her around. Ava slowed a bit so that she fell into step with Xavier, who was a few paces behind me.

“Get lost,” Xavier snapped. I couldn’t help but smile. As usual, though, Ava refused to take the not-so-subtle hint and remained at Xavier’s side as if he hadn’t said a thing. “She just doesn’t pick up on any social cues,” Xavier grumbled under his breath.

“I wonder what our ‘assignments’ are?” Greyson mused as we filed back into the ballroom.

The night had been so crazy already that I had no idea what else Lucian and Aysel could possibly have in store for us. That weird—and kind of boring—ceremony should’ve capped off the night, but it was clear that Lucian and his sister didn’t know when to end a party.

“Let’s not jump to any conclusions,” Xavier suggested. “Let’s hear what the mighty prince and princess have to say.”

There was an unmistakable buzz of excitement in the air amongst the guests. Clearly, we weren’t the only ones who were curious about our assignments. Lucian was seated in a chair—dare I say a legit throne—in the center of the room, and he had a huge silver chalice in his hand. He reached into the chalice and pulled out a key.

“Quiet down, everyone!” he said, waving the key in the air. He had a crooked grin on his face that was making me more than a little unsettled. “Now, for our first assignment. The first bedroom will go to our very special guest, Caliana.”

Lucian beamed and motioned for me to approach. I walked toward him, people making a path for me in a manner that made me feel like Moses parting the Red Sea—only this sea was made of envious werewolves instead of waves.

“Thank you,” I said, bowing awkwardly because I wasn’t sure what else you were supposed to do when a prince presented you with a room key.

Lucian cupped his hand over mine as he handed it over. “It’s my pleasure, Caliana. One of my attendants will show you to your room.”

“Okay,” I said as I did my best to avoid the intensity of his stare. I retreated to Greyson and Xavier’s side as Lucian reached into the chalice again and announced the next bedroom.

Seconds later, an attendant approached. “Come with me, please.”

I nodded and followed the attendant, Greyson and Xavier on either side of me as we threaded our way through the guests.

“Stop!” Lucian boomed. Everyone turned and stared at us. I looked around, wondering what I’d done wrong. Lucian got up from his throne and approached. “You must have misunderstood. Everyone is assigned their *own* room for the night.” He handed Xavier and Greyson a key each. “Apologies if I was unclear. I hope you all have a blissful sleep, and my attendants will be at your service if you need anything at all.” His gaze lingered on me. “And I’ll be seeing you… in my dreams,” he added, before turning and sauntering away.

My cheeks warmed with embarrassment, and I looked from Xavier to Greyson, distracted and confused as I tried to make sense of what had just happened.

“What was all that about?” Xavier asked as the attendant beckoned for us to follow once again.

“Yeah, in his dreams? Could this guy be any weirder?” Greyson whispered, taking care that the attendant didn’t hear him.

I ignored them, lost in my own thoughts and knowing, deep down, that Lucian’s words held the promise that I might be seeing him again, whether I wanted to or not.

We were nearly at the top of the palatial winding staircase when I froze, my stomach suddenly in knots. I turned to my mates, who were both looking at me with concern.

“What is it, Cali?” Greyson asked.

“We can’t spend the night.” I lowered my voice even more. “Kira told me that my Luna marks will fade by morning. We have to get out of here before dawn!”

**Episode 2044**

VIOLET

I lay there staring at the ceiling, completely still, afraid to move.

Charlie leaned over me with a worried look on his face. “Are you okay?”

I nodded. My mind was racing a mile a minute, and I couldn’t quite get my mouth to form words yet. I’d just had full-on sex for the very first time. With my mate. I played back every moment, every touch and sigh and kiss. I couldn’t believe that it had finally happened.

“Are you sure you’re okay? You look a little… shell-shocked.”

I nodded again, my mind still sorting through the jumble of emotions I was feeling.

“If you’re okay then why aren’t you talking to me?”

I looked at him, trying to choose my words carefully before I spoke. Honestly, I wasn’t sure how to voice how I was feeling without hurting Charlie’s feelings. It wasn’t that losing my virginity had been disappointing—quite the opposite. I’d enjoyed it. Charlie had been sensitive and considerate throughout, and I was sure he’d enjoyed it, too. I just didn’t feel the way I’d expected to feel. In all the movies I’d seen where a girl had sex for the first time, afterward she acted like the world was a new place—like when Dorothy entered Oz and the world changed from something dull and boring into an exciting place with vibrant colors. It wasn’t like that at all right now. Everything looked and felt exactly the same.

“Did I hurt you? Is that it?”

I turned to face him, noting how distressed he looked. I didn’t want either of us to remember our first time together as some tragic event. I kissed him, trying to shake off the weirdness I was feeling. “You didn’t hurt me, Charlie, not at all. You were wonderful, it’s just that…”

Charlie looked at me wide-eyed, wincing a bit, like he was afraid of what I was going to say next.

“Well, it’s only… do I look different to you?” Maybe I wasn’t supposed to feel different on the inside—maybe the change was on the outside. Would people be able to tell what I’d done? That I was no longer a virgin?

Charlie’s distressed look changed to one of confusion. “Seriously?” He peeked under the covers. “Nope, you look just as beautiful as before.”

I smacked him with a pillow, and he laughed. “I’m serious, Charlie! I don’t know, this is all… It’s a big thing! I’m trying to come to terms with it.”

“Okay, okay, I get it.” He brushed a strand of hair out of my face and kissed me softly on the lips before pulling away. He looked thoughtful now and had a faraway look in his eyes. “I remember my first time. The aftermath was definitely a little strange, so I get what you’re going through, Violet. Deep down, I felt like something had shifted, but I couldn’t put my finger on whether it really had or if I was just imagining it. I actually stood in the mirror right after, examining myself from head to toe for at least an hour, convinced that I’d changed and that everyone was going to be able to tell somehow just from looking at me. The truth was, nothing had changed. I was still the same Charlie, inside and out.”

I thought about it, concentrating a little, trying to see if I could sense even the smallest shred of change inside myself. “I guess I *do* feel different, in a way. For one thing, I feel closer and more connected to you than I ever thought possible.”

I thought about how vulnerable I’d felt before, during, and of course after. I couldn’t imagine having shared such a special moment with anyone but Charlie.

A slow smile spread across Charlie’s face. “I feel that way, too. Do you think it’s because we’re mates?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know… But I like it.”

“I like it, too.” Charlie pulled me close, and I melted into him, inhaling his scent.

I relaxed and closed my eyes as I buried my face in his chest. The awkwardness I’d felt only moments before dissipated, and I finally started to feel more like myself. I opened my eyes and looked up at Charlie, and he looked at me. At least I knew that I’d made the right decision and had chosen the right person. Feeling regret after something like that would have been the worst. No, there was no doubt that I felt comfortable and secure with my mate—and then I remembered that things hadn’t been so secure earlier. Someone had gone to a lot of trouble to lure me into an abandoned theater to try to kill me—and they might still be trying, for all I knew. I shuddered, remembering how the chandelier had crashed to the ground, missing us by inches. It was unsettling to think that they’d almost succeeded. I shuddered again.

“Are you cold?” Charlie asked, already rubbing his hands up and down my arms to warm me up.

“No, I’m not cold—it’s just that everything happened so fast that I haven’t had time to really think about what happened to us at the theater.” Having sex for the first time definitely had a way of moving everything else onto the backburner, but now that it was over, the reality of my situation was hard to ignore.

“I promise, we’ll figure all of that out. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

I flashed a tentative smile at Charlie, wishing it were all that simple. *That’s nice to hear, but I’m just as concerned for you as I am for me.* I felt responsible somehow. After all, he’d come as close to being killed as I had, and if he hadn’t been following me, he wouldn’t have been put in such a dangerous situation in the first place. I thought about the phone call and how the strange voice had told me to come alone.

“You could’ve been hurt too, Charlie. It’s my fault that—”

“No, don’t go down that path. Besides, we told Rishika and Artemis what happened, and they’re as tough as they come. They’ll help us get to the bottom of whatever’s going on, don’t worry.”

“I hope so,” I said.

I threw back the covers and started to get up. Suddenly, I felt self-conscious about being naked—which was crazy since I was a werewolf, Charlie was my mate, and we’d seen each other naked more times than I could count. I guessed that it was different this time because being naked in front of Charlie had a different meaning now, one that involved a new type of intimacy that I’d never had with anyone before. Pushing away my embarrassment, I hopped out of bed. My eyes caught on the knife lying on my dresser, and another wave of anxiety coursed through me.

Charlie got up as well, stretching and yawning. I watched his reflection in the mirror, admiring his muscular body and remembering how good it had felt to be in his strong arms. He came up behind me, his eyes on the knife as well as he wrapped his arms around me and propped his chin on my shoulder. “You were a genius to use that.”

“I was lucky to find it,” I replied. It had just been lying there. Had the killer dropped it, or left it there on purpose with plans to come back for it and us it on me? I had no idea, and I wished that I didn’t even have to wonder about something like that.

Charlie picked it up and examined the blade closely, his eyes narrowed. “It would have been impossible to bust through those doors, otherwise. And my shoulders are still pretty sore from trying,” he said, rolling his shoulders and placing the knife back on the dresser.

We turned at the sound of commotion outside. We hurried to the window and looked out. Something was up—a bunch of pack members were gathering in the yard, and it didn’t look like it was a social get-together.

“We’d better go see what’s going on,” I said, hurriedly pulling on my clothes and bumping into the dresser in the process. The knife clattered loudly to the floor.

Charlie picked it up and was about to put it back on the dresser when he paused, holding it under the dresser light. “Did you see this?”

I looked closely, noticing the markings that I’d seen on the blade earlier. “Yeah, I saw that, but I couldn’t tell what it was.”

Charlie moved the knife back and forth under the light. “To me, it looks like initials.”

“Really?” I took the knife from him. It was pretty dirty. I scraped a bit of the dirt from the blade before I looked again, holding it closer to the light. “It looks like ‘CB.’ Who could that be? Do you know anyone with those initials?”

Charlie finished getting dressed, his brow furrowed in thought. “No, I don’t know a person—but I definitely know the place.”

**Episode 2045**

GREYSON

Cali was right, I realized. If her Luna marks faded, the Vanguard pack would know that we’d deceived them. The last thing we needed right now was another pack war. The Redwood pack still needed time to decompress and shake off all the horrors we’d seen from our last fight with Letifer. There was no way to know exactly how the Vanguards would take to being misled. And I doubted any one of us wanted to find out.

I cursed under my breath. I should have thought of it before, but I hadn’t realized that Lucian would expect us to spend the night. Now that I’d been around the man and understood how his “parties” worked, it was completely on brand for him. I’d had about enough of Lucian and his royal bullshit. I was nothing like him, and I was so glad of that. Lucian was the type to go around beating his chest, demanding respect by adopting some trumped up, outdated title. Who talked of being a prince in this day and age, especially within the werewolf community? It was one of the stupidest things I’d heard in a long time.

I looked at Xavier, thinking that I could definitely picture him pulling the same type of shit. There was nothing Xavier liked more than power, especially when he could lord it over people. I wasn’t obsessed with power, per se, but I was an Alpha and I did expect to be treated as such—which was why Lucian’s superior act was starting to grate against my sensibilities more and more as the night wore on. I could only imagine how much it was getting under Xavier’s skin. I was surprised he hadn’t flown off the handle already and blown our cover.

The attendant stopped before a door situated right in the middle of the long hallway and took Cali’s key. He twisted it in the ancient-looking keyhole and then opened the door with a flourish. I had to stop myself from rolling my eyes. He bowed and motioned for Cali to enter, but she hesitated on the threshold.

“Do you know where my mates are going to be staying?” she asked politely.

“Certainly. They will be in rooms down the hall. I hope you find your suite satisfactory, Caliana, and please do let me know if you need anything.” He bowed again and started off down the hall.

Xavier and I looked from him back to Cali, not ready to follow him yet.

*We’ll reconvene in your room, Cali, when the attendant leaves*, I said. Xavier and Cali nodded in agreement. The attendant turned to look at us, waiting. I took one last look at Cali before hurrying to join him.

Xavier elbowed me in the side. “Give me some space.”

“Give *me* some space,” I hissed as I elbowed him back, my annoyance spiking. “The sooner this co-Alpha thing is over, the better.”

Not only was I being forced to spend the night in this strange palace from hell, but I had to be away from Cali and had already spent my fill of time with my brother. The night had shaped up to be even worse than I’d imagined, and I was already fantasizing about being comfortable and safe in our pack house—preferably with Cali lying beside me in my bed.

“This room is for you, sir,” the attendant said, taking the key and opening the door. I noticed that he didn’t do the flourish and bow when he opened my door—it was clear that Lucian had told him to lay it on thick for Cali. Not surprising in the least.

“I’ll be in touch,” Xavier said as he left with the attendant.

As soon as the door clicked shut, I tried to mind link with Cali. *Hey, can you hear me? You doing okay in there?*

I waited a moment, but there was no response. Maybe she was asleep already—the night *had* been long and draining. Or maybe we were too far apart for it to work. I didn’t like the thought of that. I started pacing the room, deciding that I couldn’t just sit there and do nothing. I was going to go check on her, to reassure her that I was looking out for her. I’d promised to keep her safe by any means, and I couldn’t do that if I wasn’t with her.

I opened the door slowly and poked my head out, checking the hallway. Not unexpectedly, there was a guard, or someone who looked like one, lingering between my room and Cali’s. I smiled at the guard when our gazes connected, and then ducked back into the room and closed the door. What the fuck was this, anyway? A guard? Really? I pounded my fist into my palm and started pacing back and forth again, faster this time. I’d agreed to come to a party, not be held captive by a lunatic “prince” and his sister. I looked at the window and considered going out that way. I went over and unlatched it, then stuck my head out to survey the situation. It wasn’t going to work. I would have to scale the palace wall, and I wasn’t even sure which room was Cali’s. With my luck, I’d climb right into Aysel’s chambers. I shuddered.

“Shit,” I cursed under my breath. I threw myself face down onto the bed, frustrated and pissed and not liking how out of control I felt. The bad feeling I’d had about this place from the moment we’d walked in had only intensified. I had to get Cali out of here. None of us had any real clue what Lucian’s game plan was, or why he’d engineered this lame spectacle, but I knew he was up to something. There was no question. If he’d wanted to make some sort of power play, why hadn’t he just stated his intentions instead of going to all this trouble to trap us under the guise of a party? And that ceremony had been a joke and a half. Lucian was playing games, and I wasn’t into games. I liked to know upfront what I was dealing with.

I rolled onto my back and stared at the ornate wood paneling on the ceiling, my mind busy with thoughts of Cali, as usual. I thought of her in her gown, the curve of her back, her sleek arms, my Luna mark on her shoulder—right next to Xavier’s, but I wouldn’t let that ruin the image. I wished that I could just be with her, even if it meant leaving the pack behind. I’d done that before, and I could do it again—especially with Cali at my side. Hell, I’d happily give up being Alpha if it meant that we could be together.

Before I knew it, my mind had drifted to the three witches. Could they really give me that life? The one thing I’d fantasized about since the first day I’d laid eyes on Cali? Was trusting them something I was really willing to risk?

I turned at the sound of my door opening, my heart racing. Could it be Cali? Had she snuck into my room because she couldn’t stand to be away from me, just like I couldn’t stand to be away from her?

But then I sat up to see Aysel leaning in the doorway. Her silhouette was something straight out of a magazine, and she was dressed to kill.

“What are you doing here, Aysel?” I demanded.

“Oh, I only wanted to drop by and see if you approved of the room—and to make sure that you didn’t need, or want, anything.”

I sprung up off the bed, not wanting to give her any ideas or make her seduction any easier. “I’m fine.”

“I can see that,” Aysel said as she drifted over to me.

“Listen, I’m not in the mood for any more of your games. It’s been a long, weird night, and I want to get some sleep.”

Aysel flashed me a puzzled look. “Games? Do you think this is a game? Games are things that you play with the hope of winning. I’m a princess, so I always get what I want. I don’t need to bother with games.”

I brushed past her on my way to the door, and her soft floral scent drifted into my nose, stopping me in my tracks for a moment. It reminded me of something Maren used to wear. I reached for the doorknob.

“Stop.” Aysel’s voice was more forceful than I’d heard it before. “I haven’t given you permission to leave.”

I turned to face her, anger already taking root in my gut. These Vanguards were really full of themselves. It was their prerogative if they wanted to live in this royal dream world that they’d crafted for themselves, but I wasn’t going to be a part of this bullshit any longer.

“Game or not, I’m one prize you’ll never win, Your Highness.” I twisted the doorknob with definitive force and opened the door.

“I’m warning you, dear Greyson, if you walk out that door, you’ll regret it.”

**Episode 2046**

XAVIER

I was pacing back and forth in my room, like a caged animal. That was what I was, pretty much. A captive, a prisoner, a fool for thinking that this party could be anything but this—a load of strange bullshit. I looked around. This was a nice cage, but I wasn’t all that impressed. I’d seen better, and far preferred my own décor. I was into a more modern look, and though all the furniture and rugs and paintings were in impeccable shape, most of this stuff looked like it had been here since the beginning of time.

I looked at the door, wondering if the guard I’d seen lurking in the hallway earlier had finally moved on, or if hanging around in our wing was his official duty for the night. Why would a party need guards, anyway? I answered my own question immediately, thinking that the guard was Lucian’s way of watching the three of us so that we couldn’t rendezvous. It was crazy to think that Lucian would go to such lengths to keep us apart—especially since as far as he knew, the three of us shared an Alpha-Luna bond. Where did this guy get off, separating us and forbidding us from sharing a room? *Control freak, much?* Still, with how the night had gone until now, nothing Lucian did would surprise me in the least.

I jumped at the sound of a door slamming somewhere nearby, and seconds later, someone raced past. I threw my door open in time to see Aysel running down the hall, but I couldn’t see her face. I looked in the direction she’d come from. *What is she running from?* I noticed then that the guard was gone. Without a second’s hesitation, I headed to Cali’s room. I passed Greyson’s door on the way. *I’ll check in on him later. I need to get to Cali, first.* I got to Cali’s room, and to my surprise, Greyson was already there. Seeing him looking all smug and comfortable and standing way too close to Cali burned me up. I struggled to keep my expression neutral as I looked at both of them, knowing that I couldn’t show my displeasure or even really allow myself to feel it, since we needed to keep the Luna spell working.

“Are you okay?” Cali asked as she rushed up to me.

That was the type of reaction I lived for. I sighed and pulled her into a hug, trying my best not to give Greyson a smile of triumph as he watched us embrace. “I’m fine, Cali, thanks, but I think it’s time we get the hell out of here.”

“I agree,” Greyson said, his expression unreadable. “I was telling Cali that I wasn’t sure how Lucian and Aysel would react if they found out she isn’t a Luna.”

“I doubt it would be good—especially after they included her in that bogus ceremony. They’d probably try to make out like we’d disrespected their customs or something. Oh, and speaking of Aysel, I just saw her running down the hall. Did something happen with her?” I asked, unable to ignore my desire to possibly catch Greyson in some sort of entanglement with the princess. I’d seen the way she looked at him, after all. I wondered if Cali had noticed, too.

Greyson shook his head. “Nothing to worry about. We should get going.” He moved toward the door, and I followed, but Cali grabbed both of us by the arm, stopping us.

“Are you sure this is safe? Maybe she should wait until a little later, when everyone’s asleep.”

Greyson tittered. “I doubt that there’s going to be much sleeping going on around here.”

He was right. This whole shindig had seemed like a thinly veiled sex party from beginning to end, but we couldn’t let that stop us. “You’re probably right about that, but the longer we wait, the riskier it’ll get. Dawn is probably hours away, and we don’t know how long it might take us to escape this place.” I took a quick peek out the door. “Fuck!” I shut the door as quickly and as quietly as I could.

“What?” Cali asked, her eyes wide.

“The guard—he’s back doing his rounds.” I looked at Greyson. “We could probably take him out easy, but then what? We’d only draw attention to ourselves and be surrounded before we knew it.” I doubted Lucian would have a guard posted here if he didn’t actually plan on using him if someone stepped out of line.

“True. Maybe you should go first,” Greyson suggested. “I’ll stay back with Cali, and then once it’s clear, we’ll follow at a safe distance.”

I laughed. “Nice try. If anyone’s staying with Cali, it’s me.” Greyson was such a sneak, always trying to do whatever he could to get Cali to himself.

“You’re worried about the wrong thing, brother. This isn’t about stealing time with Cali, it’s about our safety.”

“You think I don’t know that? What? Are you trying to imply that I would put keeping you away from Cali over her safety? Don’t be an idiot.”

“Take your own advice—”

“Stop it, both of you,” Cali said, stepping between us as she glared daggers at us both in equal measure. “Are you *trying* to bring trouble our way?” She jerked her thumb toward her back. “If you keep this up, dawn won’t matter, because the spell will be broken long before. If you two can’t manage to get along, the Luna marks will fade away, just like Kira warned us.”

“Cali’s right,” I huffed. Too bad Kira couldn’t have created a spell that made the marks grow in intensity and last longer the more Greyson and I fought.

“Well, on that we can agree. So, little brother, you going first?” Greyson cocked an eyebrow at me, looking pleased with himself.

I opened my mouth to respond with vitriol, but I stopped myself, knowing that Cali was watching me. I turned back to the door and swore to myself that when this was all over and we were back at the pack house, Greyson and I were going to have a little talk.

“Fine, I’ll go first. I *am* the bravest, after all, so it makes sense that I would be on the front lines.” Greyson rolled his eyes as I stepped close to him, getting in his face. “But if anything happens to her—”

“Nothing will happen to Cali,” Greyson said.

We locked eyes and stared at each other for a few beats.

“Well, it had better not, or it’ll be your ass,” I muttered, then turned back to the door and poked my head out again. The guard was moving down the hall, so I stepped out and headed in the other direction. I wondered if all of this was really necessary. It wasn’t like Lucian had demanded that we stay in our rooms—however, if that wasn’t what he wanted, then why the guards?

I slowed as I passed by the next door, wondering which guest might be staying inside. I pushed the thought away and kept moving. At the next door, I turned back to see Cali and Greyson coming out of her room. I gestured at them to keep coming. Beyond them, the guard turned a corner and disappeared. I exhaled and kept moving down the hall, feeling more than a little foolish that I was being forced to sneak around. I felt like a kid trying to sneak out of their parent’s house to go meet a girl.

My ears were perked up, and I was on high alert. The moment I heard a sound or caught a scent that didn’t feel right, I wouldn’t hesitate to pounce. I paused at the next door, realizing that I recognized the scent that lingered there. Ava. I kept moving and hoped like hell that she hadn’t sensed me, too. She could really muck things up if she came out and caught us. I took extra care to be quiet as I moved past her door. Up ahead, I spotted a small stairwell. I looked back over my shoulder. Cali and Greyson were still following.

*This might actually work. We might get the hell out of this fucking place in one piece.*

I reached the top of the stairwell and paused, waiting to see if I saw or heard anything at the bottom. I heard nothing. That was either a good sign, or a warning that someone was lying in wait. I motioned for Greyson and Cali to keep coming. I couldn’t shake the feeling that this was the calm before the storm.

I started down the stairs, keeping my ears pricked to catch any noise that suggested we’d been found out. I was halfway down when I stopped and looked behind me. *Shit, where are they?* Cali and Greyson were no longer right behind me. I stood and waited a beat—maybe they were being extra careful and taking their time. When a few long moments passed and they were still nowhere to be seen, I crept back up the stairs and peered into the hallway.

They were gone.

**Episode 2047**

My heart pounded as Xavier motioned for us to follow him. He wanted us to see that he was heading for what looked like a small staircase at the end of the hallway. Greyson held me close as we walked, one hand on my waist and the other holding my wrist as he pulled me along. I felt safe with him at my side. Greyson was much better at this sort of thing than I was. I’d seen him in action, both in his world and in the Fae world, and he was a natural at moving around undetected and seeing threats before they could get the jump on him. I had to follow his lead: move when he moved, stop when he stopped—which was exactly what he did, out of nowhere. Without a word, he slid a hand over my mouth and pulled me into an alcove. I was stunned and scared and my knees went weak.

*What’s going on?* I mind linked to him.

*Be still, love*, he replied, wrapping his arms around me and pulling me close, like he was shielding me. *Be still, and don’t move. Don’t even breathe if you can help it.*

I swallowed roughly. *What is it? Is it Lucian? Aysel? Maybe she’s just coming to get her gown back?* I knew that was a crazy thing to think, but I was panicking and my mind wasn’t quite firing on all cylinders.

*I don’t know—I heard something*, he said.

He started to peek out, then jerked back into cover in one fluid movement, like he did this sort of thing every day. He walked me backward and pressed himself against me as we melted deeper into the shadowed recesses of the alcove.

*I mean it, don’t even breathe, Cali. We’ll get through this, but we have to stay quiet*, he said.

I did as he said, holding my breath and squeezing my eyes shut. I was afraid to even look for fear that I would cry out and blow our cover. I didn’t stop breathing—that was impossible, of course—but I all but stopped, and I felt a tickle of sweat rolling down my back. We stood there holding each other, completely still. I could feel our hearts pounding in near unison, and I hoped that no one else could hear it, since I couldn’t calm mine down. I opened my eyes to sneak a look and almost gasped as a guard stopped right in front of us. He was looking in the other direction, but he was so close I could’ve reached out and touched him. I pressed my eyes shut again and tried to fight the panic rising in my chest.

*Look at me*, Greyson said.

I looked into his eyes. They were intense but steady. I let out a silent breath as the panic started to ebb away. An eternity—which was probably more like a second—later, the guard turned and headed off. I nearly collapsed into Greyson’s arms, I was so relieved, and my breathing slowly returned to normal. He smiled down at me as if to tell me that everything was okay, that nothing was wrong and that even if something was, he would take care of it. I knew that was true, and I also knew that if he hadn’t been right there with me, I wouldn’t have had the strength to stand still with danger lurking barely a foot away. There was no doubt in my mind that if I’d been on my own, I would’ve been caught for sure.

Greyson took one last cautious glance out into the hallway and then moved to leave, but I pulled him back and pressed my lips to his. I snaked my tongue into his mouth, and he moaned, leaning against the wall and letting me take the lead. Emotions swirled through me, fueled by danger and my waning fear and, most of all, by my love for him. Seeing him in action, protecting me and calming me down in the face of one of our more harrowing escapes, was the ultimate turn-on, and I wanted to rip his clothes off right then and there.

We heard a throat clearing right next to us and broke apart to see Xavier glaring at us.

“Really?” he hissed. “You had to do that here? Right now?”

Flustered for the millionth time that night, I tried to explain. “Xavier! Hi! We had a really scary near miss, and Greyson was just trying to comfort me—”

Xavier held up a hand. “Save it.”

He shook his head and headed back toward the stairwell without bothering to see if we were following this time.

I felt bad and wanted to explain—if that guard had just turned one inch the other way, we would’ve been caught, and it was almost worse not knowing what exactly would have happened to me if they had. “Xavier—you’re both supposed to be co-Alphas, and I’m supposed to be your co-Luna, and… it wasn’t what it looked like.”

To my surprise, Xavier brushed it off. “We don’t have time for this. We have to get you out of here,” he said. He shot a cold glance at Greyson. “Come on, brother, let’s get you to safety.”

Greyson and I exchanged a quick, awkward look as we followed Xavier to the staircase. We all took slow and careful steps down the stairs, stopping every now and again to make sure no one was coming from either direction. I didn’t want to be surprised again—in fact, I didn’t think I could handle any more unexpected moments tonight. When we got to the bottom of the stairs, Xavier stopped.

“Which way?” he whispered.

We were in yet another hallway. This place was like a maze with its palatial corridors. There was no way I could tell which way was going to lead us to an exit.

“How many hallways does this place have?” Xavier grumbled. He started to go left, but Greyson stopped him.

“Why that way?” Greyson whispered.

Xavier shrugged. “You’ve got a map memorized in that head of yours? I’m throwing darts and seeing what sticks. Better than standing around here waiting to get caught.”

“I disagree,” Greyson said. “We should go the other way.”

“If you want to lead then be my guest,” Xavier snarled. “I’m all too happy to take over escorting Cali.”

“Oh, I bet you are. She probably won’t even make it out because you’ll be too busy trying to one-up our kiss.”

“Brother, I could peck her on the cheek and it would one-up that dry-ass kiss I saw you giving her earlier.”

I rolled my eyes, starting to get frustrated. Who argued at a time like this? We had no idea what we were up against in this Vanguard fortress, but they wanted to argue about who was going to lead me out and away from danger?

“Why can’t you two stop this? Every time you stop and bicker like this you risk exposing me! Is that what you want, to expose me?” I whisper-yelled.

Both mates gave me chagrined looks, which made me feel more than a little powerful. I turned away from them and peered out into the hallway. Xavier was right, this place was literally all hallways. Then I noticed something up ahead—a doorway. It looked it led to the same library that I’d used to change out of my blanket and into my second gown of the night, which meant that we weren’t far from the ballroom. I paused, trying to get my bearings. All we had to do was retrace our steps, and we’d be back in the ballroom in no time.

I grabbed both their hands. “I’m leading this leg of the expedition.”

“Stop,” Greyson and Xavier whispered in unison.

“We have no idea if there are more guards,” Xavier said.

“Or if the royal court themselves are lurking down here somewhere,” Greyson added.

“Don’t tell me to stop, I’ve got this,” I hissed over my shoulder. “I know what I’m doing.”

I charged forward and dragged them behind me, growing more confident as we went. We were definitely going the right way. A few seconds later, we were standing in the doorway to the ballroom. We paused and peered inside. It was empty.

“Look,” I said, “there’s the foyer right over there. If we can just get to it, we’ll be in the clear.”

Greyson smiled at me. “Nice job, love.”

Xavier pulled me into a hug. “Never should have doubted you.”

I beamed at them. “Let’s go.”

I took their hands again and led them across the gleaming marble floor of the ballroom. It wasn’t that long ago that I’d been here dancing with Lucian and Andrei—and I hoped never to do so again. If I was lucky, I wouldn’t ever see either of those assholes ever again.

We turned at the sound of boots clomping over the floor as a wall of guards formed across the passageway to the foyer. Lucian emerged from behind them, his hands clasped behind his back and a strange smile on his face.

“Leaving so soon?”

**Episode 2048**

LOLA

I was screaming inside my head and probably on the outside too as Jay, Jacqueline, and I ran toward the pack house. Were the vampires following us? Had I just led them to a delicious blood buffet that consisted of all the people I loved?

*This is FUCKED, Lola!*

It was.

Looking over my shoulder as I ran, I couldn’t see anything other than trees. But that didn’t mean that the vampires weren’t on our tail. Jay’s driving had been no match to their speed, and I was certain that they’d followed us.

When we got to the house, Lilac, Kira, Big Mac, and Marta were all standing on the porch. They stared at us like confused baby ducklings that the vampires would eat in three seconds flat.

“Get inside, now!” I said, panting. “We got vampires incoming!”

“Vampires?” Big Mac asked, clearly irritated. “How? *When?*”

Before I could reply, Marta screamed and pointed, answering the question. We all turned around and gasped in horror. Five vampires streamed out of the tree line in predatory sync.

“What did you bring to our doorstep?” Big Mac demanded, glaring at me.

“It’s not her fault!” Jay looked offended on my behalf, all hot and indignant. He was such a good egg that I wanted to start crying. Though I should probably *not* go there right now.

The vampires continued to advance on us with slow, measured steps that made me think of cats ready to play with their prey.

“We were at a blood bar,” I told Big Mac. “Jacs took me—”

“You were *what*?” Big Mac asked.

“Hey, don’t throw me under the bus, this witch is scary!” Jacs said.

I swallowed roughly, staring at Big Mac. “The point is that they smelled that I was a werewolf and totally flipped.”

“Lola, it wasn’t your fault,” Jay repeated, squeezing my shoulder.

But no matter what he said, no matter how much I appreciated his support, I couldn’t help but feel that this totally *was* my fault. I should have immediately realized that the werewolf they were smelling at the bar was me and gotten the hell out of there before things had escalated to this.

I turned to face the vampires again and realized that it was just the drunken crew from the bar. Really, five wasn’t a bad number. It would’ve been *much* worse if they’d picked up reinforcements along the way.

“No matter whose fault it is,” Big Mac said, “I want all of you to stand back.”

She motioned for us to get to the porch and planted herself up front.

Just then, Echo stopped directly in front of the pack house.

His eyes were bloodshot, fangs on display.

A shudder ran through me.

“You are not welcome here,” Big Mac said firmly. “Go home.”

The vamps snickered. They had to be pretty wasted. Echo swayed slightly, squinting at Big Mac. “You don’t…” He sniffed. “You don’t smell like a wolf… wolf.”

The other vampires kept leering at us and grinning at each other. I started biting on my nails—oh, how I wished that Xavier and Greyson were here! The pack house felt vulnerable, and I hated that I was the one bringing this danger down on us.

I was lucky Big Mac was here to deal with this fucking mess.

“I may not be a wolf,” Big Mac said, “but I’m part of the Redwood pack, and you are trespassing. You can’t even get in this house, so you might as well leave.”

Tracer stepped forward, glaring as he pointed directly at me. “We just want that wolf. Who was trespassing on OUR property, might I add.”

I wanted to yell at him and stomp my feet, say that I *hadn’t* been trespassing. I was a vampire too! But would that help the situation or just make it even worse? *Crap!*

“You need to back off,” Jay told Tracer, stepping forward. “She wasn’t doing anything wrong.”

Echo laughed, signaling for the rest of those bastards to move. They walked in sync, and Echo was bold—or reckless—enough to plant his fucking foot on the first step of the porch. Everybody next to me recoiled, ready to dash into the house, but then Big Mac raised her hand.

A blast of energy like purple lightning erupted directly in front of Echo’s feet.

He flinched back with a squeal, and the rest of the vampires recoiled.

I was pretty sure they’d have been panting in shock if they’d been in possession of working lungs.

Echo’s eyes narrowed at Big Mac. “You’re a witch… witch.”

Big Mac scoffed. “You want a cookie for making the connection?”

“I—”

“Doesn’t matter,” Big Mac snapped. “I *am* a witch, and I’m protecting this pack.” She sneered. “You can’t even get in the house without being invited in, do you realize that? You drunk idiots should clear out right now before I turn you into popcorn.”

Echo’s eyes widened. “Popcorn… pop—”

“Yes, *popcorn*,” Big Mac said impatiently, her fingers glowing purple.

The drunk vampires glanced at each other. They clearly realized they’d been out-magicked and started to retreat backward, grumbling all the while.

“Fine. We’ll leave.” Echo’s gaze moved to me. “But your wolves had better stay the hell out of our haunts!”

“No problem!” I squeaked, waving him off.

He shook his head like he couldn’t figure out what was wrong with me, which would have offended me under other circumstances, but now wasn’t the time.

I breathed a sigh of relief as the vampires turned and zipped away, back into the tree line.

Thank *god* there hadn’t been an actual altercation.

“It’s okay,” Jay told me, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. “You’re okay.”

Was I, though?

I turned to Jay, knowing he’d basically excuse anything when it came to me. It was a fun superpower to have when it came to my mate, but I was pretty sure Big Mac didn’t feel the same way about me.

“What were you two thinking?” she demanded, pointing at me and Jacqueline. Jacs flinched—shit had just gotten even realer. “Why would you go to a blood club?”

Jacs pouted, defensive. “Don’t yell at us!”

“I am the one that just got you out of trouble, so I’ll do whatever the hell I want!” Big Mac barked, and Jay hugged me tighter.

“You don’t have to be so—”

“Who else among the people currently in this house could’ve cleared this up without any bloodshed, Jay?” Big Mac demanded. “You lot are way too reckless sometimes, I swear.”

Kira and Marta stood by the door. They stayed silent, looking uncomfortable while they watched the scene.

“You’re making such a fuss,” Jacs told Big Mac, huffing. “We just went to that bar to have some fun. It wasn’t a big deal.”

Big Mac’s eye twitched. She turned to me. “Lola, please tell your friend to shut the hell up before I turn her into a frog.”

Jacs gasped, terror making an appearance on her face. Her vanity must have switched into absolute panic mode at Big Mac’s threat.

I took a step forward, releasing myself from Jay’s protective cocoon. I knew I had to take responsibility here, otherwise Big Mac wasn’t gonna let this go. She was right about everything, anyway.

“I’m really sorry,” I said, staring at the witch. “I didn’t mean to cause any trouble. We just wanted to drink some, uh, blood. Like, real blood instead of animal blood. We messed up.”

Big Mac paused, rubbing her forehead before peering into my eyes. There was absolute silence for a brief moment, and her expression finally softened.

“I understand that all of this is really new for you, but that doesn’t excuse you from being careless.” She scowled. “Now’s not the time to be looking for trouble. You should know better.”

I pressed my lips together, nodding in agreement.

Even Jacs had shut up. *Imagine that.*

Marta gave me a sympathetic look, but she was the only one. Kira seemed just as stern as Big Mac, and Lilac had this worried expression on his face. With one last firm glare at me, Big Mac gestured for the three of them to follow her back into the house.

Jacs, Jay, and I were left alone on the porch. A quick moment later, Jacs grumbled something about heading to her room, and then it was just me and my mate, alone. I stared at Jay, my mind reeling, my heart pounding with anxiety and guilt.

“It’s okay,” he murmured, pulling me into a tight hug. “It all worked out. Don’t worry, baby.”

But how could I *not* worry?

I thought back to how furious the vampires had been when they’d realized there was a wolf at the blood bar, and how weird I’d been feeling at the pack house as a vampire-wolf hybrid among just wolves. I used to be half human and half wolf, and now I wasn’t a whole wolf, and I wasn’t a whole vampire either.

My entire life I had always been stuck in the middle, one way or another.

The realization was jarring.

Looking up at my mate, I burst into tears. “But what happens now, Jay? *Where* am I supposed to fit in?”

**Episode 2049**

I stood there frozen, staring at Lucian. He was backed by what looked like a whole army of soldiers. He had an actual “royal” guard, because of course he did, because this was a palace. That he’d casually invited us to what seemed to be a permanent sleepover in.

*HOW is this real life? WHAT is this annoying, arrogant asshole’s game? Let us leave at once, you extremely handsome creepy bastard!*

Thankfully for everyone, I kept those thoughts to myself. Greyson and Xavier seemed to await so much as a squeak from me to attack Lucian. I was scared shitless that an all-out fight was about to start. Lucian was a haughty little bitch, and my mates were extremely proud, formidable fighters, and way too confident in their ability to kill an army.

Literally.

But we were wildly outnumbered here, so there was absolutely no way that we’d be able to win. This wasn’t me being insecure—it was simple math! I wasn’t good at math, but even I could figure out that two versus, like, probably seventy was not a good ratio!

And what about afterward? After we lost the battle?

I swallowed thickly, blinking rapidly as my mind was suddenly flooded with visions of Xavier and Greyson chained up in some dungeon. Of course a place like this would have some kind of medieval torture chamber. Lucian would probably make Xavier lie in a coffin full of silver nails, and throw Greyson into a tank full of piranhas. No, he’d throw both of them into a tank full of piranhas!

Oh. My. *God*.

I could see it all happening, right before my eyes.

I could also see my mates stealing glances at each other.

*Okay, everyone calm down!* I mind linked with both my mates, gripping their hands tight. *Whatever you guys are planning, stop it!*

*I have no idea what you mean*, Greyson said, deadpan.

*We didn’t do anything*, Xavier replied in the most defensive manner ever, which he only used when he was fucking lying.

*Do not do anything stupid*, I said*. Please, for my sake*. *PLEASE.*

I could practically feel the tension rolling off the two of them as they glared at Lucian. Lucian, who looked at me alone. He was leering, really, and I could only assume that that was making Greyson and Xavier even more furious, so that was fun.

Not.

I wanted to tell the asshole to take a picture, it would last longer, but that didn’t seem to be like a good idea. I couldn’t tell my mates not to do anything stupid and then go ahead and do the stupid thing myself. I had to say something to Lucian, though—anything.

It seemed like I was the one he favored, whatever *that* meant, so it would’ve been the smartest for me to speak. Nevertheless, before I could open my mouth, Lucian beat me to it.

He chuckled.

“How unfortunate,” he said, his voice echoing. “You might not understand protocol back at the Redwood pack house, but the Vanguard pack takes hospitality very seriously.”

“Hospitality.” Greyson repeated the word with all the warmth of an iceberg.

“Of course!” Lucian said. “Sneaking out without saying goodbye? Now that’s just rude.” He waved us off. “I’ll have the guards escort you back to your chambers.”

*Oh my god, are we prisoners here now?*

Xavier stepped forward, and my breath caught. “We really do need to be going,” he said firmly. “We have a pack to look after, of course. We told everybody that we would be back tonight.”

Lucian gave Xavier a long look. His face broke into a smile so fake that it was fucking terrifying. “I’m sure the Redwoods will be happy to have a night to themselves, without the boss, so to speak. I have a special breakfast planned just for you, and I would hate to see my chefs so disrespected.”

I was about to tell Lucian that *I* felt disrespected right now, and that I couldn’t have given less of a fuck about his chefs. But then I reconsidered and realized that his chefs were probably forced to work for him forever after making the mistake of answering some shady employment add.

*Free the chefs!* I yelled inside my head, before I remembered that I should probably focus on freeing myself first.

*What the fuck is this motherfucker doing?* Xavier said to both me and Greyson, then, interrupting my thoughts.

*I don’t know, but we’re trapped in here*, Greyson replied.

No shit, Sherlock.

“Please, follow me,” Lucian said, and gestured with his hand. A couple of guards broke away from the group and moved to either side of our little group, next to Greyson and Xavier. I was sandwiched in the middle, between my mates, and that was the only comfort I had.

My heart sped up—in a bad way—as I glanced at the stony-faced guards. Lucian’s casual friendly vibe was the biggest lie of all—these men were obviously killing machines, about to take us out.

Lucian wasn’t letting us leave.

*But why? What does he want from us?* I asked my mates.

Greyson cleared his throat. “While we’re grateful for the Vanguard pack’s hospitality, my brother is right. We really do need to be going. The pack is counting on us to be back from the palace tonight. They are expecting us, and not being home on time could create a certain type of curiosity about our whereabouts.”

My throat was dry.

Was it me, or had Greyson just basically told Lucian that the pack knew where we were, and they might just casually come over and attack Lucian’s fancy ass if we weren’t back on time?

Because it seemed like *that* was exactly how Lucian interpreted his statement.

“Well,” he said, cocking his head at the subtle threat. “I’m sure the Redwood pack is smart enough to wait for their Alphas to return. It’s what any logical beta would do.”

Greyson stared at Lucian. “I assure you, our wolves are more than logical. They are formidable, with the kind of potential that could…” Greyson arched an eyebrow. “Stop an army.” He looked around with a smile of his own. “I’m sure they would’ve loved to see your gorgeous home.”

*Oh no, he did NOT SAY THAT!*

I was barely breathing here. My lungs felt so heavy that I had no fucking idea how to do it, and I squeezed Greyson’s hand, hard. Lucian paused at my mate’s words, but not long enough to show that there had been an impact.

“That’s wonderful,” Lucian said dismissively. It was like watching two passive aggressive mean girls going at each other, and I just wanted to crawl into a hole and die.

“But either way,” Lucian went on, “both you and Xavier said yourselves that you aren’t currently dealing with any type of danger, so there is no need for your pack to be concerned. All is well.”

*The danger we’re currently dealing with is* you*, jackass!* I wanted to scream at him, but I kept my mouth shut. I wasn’t feeling very good about staying quiet, though, because my two mates exchanged a glance.

I was ninety-nine percent sure they were mind linking without me again.

I was fairly sure they’d cooked up approximately fifteen different ways of getting out of this place already, and they all involved violence.

*NO!* I cut in. *Please, no don’t do anything rash, we’re completely outnumbered here!*

Xavier’s voice sounded like a groan. *We can’t just roll over and let Lucian do whatever he pleases, Cali.*

*But the risk is too big*, I said. *Lucian probably won’t kill me, for whatever creepy reason that I don’t even wanna think about, but I’m pretty sure that he’d kill you both. And then I’d be left alone! With him!*

My mates gripped my hands so tight that their touch felt like fire.

*Fuck, she’s got a point*, Xavier said. *If he touches Cali, I’m going to tear his guts out and hang them from one of those fucking chandeliers.*

I refrained from telling Xavier that Lucian had propositioned me earlier. No need to go there. None at all. As for Greyson, he’d been eerily silent for the past few seconds. Somehow, that was even worse than him spouting obscenities.

He pressed his lips together, his sharp grey eyes sliding from me to Lucian again. His voice was firm. “I understand that you only want to be hospitable and honor us, Lucian, but I am afraid we’ll have to decline. I am very sorry to say so, but we really must be going. *Now*.”

Lucian’s bi-colored eyes were fixed on Greyson, as if sniffing the air around him to feel the weight of his determination. It seemed like Greyson was the one that had his attention—far more than Xavier, and I could tell why. Greyson, with his diplomatic suaveness and penchant for bullshit, was the exact kind of person that Lucian would fuck with.

“No!”

A screech interrupted the pause in this passive aggressive conversation, and I flinched.

There was a commotion behind Lucian and his guards. Lucian frowned, stepping aside as Aysel appeared. Her voice loud and seething, she pointed at Greyson. “He’s not going anywhere!”

I gasped when I took in Aysel’s appearance.

Her gown was rumpled, her long white hair all mussed up, and her lips looked full and plush. She looked like she’d just… Well… *Had wild sex*. Greyson and Xavier seemed to be equally stunned, and before any of us could speak, she turned to her brother, panting.

“Sister,” Lucian said, “is there something you need?”

With dramatic flourish, Aysel pointed at Greyson again and announced, “He’s not going anywhere. I’m his Luna now.”

**Episode 2050**

VIOLET

I blinked at my mate slowly, trying to wrap my head around his words. “What do you mean, you know a place? That doesn’t make sense to me.”

Charlie chuckled at my expression. He took the knife from me and showed me the initials again. “CB. They stand for Camp Bridgeham, the hunter camp.”

I swallowed nervously, not liking this at all. The camp? How had that knife gotten all the way to Oregon? There was definitely only one possible way…

“There’s no way this is a coincidence,” I said. My voice was shaking, and Charlie’s earlier mirth had vanished.

He tucked my hair behind my ear, swallowing as he stared into my eyes. “No. Whoever had this knife must have taken it from the camp.”

“And that means that whoever is trying to kill me must be from the camp, doesn’t it?” I asked, finishing his thought. Saying the words out loud had my heart pounding.

Charlie’s expression was severe. He held my hand tight, as if to ground me, but it wasn’t exactly working. “At least this narrows the search down.”

“Why would someone from the camp want to kill me after we helped them?” I asked, frustrated. “I don’t understand human hunters—do they *want* us to see them as monsters? Because that’s the only option that comes to mind right now!”

Charlie took a deep breath, shaking his head. “You’re right.”

“I know I’m right, I…” I sat up, my throat getting choked up as I kept examining the knife. I felt like a moron, staring at it as if it was gonna come alive and reveal to me all its secrets. I wished it were a person—I’d be able to shake it up and get the truth out of it.

“This is horrible,” I snapped at the knife, as if it had personally wronged me. I threw it down onto the bed, stood up, and started to pace around the room, anything to burn off all the anger that was bubbling up inside me. “But it doesn’t even make sense, does it?” I huffed. “Why exactly would someone from the camp be trying to kill me?” I pointed at Charlie, flailing. “I thought we left the camp on good terms! Didn’t we?”

Charlie’s gaze was dark, worried. I could tell there was anger in there too. I remembered when Charlie had learned that Zachery had stabbed me with a silver knife—his fury had been so intense that he would’ve gone out to the camp and gone on a rampage.

*I* was the one who’d stopped him.

Would I need to stop him again?

There was a calmness to him that felt eerie. “I thought we left on good terms, too. But of course, we were both werewolves at a werewolf hunter camp, so it’s not too outrageous to think we might have made some enemies. People, especially hunters, don’t let their prejudices go easily.”

Charlie’s tone was low, thoughtful, and my heart was pounding. “But who could it be?”

“Zachery?” I asked.

“But wasn’t he taken somewhere after the trial?” Charlie asked.

I shook my head. “I have no idea. I *hope* so.”

He sat up on the bed, his motions smooth, unhurried. He looked so collected that I was spooked a little. Not for myself, but for whoever had dared try to hurt me.

“Who else? Sergeant Pepperdine was always so hardline about werewolves,” Charlie said. “He was sure that they were the enemy.”

“Hadn’t he been changing his tune, though?” I asked.

“True,” Charlie said. “But maybe he only started playing nice with us because he wanted to throw off my mom.”

I swallowed. “And now that we don’t have Iris’s protection?”

Charlie stared at me. “He might think that now it’s safe for him to take us out.”

I frowned. “I just—I can’t imagine that. Sergeant Pepperdine is kind of intense, but he seemed to accept us once the truth was out. Don’t you think?”

Charlie took a moment, processing. “That’s true. But I just can’t imagine who else it could be.”

I shook my head, huffing as I paced up and down, when—

I froze, holding my hand out. “Wait,” I said, gasping. “Do you hear that?”

Charlie cocked his head, and I focused as well. We both listened to voices coming from outside. Raised voices that didn’t sound like someone was chatting or having fun. They sounded like a fight about to break out. I looked out the window, but I couldn’t see the porch from here.

Charlie rested his hand on my shoulder. “We should go see what’s going on. They could need us.”

We quickly got dressed and made our way downstairs just as Big Mac, Kira, Marta, and Lilac walked into the house. They all looked serious, splitting up without a word.

*What’s happening?* Charlie mind linked. *Why’s everybody so serious?*

“What’s going on?” Artemis asked, walking up to me.

She rubbed her eyes, and Rishika was looking equally sleepy next to her. They must’ve been having the best time in dream land, because both of them looked a little annoyed to have been woken up.

“I have no idea,” I said. “We didn’t see what happened, but it seems resolved now.”

“Is it, though?” Rishika asked, nodding toward the patio glass doors.

Lola and Jay were still on the porch, talking. Lola seemed very emotional, wiping her eyes, and Jay had a worried expression that alarmed me. Jay was rarely worried about anything—he was the mellowest dude ever. Probably the perfect man to balance out Lola’s energy levels.

“That looks like their business, though,” Artemis told Rishika with a nudge.

The two of them were cute, but I was too stressed out to focus on that. I was glad this wasn’t some sort of threat on the house—Charlie and I had had enough drama of our own today. Of the murder-y kind, in fact. The only excitement I was interested in at this point involved Charlie and me getting on with our kissing.

“You two look a little weird,” Rishika noted, then, pulling me out of my thoughts. “Are you okay?”

I tried not to flinch. Charlie and I were holding hands and frowning in unison. I wasn’t trying to wear my emotions so clearly, but someone *had* tried to kill me, after all. Pretty hard to gloss over that.

Why, though? Why would they want to do that to me after all the help we’d given the camp?

The question made a lump form in my throat. I stared at Rishika, squeezing Charlie’s hand and sighing. “We’re not doing that well.”

Artemis took a step closer, looking between us with keen eyes. “What’s wrong? Did something happen?”

“Did anyone bother you? Tell me who it was, and I’ll deal with it,” Rishika added sternly, her eyebrows arched.

The outpouring of questions—and all the care to be found within them—made me want to wrap them both in a hug. I turned to Charlie, offering a curt nod, and then he went ahead and dug into his pocket.

“This knife…” He held out the dagger for Rishika and Artemis to see. “The one we found after Violet’s attack—it’s from the hunter camp, back in Minnesota.”

Artemis scowled, immediately picking up on the implications. “Humans, always so ungrateful. You think that whoever attacked Violet was from the camp?”

Charlie nodded seriously. “Yeah, but we aren’t sure who.”

Rishika and Artemis shared a look. Rishika rested her hand on my shoulder, her voice gentling in a way that rarely happened. “Did you have any problems with anyone at the camp?”

I shook my head, laughing a little while sniffling. “Not problems that people would want to *kill* me over.”

Artemis squinted. “I mean, that’s relative. I wanted to kill Sage the other day, and all she did was eat my snacks.”

Rishika shushed Artemis. “Are you sure about this, Violet?”

“We were the only werewolves at a werewolf-killing camp, so it’s not hard to imagine that we made some secret enemies,” Charlie said darkly. “Hunter prejudice and hatred runs really fucking deep.”

I flinched at Charlie’s sharp tone. I squeezed his hand to soothe him as Rishika asked, “Is there anyone back at the camp that you completely trust? Someone you could ask to do some digging for you?”

Charlie and I exchanged a look. I thought of Sophie—she’d been a champ, always sweet, and we’d been texting a little, talking about our fave TV shows. Could I really trust her, though? And even if I did trust her, I’d feel bad drawing her into this. After what had happened at the movie theater, I felt…

*Raw*.

Like the rug could be pulled from under my feet at any second. Like I was scared to go to sleep, because I didn’t know what kind of terror awaited me in my dreams.

I turned to face Charlie. His expression was dark. He took a deep breath and turned to me.

“What?” I asked.

“I have an idea, actually,” he muttered. There was an apologetic quality to his face that set off alarm bells in my head. “I hate to say this, but… I think we need to call my mom.”

**Episode 2051**

GREYSON

I stared at Aysel in utter disbelief.

She said she was my *Luna*?

*My* Luna?

There was no way in hell that would ever happen, but still, I had to wonder what the fuck her angle was here. I noticed that her hair was all messed up, her clothes a little crooked, and she looked…

Well, she looked like she had just been ravished.

My blood started to boil. What exactly was she implying here? That *I* had done all that? I’d only kissed her. And I felt beyond guilty and confused as to how and why that had happened, but I’d put a stop to things.

I’d said *no*.

“It’s impossible for you to be my Luna,” I told Aysel, finally finding my voice. I moved toward Cali. “My Luna is right here.” I put a hand around her waist, pulling her close.

*I have no idea what’s going on, but Aysel is lying*, I mind linked to my mate.

Cali leaned into me, making my heart soar. *I’d never doubt you.*

Her trust made me feel like shit, but anyway—one problem at a time.

Lucian’s bi-colored eyes slid from Aysel to me. “What’s all this about, then?” He faced Aysel again. “It’s odd enough for two Alphas to have one Luna, sister. Now you claim to be another?”

Aysel lifted her chin up defiantly, glaring at my hands on Cali. “Greyson slept with me—made me feel things I’ve never felt before—and then he left! And all that under Seluna’s watch!”

Lucian gasped. The guards gasped too, and honestly, could everybody just dial it the fuck down with the drama? *Jesus*.

“We both know you’re making this up,” I declared. “I would never have sex with someone who’s not my mate.”

Aysel smirked. “That’s not what you were telling me earlier, Greyson. You were saying such naughty things too…”

I felt Cali go rigid next to me.

*Oh my god, I am going to throttle her!* she said to both me and Xavier.

*We need to keep our cool. This might be a trap*, Xavier replied.

I couldn’t believe that he was the calmest one right now. The world had turned upside down.

“None of that happened, Aysel,” I said. “I—”

“Of course it happened! Lucian, tell him!” Aysel whined, and Lucian pressed his fingers to his temple like he was getting a migraine.

“My parties are meant for indulgence, Greyson,” he said, “but this sounds like much more than that. Aysel is a daughter of Seluna, and for an Alpha to lie with her on this night—”

“—binds him to her. For life,” Aysel cut in smugly before smirking at Cali. “Basically, Greyson is mine now.”

Cali gaped. *That jerk!* she said. *She’s been planning this!*

I couldn’t believe this. No matter her beliefs—this couldn’t be true, because I hadn’t fucking slept with her. I was stunned, and a small beat of silence ensued.

Xavier broke it with his laughter.

We all turned to look at him, startled.

“Something funny?” Lucian asked, eyes narrowed dangerously.

“Do you even—” Xavier pointed at Aysel. “Do you even hear yourselves? That sounds like a load of horse shit.”

“Are you calling my sister a liar?” Lucian snapped, pointing at my brother accusingly.

Before Xavier or I could move, Cali cleared her throat, stepping forward. “All due respect, Your… Wolfness…”

Lucian started at Cali, instantly distracted.

“… but Aysel’s been totally obsessed with Greyson since she first set eyes on him,” Cali told Lucian, determined. “I had to tell her to back off earlier. There must be some sort of misunderstanding here, because I am certain that whatever Aysel feels for Greyson is very much one-sided.”

Lucian frowned, turning to his sister. “Aysel—”

“No,” she snapped, running a hand through her long hair before pushing it behind her shoulders. “That might be what you want to hear, Caliana, but the truth is that Greyson and I got *very* close tonight.” Her eyes flickered to me, and she gave me a little smirk.

Guilt hit me like a train. Cali turned to me. “Greyson?”

This wasn’t how I wanted to tell Cali the truth. I had planned to figure out what the fuck had happened first—the real reason why I’d kissed Aysel. Was it something I’d had to drink? Was it some sort of spell Aysel had used? Was it the moon, or Seluna, or whatever the fuck?

I, apparently, no longer had the luxury of wondering, though. I took a deep breath, trying to keep myself level-headed. And then, I finally told Lucian, “Aysel kissed me. That’s all that happened.”

Cali’s grip on me tightened in what had to be surprise or anger, and I rushed to mind link with her. *I’m so sorry, love. I was going to tell you. Nothing else happened, I swear on my life.*

Cali didn’t meet my gaze, but she squeezed my hand in hers. *I don’t need the details right now. We should just get through this and go home.*

But I had to tell her the details. I had to look at Lucian and say, “I just got caught up in whatever you have in the air at these parties.”

“I’m afraid I don’t follow,” Lucian said, expression totally neutral.

“We both know there’s something about your celebrations that lowers inhibitions,” I said tightly. “Or are you going to deny that?”

Aysel scoffed. “Oh please, that’s such a stupid excuse. You kissed me, Greyson, and we did more than that, because you enjoyed it. Are you really not man enough to admit it?” She arched an eyebrow. “I bet you can’t wait for us to get to it again.”

Hot fury rushed through me. This woman was fucking goading me, and I had no idea why she’d been so enticing earlier—no idea how I’d gotten sucked into that. I pulled Cali closer, wrapping my arms around her.

“Cali is my heart. She’s my Luna,” I said, glaring at Aysel. “No kiss you initiated means anything, ‘under Seluna’ or not. And we didn’t lie together, no matter how valiantly you threw yourself at me.”

Aysel gasped, clutching at her chest as if she’d never been more offended in her life.

Lucian spoke up. “Well, that’s a beautiful sentiment. But even if the only thing you shared with Aysel was a kiss, it was still under Seluna’s watch, so the bond between the two of you might still exist. It would be an insult to ignore the desires of a goddess.”

Xavier looked like he wanted to start laughing again. Had to be fun to be him. At least when he opened his mouth to speak, though, it was to say, “Are you talking about your sister’s desires or Seluna’s? Because what Greyson and Cali are very clearly telling you is that your sister has been running after Greyson like Wile. E. Coyote. And you’re not listening.”

Cali actually covered her mouth. Now it looked like *she* was about to laugh.

This wasn’t how I’d expected my confession to go, but I’d fucking take it.

“Brother!” Aysel gasped. “Did you hear the way Alpha Xavier just spoke about me?”

“I forbid you from disrespecting my sister.” Lucian glared at Xavier before turning to me again. “This is not a debate. What Seluna demands, we must give her.” He snapped his fingers, and a bunch of guards stood to attention. “Alpha Greyson will stay here with Aysel and await Seluna’s judgement regarding the bond.”

I choked. “*What?*”

Aysel was grinning like the shark that she was.

“We will never just leave Greyson here,” Cali told both Lucian and Aysel sharply. She brought herself in front of me, and my heart twisted with how much I loved her. “What you are asking is impossible, Lucian.”

“And incredibly stupid,” Xavier added. “I thought you were an Alpha—a self-proclaimed prince. But this goddess asks for something and you get on your knees for her?”

The way Lucian, Aysel, and the entirety of the guards went rigid told me that Xavier had just fucked up. Lucian looked furious at the accusation.

“You’d better watch your tongue, Xavier. Greyson will stay and honor what has already begun, or we will *make* him.”

“You can’t make me do anything,” I declared. “You can’t keep us here.”

Lucian laughed like some sort of comic book supervillain. “On the contrary, I very much can. I am the true Alpha here, and you all must obey.”

Lucian raised his hand, as if ready to set his guards into action.

*I’m gonna rip his throat out*, Xavier said.

*Not if I do it first*, I replied.

*Both of you, stop it!* *There are too many of them!* Cali said. *Let me deal with this.*

Before either of us could speak, Cali stepped toward Lucian. “Lucian, *please*.”

Lucian’s hand froze in mid-air.

“You’re a reasonable man,” Cali said. “You must realize that having us stay here against our will wouldn’t position the packs well with each other. We’ve all just met, why complicate things beyond what’s necessary?”

Lucian’s eyes narrowed on Cali’s face.

I held my breath—was this really working?

Damn, Cali really was a good Luna, wasn’t she?

“I’m listening,” Lucian said slowly.

Cali swallowed. “I think—I think I have a solution for all of us.”

Lucian cocked his head at her, checking her out with a gleam in his eye that made me want to punch him. “What do you propose, then, Caliana?

**Episode 2052**

All eyes were on me, and I swallowed roughly.

What did *I* propose?

*WELL, I didn’t think that far ahead.*

Like, I hadn’t known if Lucian would even give me the time of day. I’d just told my two hothead boyfriends to step back, because they were getting too intense and I didn’t want this to escalate!

“Me?” I said, laughing awkwardly. “You want to hear *my* suggestion?” Lucian raised an eyebrow, and I fumbled. “Right, of course, I should share my thoughts. Since I asked to share them, I should.”

Greyson flinched. Xavier was wide-eyed, giving me his classic “Cali, WHAT are you even DOING?” look.

I powered through.

“The point here, Lucian,” I said, clearing my throat, “is that we don’t want any trouble with the Vanguard pack, and it seems like there’s definitely been some kind of miscommunication between everyone here.”

*Apart from the part where Greyson admitted that he kissed Aysel*, I thought bitterly.

But then again, I HAD almost been lured by Lucian myself, so I wasn’t going to point fingers right now. I could be upset about the kiss *after* Aysel’s nails were out of Greyson.

“What are you saying, Caliana?” Lucian asked.

“Basically,” I went on, “everybody is tired, and that’s why tensions are running high. Why don’t we all just spend the night the way we were always going to? Why don’t we go rest and recharge and come back to all of this ‘Seluna bond’ stuff in the morning?”

*You don’t have to do this, Cali*, Greyson’s voice said in my head.

*We should just get the fuck out of here now*, Xavier agreed.

This Luna mark mind link thing made it so easy for them to gang up on me.

*If we want to get out of here without getting into a fight*, *this is the only way*, I replied patiently. *Don’t you two trust me?*

After a small pause, they both said, *We do.*

At least there was that.

“Well, Lucian?” I asked. He’d been quiet for the past few seconds. “What do you think?”

To my relief, Lucian’s serious expression broke into a smile. “I think that’s a wonderful idea. We can all approach this with fresh eyes tomorrow.” He eyed Greyson and Xavier. “How lucky the Redwood pack is to have such a levelheaded Luna.”

I didn’t know about levelheaded—more like an occasionally good-enough bullshitter. But at least this bought us some time, at least until the morning…

When the fake Luna mark would be gone. Oh, fuck. I hadn’t taken that one into account!

*Shit shit shit!*

“Come on, love,” Greyson muttered, tugging on my arm. “Let’s go.”

“Oh,” Lucian said. “Apologies if I wasn’t clear. All three of you will take your separate rooms and stay there just like it was originally arranged. You understand that, don’t you?”

Xavier scowled. *I fucking hate that guy.*

Greyson scowled as well. *Me too.*

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I was back in my fancy room, pacing up and down. I had no idea where the boys were—earlier, we’d just bumped into each other. I had hoped, probably naïvely, that we’d at least get a moment alone before being separated, but of course not. Lucian didn’t want us discussing how we were going to get out of this mess.

*What a royal ass!*

I’d tried the door earlier, but it was locked. Lucian was clearly serious about no one leaving.

I fought to connect with my mates through the Luna mark mind link. *Xavier! Greyson! Greyson, can you hear me?*

Radio silence.

Where had Lucian positioned them? The moon? Why couldn’t I reach them?

*UGH!*

I glanced out the window—the sun would be rising in a few hours, and the Luna marks would fade. I still couldn’t believe that Aysel had said that she was Greyson’s Luna—I’d been playing it over and over in my mind, and I couldn’t wrap my head around it. I knew that Aysel was a lying liar who lied, of course. This must’ve been her plan all along—to lure Greyson here and lay some sort of weird Seluna claim on him.

*Greyson did kiss her, though…*

It stung to think about that, even if I knew, to my core, that there had to be a supernatural reason for it, like there’d been a reason why I’d been tempted by Lucian. I reminded myself that Greyson hadn’t gone further with Aysel—there was simply no way that he would sleep with someone who wasn’t me. Like, right now. I mean, he *had* almost slept with Maren that one time, but that had been when things between us were super rocky and we weren’t really together…

*But still! Goddammit, Greyson!*

I was fuming.

*Will this night ever end?*

Groaning, I looked around my opulent surroundings. I could never live in a place like this—I’d be scared of getting crumbs on the pristine carpet. Also, I found it all so fucking suffocating. I had to get out and find Greyson and Xavier, so we could come up with a plan.

*I hope they’re not in a dungeon or something… Oh my god, is that why my mind link can’t reach them?*

I forced myself to get a grip and paced over to the window for the hundredth time. Nothing had changed. I couldn’t tie all the bedsheets together and make an escape—it was a steep drop to the ground, and there were guards patrolling below.

*But maybe I could use something to break the door?* I thought.

I looked around, taking inventory of all the stuff in the room, but then I heard muffled voices outside. It didn’t sound like the boys, or Lucian…

*Is this a new threat? What if they run in here and attack me?*

I grabbed a heavy lamp to use as a club while the voices outside rose.

And then I recalled that I was Fae.

*Ugh, Cali!* I scolded myself. *You can always use your magic!*

Shaking my head, I put the lamp back down and readied myself. I heard a thump from outside, and suddenly the door opened. I was ready to pounce, but then I saw…

“Ava?” I asked, confused. “What are you doing here?”

“What?” She frowned. “This isn’t my room?”

I shook my head. “No? Why are you roaming around in the middle of the night?”

“I just went to get a glass of water, and then I wanted to get back to my room. What’s it to you?”

“But this *isn’t* your room,” I repeated. “Weren’t there guards outside?”

Ava blinked slowly. “*Oh*. No wonder they didn’t want to let me in.” She gave me a look.

I raised my eyebrows, crossing my arms over my chest. “Leave then?”

Ava casually sat down on one of the elegant couches. “Well, now they won’t let me. They’re guarding you, after all.”

I arched an eyebrow. “I bet they’d let you go if you told them that they were right, and this isn’t your room.”

“But I don’t like my room that much right now…” Ava trailed off.

“Excuse me?”

“It suddenly started smelling like shrimp puffs, and that woke me up,” she said and flipped her hair over her shoulder. “So anyway, I’ll stay here now.”

Oh, *wow*. I couldn’t believe this was happening. Not only could I not get out of here, but now I was stuck with Xavier’s ex, who sucked…

Well, she was on the same level as Aysel, really.

Maybe a bit worse. She *was* Ava, after all.

“Just stay on your side of the room, and we’ll be good,” she told me, settling back in the cushions. She closed her eyes and made herself comfortable. I couldn’t believe her audacity, and yet I also could. Invading my room was somehow the *least* horrible thing she’d ever done.

I glared at her as she lay there, Sleeping fucking Beauty, with her perfect porcelain skin and smooth hair, not giving a single fuck that I was here and fuming. I wished I was as insensitive as she was, honestly. Imagine being her—she just did whatever the hell popped into her head!

An idea hit me, suddenly.

Two heads were better than one. Even an evil head like Ava’s.

“What?” Ava opened one eye, glaring at me. “What did you just say about me?”

I had called Ava’s head evil out loud. Oh, well.

“We need to figure out how to get out of here, Ava,” I said seriously.

She scoffed, peering at me. “Is this some sort of weird *due destini* thing? Because I’m not interested—I’m here to sleep, not hear about your relationship problems with your mate and Xavier.”

“Xavier is my mate too, Ava,” I snapped. “Both of them, *my* mates. That’s why it’s *due destini*. This isn’t up for debate.”

She snorted. “Whatever. I’m done listening to you.”

And then she closed her eyes again.

*Oh my god*, I thought, furious. *She’s such a piece of work!*

I marched up to her, grabbing her by the arm to pull her up from the couch. She yelped, looking shocked by my nerve. Good. I was done playing nice.

“You’re going to help me get out of here, Ava,” I declared. “Whether you want to or not.”

**Episode 2053**

XAVIER

I wanted to trash every inch of this shiny perfect room. It was like a golden cage, and I was an animal pacing inside it. I couldn’t fucking believe that we were in this position. All because Greyson had kissed Aysel, and some sort of goddess had been watching over them like a peeping Tom?

Nothing made sense.

“Shit,” I said under my breath, resting my forehead against the locked door. “This is all *such* a goddamn mess.”

I glanced at the fluffy bed. I wasn’t going to get any sleep whatsoever—I had to keep my eyes open for whatever bullshit Lucian threw at us next. I doubted he was anywhere near done with his antics, and I didn’t want Cali to have to act as a mediator. I was supposed to be an Alpha. I wanted to maintain my authority and protect Cali from any kind of conflict.

I wanted to keep her away from Lucian’s fucking creepy lingering eyes.

I *hated* the way he looked at her.

I glanced out the window—the sun would be up soon. We weren’t with Cali, so we wouldn’t be able to deal with the spell situation, and who knew what Lucian would do if he realized the Luna marks weren’t real? I closed my eyes, groaning in frustration before slamming my fist into the wall.

After a second, I heard a responding thud.

Then another.

Frowning, I pressed my ear to the wall and heard an angry groan that sounded a whole lot like my older brother. There was a third thud, then I felt a whole-ass emotion coming through Kira’s spell-induced mind link.

Greyson was next door, and he was *pissed off.*

“Greyson!” I called, punching the wall. “HEY!”

No response. What kind of fucking sound-proofing did these walls have? Or was it a spell? No matter. I tried mind linking directly.

*Greyson, are you there?*

Silence.

Was I going nuts? Because that was a possibility.

*Xavier?* said Greyson’s mental voice. *Where the fuck are you?*

I laughed, scoffing under my breath. “Shit. These people really are dumb.”

*They seriously put us in neighboring rooms*, I mind linked. *For someone who’s so obsessed with details, Lucian clearly neglected to separate us.*

*He was probably too busy staring at Cali and got distracted*, Greyson said darkly.

*Don’t fucking remind me*.

*We need to get out of here and find her before the sun rises*, he said.

*Are you sure you wanna leave, though?* I asked, always ready to give him shit. *Don’t you want to see your new girlfriend over tea and crumpets in the morning?*

The wall right by my head got banged hard enough that I felt dust fall from the ceiling. I jumped back, startled.

Greyson’s voice was a growl. *Do* not *call Aysel my girlfriend. That whole act was a fucking lie!*

*Chill, man*, I mind linked. *Do you have to be so sensitive?*

*This is not the time to joke*, he snapped. *Cali smoothed things over relatively well, but that’s only for now. The clock is against us.*

I hated it when Greyson was right. More annoying than anything.

*I have no idea what kind of game Aysel is playing*, Greyson went on, *but I want no part of it. Whatever happened between us… It felt like a dream. I didn’t want her. Not for real. Do you get that?*

I swallowed thickly.

*Don’t worry*, I said. *I believe you.* *All their moon goddess stuff is a bunch of bullshit anyway.*

It had to be. Because if it were true, then what would that mean for *me*? Could it affect me too? Could my kiss with Ava mean something deeper, bigger? Was that why my veins had acted up?

I ignored the panic rising in my chest.

*We need to focus*, Greyson said. *If we don’t get the hell out of here, Lucian is going to realize that Cali’s Luna marks are gone. Crumpets aren’t going to save us if he finds out that we lied about it.*

*Yeah*, I agreed. *None of us should stick around long enough to find out what he’ll do then.*

*I hate that guy*, Greyson said.

*So fucking much*, I agreed.

We both fell silent for a moment.

Then Greyson said, *We need to wallow less and plan more.*

I huffed. *True. What have you tried out as an escape tactic so far?*

Greyson sounded sheepish. *Well. Breaking the door down.*

That was at least straightforward. A “get out, ask questions later” kind of plan.

*Any luck?* I asked.

*It’s starting to crack. Very, very slowly*, he said. *They’re really solid.*

I groaned, looking around. There were a few windows, but they’d been painted shut. I could probably rip them up and jump down to the garden after shifting, but leaving the building wasn’t smart. We would have to return to get to Cali, which could result in a whole other shitshow. Plus, we had no idea where Cali actually *was*.

The silence between Greyson and me was deafening.

Through the link, I could feel his frustration, and it was only fueling my own.

Surprising myself for not acting like a dick, I reached out to my brother again.

*Look*, I said, *I know you didn’t want any of this to happen with Aysel. I know you didn’t want us to end up like this. I know you feel guilty.*

I was saying those things because I wanted to hear them myself. Because *I* was the one who felt guilty. I felt so fucked up and sick over what I’d done with Ava. Kissing her had felt… *good*. Cathartic in its own way—at least up until the veins had started acted up.

My hands clenched into fists at the thought.

*Cali* was the one for me. Mine. That was the way it was meant to be, and Ava had nothing to do with it. The kiss had been a mistake, and I was pretty sure something in this castle was to blame.

*Thanks for saying that*, Greyson said awkwardly. *Are we having a bonding moment right now?*

I rolled my eyes. *You’re such a dick.*

*Right back ‘atcha. Found any other way for us to get out of here?* he asked.

I huffed, running my hands through my hair.

*What the fuck is up with that door?* I asked. *Why did you stop punching it?*

*Now that you mention it*, Greyson said, *if I could manage a crack on my own, I bet it would give easily if we both charged at it.*

I sneered, speaking out loud. “Great idea, but we’re not in the same room right now, genius.”

*Stop yelling*, Greyson snapped. *The guards might hear you.*

I groaned, starting to pace again.

*We need to get in the same room*, Greyson said. *We’re more powerful together.*

*No shit, Sherlock!* I huffed. *But how…*

I stopped talking. My eyes fell on the windows again. Without another thought, I ripped one open.

*Break through your window*, I said. *I bet there’s some way that I could cross into your room.*

Before Greyson could say anything, I looked outside. Greyson’s window was only a few feet away from mine. There was a small ledge connecting them and really nothing to hold onto, but it wasn’t a windy night. I looked down at the ground—there were no guards, which seemed suspicious. Why would Lucian lock us up and not guard our windows? There had to be some other kind of security going on—probably a spell of some sort.

I had no idea what kind of tricks these Vanguard maniacs had in their arsenal.

Either way, I needed to move fast. I climbed out onto the ledge, hands on the wall, and then I heard the window next door crack open. Greyson stuck his head out, looked down at the ground that was more than seventy feet away, and gave me a fed-up look.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

In that moment, he could not have sounded more like an older brother.

“You’re fucking useless, so I’m coming to save you,” I said in a low voice.

“You’re such a dumbass,” he said, groaning as he buried his face in his hands. “You’d better not fall. I see something glistening down there—it might be a net or something. Or an alarm?”

“Can you stop being such a whiny little bitch?”

“I’m just saying.”

Our hushed conversation was interrupted by an owl hooting.

“Fine,” Greyson grumbled. “I guess we have no other choice.”

Concentrating, I continued to carefully move along the ledge. I was doing really well. In fact, I was doing so well that I gave Greyson a thumbs up before flipping him off, just to keep our dynamic pure.

I was only a foot away from his window when he hissed, “I said be careful! Go slow!”

“I *am* being careful,” I retorted. Could he just let me do this? Did he always have to comment on everything?

“You’re not, you’re going way too fast, Xavier.”

I started to answer, but even as I opened my mouth, I felt my foot slip off the ledge.

**Episode 2054**

Ava stared at me blankly for a moment. “Help you?” She grumbled. “No, thanks. I think I’ll pass.”

I scoffed. “Who said you had a choice here? You’re in my room—because yours smells like shrimp puffs, apparently—so you’re going to follow my lead!”

“Yeah, no, I prefer sleep,” Ava said, leaning back against on the couch.

She had no idea who she was messing with. If stubbornness was a competition, I’d be a World Champion!

“Do you *really* believe that I’m gonna let you sleep right now? Realistically speaking?” I asked casually, picking up a decorative drum from the mantelpiece.

Ava froze, dread overcoming her face. “Do *not*—”

I started banging on the drum, and she growled, marching up to me and snatching it from my hands before throwing it away.

“You’d better stop!” she snapped. “Right now!”

“I will—if you listen to me.”

She huffed. “Why the hell do you need my help, anyway?”

*Aw!* I was so glad that she’d seen the light.

“I need to get out of here and find Xavier and Greyson so we can come up with a plan,” I said.

Ava fell back on the couch, crossing her arms. “A plan for *what*?”

I definitely didn’t want to explain all the Aysel stuff to Ava, so I tried to sum it up.

“Aysel thinks she has a right to be Greyson’s Luna, because their weird moon goddess said so. Or something like that,” I said.

This put a very sinister sparkle in Ava’s eye, because of course it did. “Oh, really? How interesting.”

I waved her off, my annoyance escalating. “Look, Ava. You don’t have to come with me—you can stay here and sleep, since you’re so invested in that—but you need to help me get out of this room.” I leveled her with a look. “You owe it to Xavier, don’t you?”

Ava shrugged. “Xavier’s made it abundantly clear that he’s not interested in me, *or* my help. The way I see it, you should take this expedition upon yourself and get out on your own…” She arched an eyebrow. “You know, since you’re a strong Fae and all.”

I took a deep, deep breath. I clearly needed another angle here.

“What if someone was claiming they had a right to Xavier, Ava?” I remembered who the hell I was talking to, then, so I changed gears. “Before you killed his mother and betrayed him and he killed you, I mean.”

Ava glared. “I’d be pissed off—much like I am at you right now.”

I wasn’t about to argue semantics with her. I put on a cheerful smile instead, pointing at her triumphantly. “There it is—you get it! You’d do whatever you could to make sure it didn’t happen.”

I really hoped that I wasn’t giving Ava any ideas here, but that seemed logistically impossible. Ava had always been a vindictive ex-mate, but I could take her. I was Xavier’s true mate, and she was an afterthought. And even if she tried anything funny with me…

Well, that was a problem to deal with later on.

*One issue at a time!* I thought.

I was getting a headache now. Ugh.

“Are you sure Aysel’s lying?” Ava asked me conversationally.

Sitting down to clear my head, I peered at her. “What do you even mean?”

Ava fluttered her eyelashes, all innocent. “Just saying, Alphas aren’t always the most chaste beings. What if Aysel *does* have a claim over Greyson? What if he *wants* her to?” She smiled. “They would make such a beautiful couple, don’t you think?”

“Stop bullshitting me,” I snapped. “It won’t work.”

“But mates can work in such mysterious ways, Cali,” Ava continued in a subtly gleeful tone. “You should know that better than anyone, right?”

What killed me was that her words made sense. But I wouldn’t give her the satisfaction of engaging with her horrible little mind games.

“I am not going to get into a debate with you, Ava,” I said. “Greyson is my mate, and nobody else could have any real claim on him. That’s it.”

“That’s just what you think,” Ava said, flipping her hair over her shoulder. “It doesn’t mean it’s true.”

I glared at her. “Are you going to be helpful here, or should I go get that drum and start banging it again?”

“How am I supposed to be helpful?” Ava scoffed. “What is it that you want from me, exactly?”

I glowered. “I don’t know! You’re a devious mastermind, I bet you could figure out what Aysel’s angle is!”

There was a long tense silence between us. We stared at each other like we each wanted to turn the other person into dust. Then, Ava huffed. “Well. Aysel seems like a straightforward enough girl. She sees something she likes, she wants it. She probably wants Greyson to marry her in some ancient soul-bonding ritual under the goddess’s eye. I think I read something about that somewhere.”

I recoiled. Ava wasn’t saying anything that I hadn’t thought of before—I’d already decided that Aysel had wanted to lure Greyson into this place so she could lay a claim on him. But the thought of an actual *marriage* made me feel sick.

“You think Lucian could force Greyson into a ceremony like that?” I asked, shaking. “There’s no way that could actually happen, right?”

Ava shrugged. “I don’t know how these lunatics operate. If they’re adding an ancient shady religion into the mix, anything is possible. Or maybe things are way more clean-cut.”

I frowned. “How do you mean?”

“Maybe Aysel’s just decided that if she can’t have Greyson, no one can.” Smirking, Ava arched an eyebrow. “Maybe she just wants to make sure *you* can’t have him.”

The thought hit me like a wall of bricks.

*Oh, crap! This HAS to be giving Ava ideas of her own!* I thought.

“You can’t be serious,” I said.

“I am serious.”

I shook my head, standing up again. I started to pace, biting my nails. “Either way, we need to get out of here. The guards took Xavier and Greyson to their own rooms. I need to find them. We have to talk about how we’re going to handle all…” I waved a hand around desperately. “*This!* Whatever it is!”

Just the idea of Aysel’s Machiavellian plans succeeding had me on edge. It made me feel insane, my anxiety to get out of this locked room growing by the second.

Ava watched me with mild interest. “Sleep is eluding me at this point, so I guess I will help you. If you’ve got an idea, I’m listening. Xavier might not appreciate my contribution, but that won’t change its value.”

I chose to ignore her last little comment. I stopped my pacing and rubbed my forehead. “How many guards were outside the room when they brought you in?”

Ava thought for a moment. “A couple, and then there were the two who were following me around after they spotted me in the kitchen drinking water. All four of them might still be out there.”

I took a deep breath, processing. “Okay. I think I have a plan.”

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A few minutes later, I stared at Ava. “Are you ready?”

She rolled her eyes. “Please. This is gonna be a piece of cake.”

I swallowed nervously. “This isn’t a joke, Ava. I want you to win an Emmy here.”

Ava scoffed. “Just watch how it’s done.”

I wanted to smack her, but then I remembered that we were supposed to be collaborating, so I shut up and tried to calm myself down.

And then, Ava gasped. “Oh my god.” She groaned loudly and dropped to the floor with a deliberately loud thud. “My stomach hurts!”

I kept my voice loud, aimed toward the door. “Ava? What’s happening?” I yelled. “Oh, wow, you look green! Are you okay?”

“No, I’m not—I feel like I’m dying!” she wailed.

Okay, she was really selling this. I was impressed.

“Stay there, I’ll get help!” I banged on the door, thinking about my own Emmy nomination. “Please, someone help us, she’s collapsed! She’s in agony!”

There was a conversation behind the door now. Ava started sobbing. “It was the stinky shrimp puffs!”

“The shrimp puffs poisoned her!” I shrieked. “She’s so pale—I think she’s dying!”

I motioned for Ava to come over and stand with me behind the door as the guards’ conversation got louder. And then…

The door slowly swung open.

“What happened?” the tallest guard asked sternly, looking at Ava, who was standing there, alive and well. He gasped in shock, but before he could do anything, I raised my hands in a fighting position.

*This is the moment of truth, Cali!* I told myself.

I blasted all four of them with Fae magic that sent them colliding into the wall. They groaned as they dropped to the floor in a pile like used rags.

“Did you see that?” I breathed, incredulous as I admired my handiwork. “I’m a badass!”

“Sure, you like to think so,” Ava muttered. “Let’s just get out of here before they recover.”

*Right!*

I grabbed Ava’s hand, and we dashed out of the room.

**Episode 2055**

GREYSON

I lunged forward and grabbed Xavier’s forearm before he could fall multiple stories to the ground. Grunting, I pulled him inside through my window, gripping both his arms now. Alpha werewolves weren’t the easiest to carry.

Once Xavier had his footing, he dusted himself off. I could tell that he was embarrassed. I felt the urge to tease him about it, because I was that kind of sarcastic asshole, but I refrained. Clearing my throat, I asked, “You good?”

“Yep,” he said, nodding.

I couldn’t help myself, so I said, “You weren’t that careful after all, were you?”

He huffed. “You better shut up before I knock you out.”

I laughed, shaking my head, and his stern expression broke into a small smile as well. He took a deep breath, muttering, “Thank you.”

“Sure thing.” I paused. “Is this another bonding moment?”

He scoffed, rolling his eyes. “Don’t get used to it.” He turned to the door, pointing at it. “You ready to do this thing?”

I wasn’t just ready—I’d been itching to get out of this fucking room. I didn’t trust Lucian to honor Cali’s suggestion and seek her out again in the morning. He might be at her door right now, serenading her or whatever. He was so obviously into her that it gave me the fucking creeps. I wanted to smash his skull into the wall, but I guessed that wouldn’t work well with *diplomacy* and all that.

“We should shift and run the thing down,” I told Xavier, pointing at the door. “The wood is really thick, probably oak, but if it’s both of us, I don’t think it’s gonna last.”

Xavier nodded. “Any guards outside?”

“I’ve been banging on it for a while now, and nobody complained. Hopefully they aren’t lurking anywhere close,” I said.

Xavier started, “We shift, bring down the door—”

“Sniff out Cali in this maze of a castle, and then go back home to the pack house,” I finished.

Xavier swallowed, glancing out the window. “How much longer till the sun rises, you think?”

I scowled. “No idea. We’d better get to it.”

We both shifted into our wolves and eyed each other.

*On the count of three*, I mind linked.

*One…*

*Two…*

*Three!*

We barreled into the door at the same time, and there was a loud crack.

*It’s working!* Xavier said gleefully. *Let’s go again!*

With the guards clearly absent, we were free to turn the door into firewood.

*Yes!* Xavier exclaimed, his wolf thumping its head against mine. Our victory was short-lived, though.

*Shh!* I mind linked, ears perking up. *Someone’s coming!*

A second later, a bunch of guards came around the corner. Whoops.

*Get these assholes!* Xavier snarled, and both of us fell into the fight.

Cali was running on limited time, with the sun preparing to make her Luna marks disappear, and now that the guards were here, Lucian would know that we’d tried to escape.

He would probably not like that.

I had no fucking idea where this man got off, thinking that forcing his “guests” to stay at his castle was a smart thing to do. But, of course, this wasn’t just about that—this was about Aysel and her lies, too. When would this night from hell ever end?

*On your right!* Xavier mind linked, and I bit into one of the guards’ arms, making him screech and fall to the ground. But just as I grinned to myself, realizing that the road was almost clear for us to leave, I heard a slow clap.

“Well, well, well.”

*Speak of the devil…*

Lucian had arrived, and he’d brought even more guards with him. Fuck. This asshole was everywhere, it seemed.

“I cannot believe the Redwood Alphas would behave in such a way,” Lucian said with a *tsk* in his voice. “I tried to treat you respectfully, and this is how you repay me?”

I was pissed off enough to shift back to human, just to face this asshole eye to eye.

“Repay you for what?” I snapped. “Locking us up as prisoners instead of guests?”

Lucian scoffed. “You seem to forget that I negotiated with your Luna, which is the ultimate show of respect.” He pointed between me and my brother. “And what do you two do? You don’t honor her diplomacy.” He shook his head mournfully. “I feel sorry for Caliana. It must be such a burden to have two hotheads as her mates.”

Xavier’s wolf growled, and I glared at Lucian. “You’re the one who’s not respecting the Redwood pack, Lucian. You can’t keep us here, and I’m not interested in Aysel. We are done.”

Lucian, the arrogant son of a bitch, laughed. “On the contrary, things are just getting started. You may not understand the Vanguard pack’s traditions and our relationship with Seluna, but you have no choice but to accept those things. You kissed my sister, and now you need to wait for Seluna’s decision.”

“We don’t need to accept anything. You can’t keep us here!” I sneered, just as Lucian told his guards, “Take these men to new rooms. Separated, obviously.”

Xavier’s wolf snarled, moving forward, ready for business.

But then the guard closest to us pulled out a knife.

It gleamed like silver.

Xavier’s shifted back to human, his rage palpable. “This is the Vanguard pack’s version of hospitality? Threatening us with *silver*?”

Lucian sighed, long-suffering. The theatrics were making my blood boil. “Please do not make me do something I’ll regret. I would hate to lose any Alphas to silver. It would really throw a kink in my day.”

Xavier looked like he was about to explode, but I mind linked, *Let’s bide our time, brother. We got away once, we’ll do it again. Anything for Cali.*

My words seemed to calm Xavier. He didn’t fight when we were taken away, and I didn’t either. I still glared at Lucian, though, over the guard’s shoulder. What the fuck did this guy have planned for me? For Cali?

My unease only grew as we were led deeper into the palace, until we reached a hallway crossroads. Xavier met my gaze. As we were separated, I mind linked, *Whatever you do, find Cali.*

Xavier nodded and then disappeared around the corner. I was dragged away, down another corridor, weapons all around me. My fury flared when the guards shoved me into a new room.

“Not so tough now, are you?” one of the guards mocked.

I growled, charging forward. He jumped back, spooked. Two of the guards raised their silver knives. Ridiculous.

“Must be nice to hide behind your silver toys,” I told them sarcastically. “You know I’d take you out in a minute if you didn’t have those.”

They slammed the door in my face.

“Fucking *cowards*,” I said.

Judging from the snarl behind the door, I knew they heard me.

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I was locked up again, pacing again, and I was more pissed off than ever. It didn’t matter, though—I kept telling myself that since I’d gotten out twice, I would do it again. I wouldn’t let Lucian keep us here against our will. I eyed the window and went straight for it. That had worked for Xavier last time.

The distance to the ground could be an issue if I jumped out. But even though I wasn’t a cat, werewolves also tended to land on their feet. I could only hope there was no net on the ground, or some sort of alarm. Or, even worse, a bunch of guards patrolling under my window, holding silver knives.

I ripped the painted-shut window open and paused, listening intently. I needed to make sure that I hadn’t been too loud. Last thing I wanted was to alarm any guards who might be lurking outside the door. I was met with silence, thankfully.

But before I could feel too triumphant, I heard footsteps approaching.

Fuck.

Could it be Lucian? *Again?*

I braced myself—whatever Lucian tried to do to me, I could take him on. I wasn’t just an Alpha—I was a fighter. I had killed monsters worse than Lucian, and if silver was the price I had to pay, if worst came to worst, I would push through.

I needed to, for Cali.

I didn’t care what or who stood in my way—I had to get to her.

I heard talking outside, and I swallowed, waiting, ready to lunge.

When the guard opened the door, though, it wasn’t Lucian that I saw.

It was…

“*Aysel?*” I said. “What the hell are you doing here?”

She smiled. “Aren’t you happy to see me?”

“No,” I said flatly.

She laughed a little, shamelessly checking me out before turning to the guard. “Alpha Greyson is going to move locations.”

The guard looked sheepish. “But the prince told me….”

“I don’t care what Lucian told you. What I’m telling you is that Greyson is moving elsewhere. Got it?”

The guard, still holding his silver knife, hesitated before nodding.

“What kind of fucked up game are you playing, Aysel?” I asked her, shaking with fury.

Aysel stared at me, and the way her eyes gleamed made me sick.

“Oh, sweetheart,” she said. “You’re coming to my chambers.”

**Episode 2056**

XAVIER

I was shoved into yet another fancy-ass room—how many of those were there in this goddamn house?—but this time, I wasn’t alone. A single guard sat on a chair at the far corner, right by the door.

He was watching me with narrowed eyes.

In a way, it was kind of flattering that Lucian thought I needed someone to guard me *inside* the room. It was possible that he considered me the reckless wild one in comparison to Greyson, but I didn’t give a fuck. I’d wear that badge day in and out if it helped me figure out how to get the upper hand right now.

The guard was holding a large silver knife.

All I had to do was grab that knife and turn it against him—it would be just as deadly to that guard as it was to me. I needed to distract and/or anger him long enough that when I lunged at him, he would be taken by surprise. Before I moved forward, though, I paused and focused on one thing.

Cali.

*Cali, are you there?*

Nothing. She was either far away, or Lucian had taken her who the fuck knew where. He was a crafty bastard, I had to give him that. I was still reeling from the way he’d thrown Cali’s words back at Greyson and me. He’d said we weren’t honoring Cali’s diplomacy—her wishes. Which was bullshit, because of course we trusted Cali. It was Lucian and the Vanguard pack that we didn’t trust.

I eyed the guard again carefully. He had a smaller frame than mine, so he probably had no Alpha blood. He looked young. Not the most seasoned guard. I knew I could psych this kid out and surprise him. I could get a rise out of him and pounce when the time was right.

I’d been in way tougher situations than this. Hell, I’d fought off Letifer just last week—all I needed right now was to keep my cool long enough to make this guy lose his. I just had to keep my temper in check.

Why did that sound harder to me than fighting a whole fucking revenant army, though?

Telling myself to get a grip, I turned to the guard. It was time to put on a show.

“Hey, what’s happening?” I asked. “Where’d they take my brother?”

The guard just glared at me.

I scoffed. “Seriously? Is this how the Vanguard pack treats other packs? Where’s your honor?”

That last one made a dent, just like I’d known it would. The Vanguards seemed like a hell of a lot of things, but honor was important to them. That much was clear.

The guard sneered. “You know nothing about honor.”

“I asked you an important question, and the honorable thing would be to answer it,” I said sharply, not wanting to lose my upper hand here. “Where did they take my brother?”

He gave me an icy look. “That’s none of your business.”

I glared. “I’m the Redwood Alpha. It’s precisely my business.”

He laughed sarcastically. “Sounds like you’ve got a big head on those shoulders. Alphas always do.”

“And for good reason,” I said. “That’s why we’re the Alpha and not a little nobody like you.”

It wasn’t something I really believed about my own pack. Everyone was integral to make it function, to make us strong, but telling this guy “I’m sure Lucian sees you as a valuable member of the Vanguard pack, here’s a gold star” wasn’t my goal right now.

The guard scoffed. “Alpha or not, you couldn’t kill a rat right now.” He raised his knife. “Not when we have silver.”

I shrugged, acting like the epitome of nonchalance. “Oh, I see. So the Vanguard pack is tough because they make sure to trick everyone else. There’s not one real fighter among you. You have to hide behind silver, and the most humiliating part is that it could kill you too.”

The guard stood up from his chair, marching toward me. He stopped at a six-foot distance. I pretended to be as cool as a cucumber, even as he told me, “You better shut your mouth.”

This kid really wanted to prove himself, didn’t he?

Well, he could give it a try with me. And fail.

I moved toward him slowly, never breaking eye contact. I kept my voice low, making sure his fight instinct kept him frozen as I approached. In a scathing tone, I said, “In a real fight, with none of this bullshit, I could take your Alpha down in less than a minute.”

The guard bristled, wagging his knife at me. “Take that back!”

“Why should I?” I laughed. “We both know it’s true. And that’s why you’re scared. Because if I could kill Lucian with ease, how could *you* ever stand a chance against me?”

“You’re wrong!” The guard was shaking. He waved his knife again, making me take a step back. I felt a little sorry for him—he was so inexperienced. I didn’t even want to fight him, let alone kill him. I just wanted to grab that knife and get the fuck out of there.

“The Vanguard pack is strong!” the guard yelled. “Prince Lucian is ten times the Alpha you are!”

I snorted, shaking my head. “Whatever helps you and your weak brood sleep at night.”

That was it. The guard was incensed with fury—too upset to think about technique. He was ready to charge at me. “I’m going to cut that tongue out to shut you up. Hard to be an Alpha when you can’t give orders!”

I growled, readying myself to grab the guy’s arm and twist the knife out of his grip.

But just as he sprang forward, about to use that knife, the door opened.

“What’s going on here?”

Both the guard and I froze at the sound of Lucian’s voice.

*Great*. Just what I fucking needed right now.

My gaze darted to the entrance, and I saw Lucian standing there, glaring at the guard, who was still aiming the knife at me. I was shocked by what happened next.

Lucian moved lightning fast and shoved the guard away.

“I do not recall telling you to threaten our guests,” he snapped. “You’ve defied my orders.”

“I’m… I’m sorry, Your Highness,” the guard stammered, pointing at me. “He was goading me!”

“How dare you blame this on our guest?” Lucian growled, and the guard cowered, clearly scared and intimidated.

None of this was making any sense. In fact, it felt pretty surreal.

“Alpha Xavier,” Lucian said to me after waving the guard off. “Do accept my sincere regrets for my underling’s misstep.”

Amazingly, Lucian sounded totally sincere. He cared about hospitality, apparently—just in a creepy, messed-up way that resembled kidnapping. The urge to punch him in the face started to rise all over again, but I could see the gleam of silver tucked into his sleeve. My theories and mockery about him were starting to feel pretty real now. He truly couldn’t be that good a fighter if he was holding that knife so close.

These motherfuckers and their silver—it was their favorite accessory, wasn’t it?

“I’m sure you’re confused about why I’m here,” Lucian said then, interrupting my thoughts.

“Yeah,” I said, giving him that at least. Greyson had been the one Lucian had had his eye on this entire time, so I had no idea what he could want from me right now. “What’s going on?”

Lucian gave me a look, wrinkling his nose. “Do you truly need to be so grouchy all the time? It’s unbecoming.”

I couldn’t believe this fucker.

“Sorry,” I said mockingly. “Being locked up in a room away from my Luna kinda does that to me. If you had one, you might understand.”

The dig wasn’t necessary, but damn if it didn’t feel good.

Lucian nodded seriously. “Apology accepted.”

This man had never heard about sarcasm, had he? No wonder he was so obsessed with Greyson’s bullshit.

“Anyway,” Lucian went on, “I wanted to talk to you in particular, about something specific.”

If I’d been on edge before, this made me feel even worse. What would Lucian want to discuss with me alone? Without Greyson?

“I don’t think I can talk about anything without seeing Cali first,” I said.

Lucian gave me an indulging look. “Clever Alpha. Don’t worry—she’s safe.”

I scoffed. “Why should I believe you?”

He looked confused. “Why, because I give you my word, of course.”

My patience was running so thin, it was ready to snap. “What about Greyson? Is he okay?”

Lucian chuckled. “Such loyalty to both of them. I’m surprised to see it.”

I glared at him, crossing my arms. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He kept smiling, all fake pleasantries. “Well, I don’t have a brother, but if I did, I certainly wouldn’t share *any* woman with him—let alone my very own mate.”

My jaw clenched, temper rising.

Lucian raised an eyebrow and added, “I have no idea how you Redwood Alphas do it.”

I peered at Lucian, suspicion flooding me. “Can you just get to the point? Why did you come here? What the hell do you want from me?”

Lucian smiled again. And then, in a low, conspiratorial voice, he asked, “Is it true that Caliana is a *due destini* mate?”

**Episode 2057**

MARTA

I tossed and turned in my bed. I couldn’t get to freaking sleep at all, and at this point it was closer to morning than night. The sun wasn’t up yet, but it would be soon, so there was no point in sleeping now.

I’d had countless nights like this in Bert’s mansion. It sucked to feel like this at the pack house, too. I’d never really had that problem here before, even with everything the Redwoods had been through.

I stared at the wall, resting on my side with the pillow tucked under my chin. I was still fighting to process the close call we’d had with the vampires a few hours ago. Big Mac had been so level-headed and stern in her dealings with them that I could only admire her.

How could she be so powerful, without any hint of doubt in herself?

Big Mac’s confidence was incredible. I only wished I’d be like her one day—the person who took shit from nobody, who everybody came to for help. As it was, I was basically Big Mac’s polar opposite—a mousy girl who didn’t know how to control her powers and was in way over her head.

Lilac didn’t seem to mind, though. In general. He just stuck around and touched me and kissed me, and I was…

Grateful for him.

I was grateful to care for someone, and to have someone care for me in return.

Smiling a little, I turned toward his side of the bed. After the scare, we’d decided that he should spent the night with me, and I wanted to crawl a little closer and dive into his arms, have him hug me like he had earlier. The boy was a perfect cuddler, one who squeezed you tight, with the enthusiasm of a koala bear, and that was exactly what all my worries needed.

I could get used to having him sleep next to me every night.

When I turned to face him, though, I saw that his side of the queen bed was empty. I frowned, confused, and then a stream of dreadful thoughts popped into my head.

Did I snore or something? Or hug him too tight? Maybe he’d overheated! Maybe he didn’t like the smell of my new body wash! Maybe—

There was a small knock on the door that interrupted my thoughts.

“Come in,” I squeaked.

To my relief, Lilac returned, looking sleepy and adorable and gorgeous, holding a glass of water, which he offered to me.

I sat up, rubbing my eyes. “Oh, thank you!”

He shrugged. “You kept clearing your throat earlier. Figured it was dry.”

That was a nervous tick of mine. A new one, apparently. But the point here was that Lilac had noticed and wanted to help.

My heart could’ve just burst.

“Thank you,” I said again.

He sat on the bed, offering me the glass with a grin. “No problem. Figured it would be easier for you to be hydrated before I kissed you good morning.”

“What about morning breath?” I asked.

He snorted. “I came back from the dead, Marta. Do you *really* think I’d let morning breath stop me?”

I laughed. He was just so ridiculous, and I couldn’t get enough of it. I drank my water, and we got back under the covers. Instantly, he pulled me closer, gave me a peck on the mouth, then cuddled me tight, nuzzling my temple.

His body, his skin and touch felt so good that I felt warm and sweet inside, butterflies flapping their wings in my stomach.

But it all came crashing down when my gaze drifted over to my desk, where an empty notebook lurked. I had zero ideas for my defense, and the trial was rapidly approaching. Just thinking about it made me nervous. I didn’t even *know* enough about my powers to justify them and myself in some sort of magical court.

“I can just hear the wheels turning in your brain,” Lilac mumbled in the dark, kissing my cheek. “What are you thinking about?”

I sighed. “The trial, obviously. It’s the only thing I *can* think about.”

He stroked my arm, his touch feather light. “I get it. Must be tough.”

I nodded. “I just hate not being able to prepare for things. It’s like a giant question mark, you know? A question mark that could have huge implications for my life.”

“And we don’t even know exactly what kind of implications,” Lilac noted.

I stared at him, my chest tight with anxiety. “Do you think you’re helping right now?”

His tone was sheepish. “Sorry.”

He squeezed me tighter in his arms and started caressing my side. I already would’ve been asleep under any other circumstances—or straddling his lap and rubbing myself all over him—but right now I was too stressed.

He could tell.

“Both Big Mac and Kira said that they would help you however they could. That has to count for something, right?” he said.

I nodded. “I’m grateful for that, but I don’t even know what kind of help I’m supposed to be asking for. I almost wish that the trial was tomorrow—I just want to get it over with.”

Lilac snorted. “For real? So soon?”

“Yes! The waiting and not knowing is killing me,” I admitted.

He kissed my temple, still holding me tight, and at least I had this. At least I had someone to give me warmth and comfort and a steady heartbeat under my palm.

Lilac just felt *so good.*

“I wish there was more that I could do to help,” he said quietly.

“I know,” I murmured, sniffing a little before I kissed his chest, right over his T-shirt. “I know.”

We fell into a worried, tense silence that not even Lilac’s impeccable cuddling skills could defuse. And then, all of a sudden, he just let me go and jumped up from the bed.

*What?*

“Well,” he said, literally ignoring me as I tried to grasp at him like a kid reaching for their teddy bear, “since we’re already up, I say we should just be up.” He turned to me. “First things first, let’s get you something to eat. You can’t think through anything on an empty stomach.”

My stomach made a sound of agreement, and he smirked.

“See?”

I snorted, nodding. “Okay, breakfast first.”

He just stood there in his T-shirt and sweatpants, watching me as I got to my feet and headed to the closet. I picked up a pair of leggings and a sweater that Cali had bought me and turned to face him, arching an eyebrow. “Aren’t you going to turn around?”

He laughed. “Please. It’s nothing I haven’t seen before.”

I flushed. “Well, this is different. I’m changing.”

He squinted at me. “Do you actually want me to look away, or are you just messing with me?”

My cheeks still hot, I swallowed, staring at him. And then I took off my night shirt and stood there in my panties, just to watch his breath hitch. I was moving to put the sweater on when he spoke up.

“Wait,” he said in a husky voice.

“What?”

“If I’m gonna sit here and watch you, I’m gonna need some popcorn.”

After a few debacles and some kisses that made me feel much better—if only while they lasted—we made our way downstairs.

It was still dark outside, but we weren’t the only ones awake.

Lola, Jay, and Torin were all sitting in the kitchen. My eyes fell on Lola, and I swallowed roughly. It looked like she’d gotten even less sleep than I had. She had dark circles under her eyes, and Jay was eyeing her worriedly.

I felt for Lola. Being both a vampire and a werewolf had to be really confusing. Almost as confusing as being a necromancer without understanding exactly what that meant. After we said our good mornings and Lilac went to pillage the fridge, Lola and I locked eyes.

“You look how I feel,” she said with a sad half smile.

I nodded, sighing. “I’m just so worried about the trial. I can’t stop thinking about it.”

“Marta,” Torin said from the stove. “Would you like me to scramble some eggs up for you too?”

“Thank you,” I said, grateful for the way Torin always checked in. “I’d love some.”

When I turned to Lola, she was staring at me quizzically.

“Wait, what trial?” she asked.

I realized that not everyone in the pack house had heard about my drama yet, so I very quickly filled everybody in. Lola stared the entire time, her eyes alight with interest.

“Now I have no idea what to expect,” I concluded. “I’ve never even been anywhere near a courtroom or anything. And who knows what kind of sentence they’re going to give me?” I fiddled with my napkin. “I don’t think…” I let out a shaky, embarrassed laugh. “I don’t think I’m going to be able to defend myself without having a total meltdown.”

“Hey, no,” Lilac said gently, squeezing my shoulder. “Don’t think like that.”

“It’s true, I—”

“Stop right there, missy!” Lola exclaimed, raising a hand. Her formerly sad expression had changed to one of absolute intrigue. Jay actually looked alarmed.

“What’s happening with Lola ?” Lilac asked Jay worriedly.

“I have no idea,” Jay offered in a tense whisper.

“This feels like it’s gonna be exciting, though,” Torin said with glee.

Lola slapped the table, and all of us flinched. “I know exactly what Marta needs, people!”

I frowned. “What?”

Lola grinned. “A mock trial! Let’s do it right now!”

**Episode 2058**

GREYSON

I had no idea what Aysel could possibly want from me at this point. As her guards grabbed my arms, I looked around, trying to figure out where I was. I figured I was going back upstairs, and I wanted to be ready to bolt if I saw an opportunity to get away.

But then we turned down a new passageway—a narrow hallway I hadn’t seen before.

I looked up at the low ceiling, then over to Aysel. “You got a private dungeon somewhere in here?”

She smiled. “Just wait, Greyson,” she said, without looking at me. “I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised by what you find.”

The only thing I would find pleasant right now was an Uber waiting outside the front door to get Cali, Xavier, and me away from this waking nightmare.

But that didn’t seem likely.

The hallway was long, and at the end of it, the guards pulled me through a door.

I looked around quickly, trying to get my bearings. We were outside. The air was damp and cold. The sky was still dark, but I could see the grey light of dawn just beginning to shine on the eastern horizon. It would be dawn soon, and the spell maintaining Cali’s Luna marks would be ending. And I had no idea where she was, or how the hell I was going to keep her safe.

Fear rushed through me, and I strained against the guards’ grip on my arms, but they held fast.

“Relax, Alpha,” one said, sounding annoyed. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“No one messes with the princess,” muttered the other one. He shook his head. “It’s not a good idea to anger her.”

I let out a hollow bark of laughter. That much was pretty obvious.

We kept walking, and the ground beneath my feet became more uneven. It was tough to tell in the darkness, but I was pretty sure we’d walked into the woods.

Was Aysel taking me to some remote spot in the woods so she could kill me? It was possible, but why? She could have just as easily killed me inside the palace. No one in there would’ve stopped her. Unless…

Maybe she had plans to kill me in some particularly horrible way—something even Lucian wouldn’t allow. She’d seemed really pissed when I’d turned her down.

Just as my heart really started to pound, we came into a clearing just beyond a thick stand of trees. In the dim light, I could see that there was a small structure in the center. For a moment, I thought it might be a dollhouse—it looked like a mini version of the Vanguard palace. But as I walked closer, I realized it was the size of a cottage, though it had all the elaborate scroll work and molding detail on the doors, windows, and eaves that the larger palace had. And in each mullioned window, there was a single lit candle.

I stared at the cottage as we walked toward it, baffled. What the hell was I looking at? If I wasn’t being held by armed guards and in fear for my life, I might have assumed it was some kind of elaborate Instagram setup.

Aysel stopped just in front of the cottage and looked up proudly. “This is my place, Greyson.” She looked over at me. “I only invite *very* special people here.” She paused, her eyes on my face. Then she looked up at her guards. “Take him inside and chain him to the bed.”

Before I could make a move to protest, everything went dark.

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Tall, thin candles lined the walls of the windowless room, burning in the dim light. The air was heavy with perfume, and my nose burned from the smell. I was lying flat on the bed, staring at the ceiling, my hands chained to each side of the wide headboard. I blinked slowly, counting the seconds it took to open my eyes again. I had no idea how long I’d been here, and there was no way to tell how much time had passed. It could be noon outside by now, for all I knew.

I closed my eyes, wondering if this excruciating wait was the torture. If it was, it was brilliant.

Then—finally—the door opened. I looked up to see Aysel step into the room. She was dressed differently than the last time I’d seen her—now, she was wearing a long, silk nightgown. It was cream-colored and shimmered over her golden skin, accentuating every curve. It had a slit all the way up her thigh, and it was completely sheer.

“Hello, Greyson,” she purred as she shut the door behind her. She locked it, then walked slowly toward me. “I’m so glad that we’re going to have some time to ourselves. The parties at the palace are fun, but I prefer a much more intimate setting.”

She climbed onto the bed like a panther, and this close, I could see that her eyes were dark with lust. Her intentions were more than clear now, and the irony of the moment wasn’t lost on me. There had been a point in my life—not too long ago—when I would’ve been totally up for whatever it was Aysel had in mind. Maybe not the handcuffs, but who knows? Aysel was an objectively beautiful woman, sexy as hell, and she clearly wanted me.

But I didn’t want her.

From the moment I’d realized my mate bond to Cali, I hadn’t felt the slightest bit of interest in anyone else, no matter how sexy they were. It was like that roaming part of my brain had been switched off.

Aysel moved over me and lowered herself, edging closer to me. She moved slowly, but deliberately, and her breath tickled my cheek. She leaned down toward me, her hair falling like a waterfall down her shoulders.

I felt my stomach recoil as her scent washed over me. Who was this woman? What *wouldn’t* she do to get what she wanted?

Her lips were hovering just over mine when a deep, booming alarm bell rang in my head. “You can’t seriously think I’m going to want to do this with you,” I said. “I have a mate.”

I had Cali.

Kissing Aysel earlier had been a mistake. A huge one. If given the option, I’d make it so I never had to look at Aysel’s face again. She was a manipulator, that much was clear. Whatever she thought was going to happen was definitively not going to.

Aysel’s eyes widened in an imitation of innocence. “But we’re going to be mates, Greyson.”

“Never.”

Aysel traced her fingertips up my chest. “But didn’t our kiss feel so good earlier, Greyson?” she asked, pressing her soft body into mine. “Didn’t you like it?”

I knew Aysel was unhinged. I had no idea what she was capable of, and I knew it was a risk to push her further, but I was sick of this bullshit. I wouldn’t play into whatever game she was trying to begin.

“What happened earlier was a mistake,” I said.

“Not to Seluna,” she said matter-of-factly.

Seluna? *Again?*

How could they believe in this moon goddess? How could a moon goddess determine who was mated to whom? What was she hoping for? That this goddess would wave her hand and I’d become her mate just like that?

I shook my head. “You know there’s no way to force a mate bond, Aysel. It’s disgusting to even think about trying. And even if there were some way to force it, I already have a mate.”

Aysel’s eyes widened. “For now.”

Was she fucking serious?

Everything about the Vanguard pack was complete insanity. I should have guessed as much when they’d started talking about all this royalty lunacy—*of course* they thought they were royal. It made total sense. It tracked perfectly with both Aysel and her brother’s innate sense of entitlement.

“What does *that* mean?” I demanded.

She looked at me for a moment. “You know that Lucian wants Caliana for his own in his bed. All Lunas tend to end up there because they choose to. Caliana won’t be any different.” She smiled. “And now that you have me, you won’t need her. You should just give in, Greyson. Your Caliana will be.”

My whole body responded to that. Anger surged through me like the blood in my veins.

“You don’t understand a thing about what it is to have a true mate,” I snarled, rattling the chains that held my wrists fast. “Cali is true to me and to my brother. What you’re implying is impossible, not only because of our mate bond, but because of who Cali is. Your brother is fighting a losing battle.”

Aysel waved an airy hand. “I’m not worried. Lucian has his games, and I have mine. And besides…” Her smiled deepened into something darker. “Your precious little Luna doesn’t know you’re here right now. You can do whatever you want with me, Greyson. Whatever your Caliana doesn’t let you do to her and more.”

The hair on the back of my neck stood up. She was completely deranged if she thought I was going to sleep with her. If I was going to even look at her again after this. Why was she trying to make this seem so normal? Like it was a regular thing to tie someone up on her bed and claim you were now mates.

She moved to kiss me again, but I turned my head, avoiding her.

“What time is it?” I asked, my heart pounding.

Aysel pressed her breasts to my chest. “It’s time for you to listen to your new princess.” She paused and drew her finger gently down the curve of my nose. “Because if you displease me, I may just lose my temper and order your pretty little Luna’s throat slit. And you wouldn’t want that, would you?”

**Episode 2059**

LOLA

“This room is set up all wrong,” I declared, standing in the doorway of the living room. I charged in and grabbed an end table, pulling it to the side of the room. “We need to clear out this space here,” I said, pointing to the center of the room. “That’s where we’ll put the defense and prosecution. Grab a chair.”

“Put the what?” Torin asked, looking confused but thrilled. Torin had been the most enthusiastic advocate of the mock-trial idea, by far, and he grabbed one of the wing chairs and hauled it toward the corner of the room. “What else are we going to need?” he asked breathlessly.

“We’ll bring in the desk from the office to use as the judge’s bench, and we’re going to need a gavel.” I frowned. “I don’t know where the hell we’re going to get one of those.”

“A what?” Torin asked.

“A gavel.” I made a hammering motion. “Judges use them to bring the courtroom to order. It’s hard to be a judge without one.”

“Oh!” Torin called out, his eyes wide. “I know what you’re talking about! I think I saw something that might work out in the tool shed. I’m on it. Anything to help out Marta!” He dropped the wing chair with a clatter and sprinted out of the room.

I pulled the other wing chair out of the way and surveyed the room. It looked good, but it still wasn’t quite right. I knew I was going a bit above and beyond with all of this, but I couldn’t stop myself. Might as well do something right for once.

“More seating for the audience, in case anyone comes downstairs,” I muttered to myself, and grasped hold of one arm of the couch and gave it a tug.

“Lola? You okay?” Jay stood in the doorway, eyeing me warily.

“I’m fine,” I grunted, pulling at the sofa will all my might. The thing was dark brown leather and *huge*. It must have weighed a ton, and try as I might, I couldn’t make it budge.

“You sure you’re all right?” Jay asked.

I looked up at him. “What do you mean, am I sure? Of course I’m sure. I’m great. And a mock trial sounds like a lot of fun. Don’t you think so?”

Jay didn’t answer for a moment. Then he walked over to me and put his hands on my shoulders.

“Lola,” he said, looking right into my eyes.

I forced myself to meet his gaze. “What?”

“I know you’re dealing with a lot right now, and all this manic energy of yours is starting to worry me a little.”

I thought back to my outburst from earlier, about not belonging anywhere. That was probably where this was coming from. But Jay looked genuinely concerned about me, and I felt myself soften a little.

“I know it looks like I’m going overboard here, but the thought of being able to help Marta out, and doing something active and concrete… It’s just making me feel better,” I said with a shrug. “Does that make sense?”

Jay smiled gently. “Yeah, it makes sense.” He stepped away from me and picked up the other end of the couch easily. “So, where do you want this?”

“Over there,” I said, tipping my chin toward the windows.

Torin raced back into the room, wildly wielding a hammer. “I’ve got it,” he gasped. “Will this work?”

“Watch it,” Jay growled.

I laughed and pulled it from his hand. “This is perfect.” I turned back to Torin. “I need you to gather the crowd. Can you get Big Mac, Kira, Rishika, and Artemis?” I reeled off, already knowing it was the worst group of people to wake up this early.

“They might be asleep,” Torin started hesitantly.

“Then wake them up!” I shouted. “Justice never sleeps!”

Torin shot Jay a wide-eyed look, then hurried upstairs.

Jay and I kept working—pulling furniture in from other rooms and moving it around—and when he moved the desk from the office in front of the fireplace, I placed the hammer on its gleaming top and stood back for a look. “It’s perfect.”

I had the two end tables set up for the prosecution and the defense, a row of miscellaneous chairs from all the other rooms for the jury, and the couch and the rest of the seats for anyone else who wanted to join us.

“Okay, here they are,” Torin said, coming back into the living room. “And I brought these two back!”

Trailing behind him was everyone I’d ask him to gather including Marta and Lilac, but they were all looking around blearily, like they’d just woken up.

Which—I glanced out the window at the pre-dawn light—they probably had.

“What’s going on?” Rishika asked with a yawn. “Is anyone in mortal danger? Because if not, I’m going back to bed.”

“No one’s in danger, but you are needed here.” I paused for effect. “We’re going to stage a mock trial!”

This was not met with the reaction I’d been hoping for. There was silence, and everyone looked at me blankly.

Then Rishika laughed. “Are you serious?” She looked out the living room windows. “It’s not even sunrise, Lola.”

“I know,” I said, a woman possessed. “But we can’t rest when one of our own is in trouble and needs help. How this works is simple. We’re going to simulate Marta’s trial for unlicensed necromancy, and each of you are going to play a part. This will give Marta a chance to practice and hone her defense before her actual trial. Sound good?” I looked around.

Everyone was still looking a little confused.

Finally, Artemis shrugged. “Should we get my sister for this? Or the two Alphas? This pack tends to do everything… very, uh, together.”

I frowned. “Oh, good idea! Is Cali back?”

Artemis shook her head, yawning. “No idea. I’m not going in her room or either of her mates. Who knows what I’d come across?”

I frowned. It felt strange not to know whether Cali had come back from the party yet. But they had probably come in earlier and gone straight to bed. Maybe they’d just partied too hard and needed to sleep it off. If Cali didn’t give me all the details later, she was going to have another thing coming.

“Everyone ready for this?” I asked, looking around.

“Hang on a second and slow your roll,” Big Mac said. The witch looked at Marta who was a little doe-eyed. “Do you want to do this right now? We don’t need all… whatever the hell this is.”

“Big Mac’s right, we can do this by ourselves if you want,” Kira added.

Marta took all of this in for a moment. “It’s okay,” she said. “It might be helpful to have more people around… We might think of something we might not have alone.”

“As long as you’re sure,” Big Mac said.

“I am.” Then Marta looked over at me, her eyes wet with tears. “Thank you for setting all this up.”

“No problem,” I said, smiling at her. I looked around. “Okay, let’s do this. Marta, you’re the defendant, obviously. Kira, you can be her lawyer. Big Mac…” I looked at her for a long moment. “You’ll be the prosecutor.”

I figured Big Mac would be the least likely to go easy on Marta, which was all the better for Marta to practice with.

Big Mac nodded and moved toward the table I pointed to, obviously agreeing.

“Artemis, Rishika, Torin, and Jay—you’ll be the jury. Right over there,” I said, pointing to the mismatched chairs.

“And Lilac is a character witness,” Big Mac said.

Kira nodded. “We know the witches will probably want to hear from Lilac, and he is the one who was resurrected.”

“I’m ready to do it,” Lilac said. “Bring it on.”

“Perfect,” I said. “And last, but certainly not least, I’ll be the judge.”

“You don’t say,” Big Mac said, monotone.

“I mean, I hate to toot my own horn”—Jay laughed when I said that, probably because he knew I really loved to toot my own horn—“but I’m kind of an expert at all of this,” I said, gesturing around.

“At what, rearranging furniture?” Rishika muttered, leaning against Artemis and closing her eyes.

Big Mac cleared her throat. “Can we just do this?”

“Yes, okay,” I said. “Just follow my lead, everyone.”

Everyone seemed convinced, and nodded. Marta was looking especially focused and was hanging on my every word.

“Okay, everyone take your places!” I shouted.

Lilac was standing next to Marta, and he turned and gave her a kiss on the cheek, then squeezed her hand. “You’ve got this, okay?” he said quietly.

Marta nodded nervously.

I looked around at everyone, trying to make my expression stern.

“Okay, okay, this court will come to order,” I barked. I banged the hammer on the desk and looked up. “Court is now in session!”

**Episode 2060**

Ava and I shot down the hallway, guards yelling at us as we ran. I’d barely had time to revel in my badassery after taking down the first four guards when two more had rounded the corner of the hallway, because of course.

“Hurry!” I yelled at Ava. “Run faster!”

“If you don’t stop yelling at me, you’re going to wish you had never asked for my help!” Ava shouted back.

Safe to say that the night had been a disaster, and between maintaining the fake Luna marks and being constantly worried that Greyson and Xavier were about to start a fight with Lucian, I’d been scared every moment. But I wasn’t scared now, even as we were running away from Lucian’s guards. I was *pissed*.

I hated feeling scared, and—more than that—I hated feeling manipulated. And as it turned out, I wasn’t a huge fan of being locked in a room and held against my will. Everyone here thought I was no threat, but my blood was half Fae, and it was boiling now. It was time to show everyone in this place that I wasn’t someone to be messed with.

“Where are you two—” one guard began, panting.

But he stopped speaking as I let loose a targeted blast of Fae magic, right at the center of his chest.

The guard went still, stunned by the bolt. Then, without so much as a cry of pain, he dropped to the floor, completely unconscious.

The second guard—maybe wondering why his partner had suddenly gone so quiet—started running at us even faster. Ava stopped, grabbed him by the shoulders, and dragged him to the floor, shifting into her wolf form as she moved.

The guard was strong, but unprepared for the attack, and he struggled to free himself from Ava’s grip as she dragged him down the hallway. She clamped down on the back of his neck with her powerful jaws, pinning him in place.

She looked up at me, and I immediately understood her unspoken suggestion. I focused my energy and sent a blast of energy at the guard’s back. He stilled beneath Ava, and when I leaned forward to look at his face, I saw that he’d been knocked out, too.

Ava opened her mouth, and the guy dropped to the floor with a thud. She shifted back to her human form and looked over at me. “Nice. Fast and quiet, just the way I like it. Now, a new plan.”

Naked now, but utterly unselfconscious, Ava knelt down next to the unconscious guard and started unbuttoning his coat.

“What the hell are you doing?” I hissed, alarmed.

Ava looked up at me. “Stripping off his uniform, obviously.”

“*Why?*”

She looked down at herself, then up at me. “Because I’ve got to wear something.” My heart was pounding out a crazy beat, but Ava looked completely relaxed as she yanked the guard’s uniform jacket off and started on his shirt. Why did she have this stupid amazing body? “And, anyway, if we want to make it more than five steps this time, looking like guards is the best way I can think of to stay undetected.”

I had to admit that she had a point. I shrugged and went over to kneel next to the other guard. Luckily both the guards were small and slight. The uniforms of these two would actually fit Ava and me fairly well.

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Dressed in the guards’ uniforms, Ava and I moved quietly along the upper floor of the palace. After we’d stripped them, we’d used their socks to tie their hands, then hauled them to my room and into the closet with the others, just in case someone decided to drop in to check in on us.

I didn’t know how long my magic was going to keep them knocked out—I was still relatively new to it—but I hoped it was a long time. At least long enough for us to find Xavier and Greyson and get the hell out of this place.

I looked up at Ava. “Where do you think we should start looking for the guys?”

Ava was looking around, her brow furrowed as she thought hard. “Can you sense either of them?”

I shook my head, my stomach plummeting. “I’ve been calling both of them through the mate bond mind link, but I haven’t heard anything.”

Ava nodded, her expression grim. “Yeah, I couldn’t reach Xavier or Greyson either, before.” She looked around curiously.

I frowned. Ava couldn’t contact Xavier either? Part of me liked it, but the rational part didn’t. If neither of us could mind link or sense them in any way… how were we going to find them? I really didn’t have time to think more about the mind linking at the moment, though. I had other, more pressing matters to focus on.

Like how everything about this whole situation felt upside down. Ava and I weren’t exactly friends, but here we were, sneaking down a corridor in stolen guard uniforms like we were in a *Star Wars* movie. What the hell was next?

We reached an intersection with another hallway, and Ava stopped. She lifted her nose and sniffed cautiously.

“What?” I asked. She hadn’t spoken, and the tension was driving me crazy.

“I can almost smell…” She took another deep breath, then nodded. “Yeah, it’s Greyson. He went this way, not long ago.”

My stomach clenched. “What?”

“Come on,” Ava hissed. She led the way down the short passageway and to a wide staircase. Following the scent, Ava led the way, and I followed behind, keeping a sharp eye out for guards.

Thankfully, we didn’t see anyone. It was quiet downstairs. It was also a mess, littered with trash and champagne bottles and discarded clothes—but no werewolves. They all must have been sleeping off their hangovers somewhere else.

Ava stopped again and closed her eyes, breathing deeply. “He was taken down here,” she said, pointing down a dim passageway to our left. “And I can smell someone else with him.”

“Who?” I asked, though I didn’t really want to know the answer.

Ava slid her eyes sideways to look at me. “Aysel.”

I glared.

“This way,” Ava murmured, and started down the passageway.

I followed her, wishing I was a werewolf so *I* could lead the way. I hated to have to rely on Ava for something as vital as finding Greyson and Xavier.

But before I could really get a good brood going, we found ourselves at a dead end.

“It’s a door,” Ava muttered, pushing against it.

The door opened, and we both stumbled through. We looked around, surprised. We were outside.

“Why would they take Greyson outside?” I wondered out loud, baffled. “Lucian made such a big deal about everyone staying in the house.”

Ava shook her head. “Who the hell knows? I wouldn’t trust the Vanguard pack to tell the truth about a single damn thing. Come on.”

We crept across the dead grass and old snow toward the trees. I felt better once we hit them—at least now we had some cover in their shadows.

Ava was still following Greyson’s scent, and she led us down a trail, toward a clearing. In the center of the clearing was a fancy little house, complete with eaves, gables, and a chimney.

She pointed at the gingerbread-house-looking cottage. “Greyson was taken this way. He walked directly up those steps and inside. And it wasn’t too long ago, either.”

My heart was pounding, but I took a deep breath and reached out with my mate bond link. And suddenly, like magic, I could sense him. He was close, and he was in distress. I could feel the anxiety radiating from him.

“Anything?” Ava asked tensely.

“Hang on,” I said, keeping my eyes closed. “I can’t actually speak with him yet, but he’s definitely there.”

Ava nodded and pulled out a silver knife she’d taken from the guard’s kit. “Then let’s go get him.”

We moved quietly toward the steps of the little cottage. It appeared to be unguarded, but Ava stopped as she reached the door, sniffing the air.

She nodded and tipped her head, motioning for me to open the front door.

I reached for the latch and opened the door, trying to move as quietly as I could. From the doorway, I could see that the inside looked like cottagecore from hell. The place was packed full of overstuffed furniture, and lit candles made the air heavy with their sickly perfumes.

I didn’t need magic to know in a heartbeat that this was Aysel’s place. Everything about it—from the pink velvet chairs to the plants withering in the window—screamed “princess with serious issues.”

Ava stepped into the cottage, then looked down a short hallway.

“I think he’s in there,” she said quietly, pointing to a door at the end of the passage.

I ground my teeth. I was done sneaking around. I narrowed my eyes, focusing all my energy on the door at the end of the hallway, and raised my hands. I could feel electricity tingling through them, and with a blast that took my breath away, I shot that stored-up energy straight down the hall.

The door blew open, and Ava and I rushed toward it.

We stepped into the room and found Greyson lying on a bed, his hands chained to the headboard. Aysel was lying across him, half naked and looking at us with wild surprise.

Without a second thought, I sent another blast of magic at Aysel, hurling her to the floor.

**Episode 2061**

CHARLIE

I stood in the kitchen, looking down at the coffee maker, listening as it made its gentle, coffee-making sounds. The light outside the window was dim and grey—it wasn’t even dawn. It was way earlier than I’d normally want to be having coffee, but it didn’t look like anyone was getting back to sleep anytime soon. Not with Judge Lola holding literal court in the living room.

I glanced over at Violet, who was standing at the toaster, a small stack of buttered toast on a plate next to her.

I cleared my throat. “I don’t think I’m going to call my mom just yet. Not this early. She’d probably freak out and think it was an emergency.”

Violet gave me a long look. “It *is* an emergency, Charlie. Someone tried to kill me, remember?”

I remembered, all right. I shuddered, thinking of the sound of the chandelier’s rusted bolts wrenching loose, and the thunderous crash the flaming thing had made as it had hit the floor right next to us.

“Plus,” Violet added, “it’s two hours later in Minnesota, right?”

“Oh yeah,” I said, “I keep forgetting.” I looked down at the coffee maker. “I’ll call as soon as I get some caffeine in my system. I’d probably slur my speech if I called now. My mom would probably think I was drunk or something.”

Violet raised her eyebrows, clearly not buying my story.

I sighed. “And I should probably think about how I’m going to explain all this to her.”

She nodded. “Yeah, I can see that.” She sighed, looking tired. “I don’t want to be the cause of an even bigger rift in your family.” She looked down at the bread in the toaster. “Your mom already hates me. Maybe she won’t *want* to help figure out who’s trying to kill me.”

“Don’t say that,” I said quickly, stung by Violet’s words. “You don’t know my mom. She would never do that. And she’s coming around with you. Besides, she’s going to be super pissed to hear that a hunter has gone rogue. My mom is *very* into the guiding principles of the hunters.”

From the living room, I could hear banging, like someone was hitting a desk with a hammer, and Lola yelling, “I will now hear from the first witness!”

Violet’s toast popped up, and I grabbed the two cups of coffee I’d just poured. “Do you want to go out to the porch for a while? It might be quieter.”

She nodded and, grabbing the plate of toast, followed me out to the deck.

We sat on the damp deck chairs and looked out across the soggy lawn, toward the trees.

“What are you going to ask your mom?” Violet asked through a bite of toast. She swallowed. “And, more importantly, do you think she’ll actually want to help me?”

“I know she will,” I said. “I know it. She knows how serious you and I are, and whoever did this, they came after me, too.” I leaned over and pressed a kiss to her temple, which felt warm in the cold morning air. “Don’t even think about it. She’s going to help us.”

Violet nodded, then got out of her chair and squeezed in next to me. “How do you think she’ll do it?”

“Do what?” I asked, putting my arms around her.

“Track this bastard down? The one who wants to kill us?”

I thought for a moment. “I’m not sure. But I know that she knows the hunter community inside and out. If I were her, I’d work with Romilly and Pepperdine to track down all the other hunters. See where they are. Where they’ve been. That’s how we find out who’s behind all this.”

Violet looked up at me. “Can we trust the adults?” She bit her lip, thinking. “I guess Romilly did help me, and Pepperdine is probably okay…”

She trailed off, and we were both silent.

Was she right? Maybe I was being too naïve. I hated to think about it, but maybe one of the teachers *did* want Violet out of the way.

I wrapped my hand around my coffee cup. “Or I could *not* call my mom. We could just find out on our own. We’re the werewolves here. We can’t guarantee that any of the hunters will care about this as much as we do.”

“You can always trust your mother.”

Violet and I both jumped and whipped around as the voice spoke behind us. Orla was standing in the doorway of the house, holding a mug in both hands.

She smiled at us. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you. And I didn’t mean to eavesdrop on your conversation. But if someone’s out to hurt Violet, then it’s your responsibility, Charlie—as her mate—to gather all the help you can. The *best* help,” she added pointedly.

“Yeah, I know—” I muttered, but she wasn’t finished.

“As a mother myself, I can say with perfect confidence that a *good* parent will do anything for her child.” She gave me a piercing look. “And you should trust your mom to do the same, if you think she would.”

I rubbed my eyes. “You don’t know how terrible it was when my mom found out that Violet was a werewolf. And my mate. She tried to kill me. To call it an awkward moment would be the understatement of the century.”

Orla’s eyes went wide. “I’m sorry Charlie, I had no idea. But if you still have any hope, and if you believe deep down that your mom will help you, then you should give her a chance to prove it.”

I let her words sink in. I could tell she really meant what she said, and that she really cared, and for a moment my throat felt tight. I was really grateful I’d found my way to this very weird, but very loving, second family.

I nodded at Orla, and that seemed to satisfy her.

“Well,” she said, turning, “if you’ll excuse me, I want to go see how this little living room trial is going. Marta is going to need all the help we can give her.”

She disappeared through the door, shutting it behind her.

Violet looked up at me. “Well, are you going to call her?”

I put down my coffee and pulled my phone from my pocket. Orla was right. I dialed my mom’s number.

“Well good morning,” she answered, sounding cheerful. “You’re up early. To what do I owe the honor of my son actually calling me?”

“Hey, Mom,” I said, trying to keep my tone casual. “Yeah, I know it’s early. Listen, it’s not a huge deal, but something came up and I could use a little advice.”

“Okay,” my mom said slowly. “What’s going on?”

“Someone kind of tried to murder my girlfriend, and we kind of suspect that person is a hunter. Because we know it is. So anyway, any thoughts you had on that would be great.”

There was total silence from the other end of the line.

I looked down at my phone, wondering if the call had been dropped. “Mom? Are you there?”

When she spoke, her tone was deadly serious. “What did you say?”

My heart started to pound. Hearing that tone of voice made it hard not to feel like I was in trouble. “Just what I said. I think someone—”

“Were you with Violet when this happened?”

“Yeah.”

“And you’re sure it was a direct attempt on her life?”

My stomach twisted at the memory of what happened in the theater. “Yeah. I’m sure.”

Whoever was behind this wanted Violet *gone*—the planning and attack on her made that clear. And it hadn’t mattered that I was there with her. Whoever was after her was willing to take me down in the process.

“Did you see who did it?”

“No, we didn’t—”

“What makes you so sure it’s a hunter?” my mom asked.

I swallowed. Her rapid-fire questioning style had always put me on edge. “We found a knife. It has a label from the camp.”

My mom was quiet again.

“Mom?” I prodded.

“I’m here,” she said shortly.

“So I’m pretty worried. I wondered if you wouldn’t mind making a few calls.”

“What kind of calls?”

I shrugged, though she couldn’t see me. “Just asking a few casual questions about where everyone is. See if anyone has been in our area. That would help narrow it down.”

There was a beat of silence.

“All right,” my mom said. “I can do that.”

“Thanks,” I said, feeling a rush of gratitude. Orla was right. I knew I could count on my mom for help. “I want to hear back as soon as you know anything. Maybe you could check back in later today?”

“Oh, I’ll check in all right,” my mom said, sounding grimly amused.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

There was a shuffling sound from the other end of the call, like my mom was rustling around in a closet. “It means I’m getting the first flight out of Duluth to Portland.”

**Episode 2062**

I stood for a moment, shocked at my own actions. I had moved instinctively, but I couldn’t believe I’d just blasted a *princess* off my mate. That was a first.

I looked wildly at Greyson. “Are you okay?”

He nodded and rattled the chains on his wrists. “I think they’re silver. I can’t try to break them—if they cut me, I’m dead.”

This somehow managed to infuriate me even more.

“We have to get you out of here!” I whirled around, looking for my back-up, but froze when I realized Ava was gone.

GONE?

Ava was *gone*? After all we’d done together?

Well, that figured. I should have known Ava would jump ship whenever it best suited her. But…

I looked around again. *Had* she left of her own volition? Maybe a guard had swooped in and grabbed her. I looked around the room. Maybe it wasn’t a guard. Maybe some kind of witch patrolled the halls of Aysel’s weird little cottage, or maybe a ghost.

One thing I knew for sure—I was alone, and I didn’t like it. I felt shaken, standing there by myself. It was one thing to storm the castle—or castle-cottage—with a team, but it was quite another to go it alone.

Dragging in a deep breath, I looked back at Greyson. I still had my magic, at least.

A hand grasped the bed covers, and Aysel pulled herself upright, glaring at me, pure hatred on her face.

Maybe I did have to consider the idea that Ava had just abandoned me. It did look like I’d just started what was going to be one hell of a fight.

Aysel got to her feet and brushed off her silk nightgown, looking barely worse for wear, despite the full blast of my powers she’d just taken.

She smiled eerily. “You really shouldn’t enter houses without an invitation, Caliana. It’s very rude. And on top of that, you run the risk of seeing things you don’t want to see.”

My hands curled into fists. “If I see you on top of my mate again, I’ll blast you straight through that wall,” I said, glaring right back at her. I held up my hands and felt them tingle, preparing for another blast of magic.

Far from flinching, Aysel just laughed. “You’re an idiot, you really are. I’m not just a princess, you know. I’m also one of the best fighters in the Vanguard pack.”

She dropped into a crouch, like she was getting ready to leap at me.

Though I’d been able to get her off Greyson, I wasn’t going to be able to do it again. I’d lost the element of surprise, which was unfortunate, because I didn’t know where that left me.

Aysel—clearly sensing weakness—stalked toward me like a cat.

She was dressed like a Victoria’s Secret model, but she knew how to move, and she could shift at any moment.

I stared at her, frozen on the spot. I’d tried here and there, but I’d never really gotten the hang of the kind of hand-to-hand combat Rishika and Artemis practiced. Watching Aysel, I kicked myself for not trying harder to learn. It was my biggest weakness.

“Blast her, Cali!” Greyson shouted. “Now!”

This was the encouragement I needed. Warmth filled my chest, and—smiling—I let loose. All the fury and frustration and rage I felt at being intimidated and manipulated and trapped in this place channeled through me and shot out my hands. The sheer power of the magic sent Aysel flying backward, slamming her into the wall. She crumpled to the floor with a groan.

I stepped forward to assess the damage I’d done, but Aysel was already recovering. Good lord, this chick was tough.

“What *are* you?” she demanded, glaring up at me. “A witch?” She pulled herself to her feet, though she swayed, wincing with pain. “Lunas are above weak witch magic.”

I thought of the witches I knew, and what they were capable of. “You’ve got some weird ideas, thinking witches are weak.”

Without waiting for her to answer, I hit her with another blast of Fae magic. And this time, it was targeted, concentrated into a single shaft of energy. Aysel looked shocked for a moment, then went still. She slid down the wall to the floor, finally unconscious.

Spinning around, I rushed to Greyson’s side and pressed a kiss to his lips. “Are you okay? Are you hurt?” I looked up at the silver chains. They were thin, but they looked strong.

“I’m okay, but this is definitely not how I saw this night ending,” Greyson said, shaking his head.

“Is there a key?” I asked, looking hopelessly at the lock. “I don’t think I can get these off.”

“I don’t know,” Greyson said, looking around. “The guards didn’t have one, and I didn’t see Aysel bring one in. I don’t think she was planning on letting me go anytime soon,” he added grimly.

I shot a poisonous look down at her limp form. “I should have killed her, not just knocked her out,” I snarled.

“Don’t say that,” Greyson said, his voice surprisingly mild, considering the woman had just chained him up and tried to assault him. “Killing someone is permanent. You shouldn’t wish to kill anyone. Besides, you never know—Aysel might end up being useful.”

“Yeah, well, I won’t hold my breath for that,” I muttered. “Listen, I don’t see a key anywhere.” I looked nervously toward the door. “Aysel could wake up any minute, or a guard could find us. I’m going to have to try something else.”

I picked up one of the chains and focused all my energy on it, trying to channel my magic. But it was hard. I could feel my frustration building. We were so close to getting out of this place. It was just this stupid silver chain that was holding us here. I just needed it to *go away* so we could get the hell out of here.

And—like I’d willed it to happen—the chain crumbled to dust in my hand.

“Hey!” I said, delighted. My power had to be growing stronger.

I did the same thing to the other chain, and Greyson sat up, massaging his wrists.

“How’d you get here, anyway?” he asked, stepping off the bed.

“Ava was with me,” I admitted. “We worked together to get out of where we were being held, and then she followed your scent here.”

“*Ava?* Where is she now?” Greyson asked, frowning.

I shook my head. “I don’t know. She’s missing, and I don’t know where Xavier is either.”

“He was deep in the palace the last time I saw him,” Greyson said. “Okay, we have to find them and get the hell out of this place before it’s too late.”

I nodded and followed him out of the cottage. When we got outside, I looked up. The sky was lighter. Shit. It was almost dawn. The spell would be gone at sunrise.

“Let’s hurry,” I said, pressing forward. But I stopped when a wave of pain broke over me, taking my breath away.

Next to me, Greyson stopped too, groaning with pain.

My shoulders burned as the magic that Kira had cast on me flared up. I doubled over as wave after wave of pain washed over me. I gasped, feeling dizzy and sick to my stomach. It was the feeling of the spell leaving me, I knew it. The space where the Luna marks had been burned like fire, then like ice.

“Are you okay, Cali?” Greyson asked, reaching for my hand and pulling me upright. He looked pale and sweaty, but his face was lined with worry as he looked at me. “That felt like I got hit with a brick. It must have been worse for you.”

I nodded, and noticed that his hands had moved to cup my elbows. He was holding me up as I swayed on my feet. My fingers felt numb as I fumbled at the collar of the guard’s uniform and pulled.

“They’re gone,” I said, craning to look at where the marks had been on my skin. “The spell is over. We have to get Xavier and leave. Now.”

Greyson nodded, and we headed toward the main house.

We stood in a silent hallway and looked around.

“Okay,” I said, thinking hard. “If you were Xavier, where would you be?”

Before Greyson could answer, the door behind us creaked open. We spun around, and for a moment, it looked like no one was there. I thought maybe it had been the wind, but then I heard heavy breathing and I looked down.

There was a wolf, and before my eyes it transformed into Aysel. She took a staggering step over the threshold. Her hair was matted, and her pale skin was muddy, but her eyes burned with fury. She grinned at us and heaved herself into a sitting position. Breathing hard, she reached behind herself and hit what looked like a light switch, just over her head.

A shrill scream blared into the air, making me jump. That wasn’t a light switch, it was an alarm, and Aysel had just summoned help.

I looked up at Greyson, my heart pounding.

We weren’t going to be able to get out.

**Episode 2063**

XAVIER

Lucian’s question shocked me into silence, and I stared at him for a minute. Why the *hell* would he be asking me if Cali was a *due destini* mate? Did werewolves not know how the fuck to keep their mouths shut? There was no way Cali would have told him.

And why did he even want to know? Lucian had to have some kind of motive—but what?

“Well?” Lucian asked. “Is she?”

I narrowed my eyes. “No.”

His eyes were cold. “Then why do I see two Alphas with only one mate between them? And I heard Greyson use the word ‘mate,’ so I know it’s true,” he said quickly, when I opened my mouth to speak. “So if she’s mated to both of you, then that’s *due destini*, is it not?”

Anger was pulsing through me, making it hard to breathe.

*Touché, asshole.*

“What we do in the Redwood pack isn’t any of your damn business. I don’t know why you wanted to talk to me about this, but I’m sorry, I don’t have any answers for you,” I said, sarcasm dripping from my tongue.

Lucian studied my face for a moment. Then he turned toward the door. “Come with me, Xavier Evers.” He nodded to the guard, and the guard opened the door.

I hesitated for just a moment, then followed Lucian into the hall. I glanced up at the oil paintings lining the walls as we walked.

“Like them?” Lucian asked, catching me looking. He smiled when I shrugged. He pointed to one in an ornate golden frame. “This one depicts the moment Seluna anointed our pack. That gentleman there is the first Vanguard Alpha. And that one over there,” he said, pointing to a painting of a woman lying near what looked like a lake of shining stars, “is called ‘The Sea of Tranquility.’ That woman—of course—is Seluna, though it doesn’t depict a moment in our past so much as elevate her as a goddess.”

“Obviously,” I muttered, looking at the painting as we passed.

He pointed to another, where a brightly lit woman was surrounded by wolves. “And this one is when Seluna gave the werewolves—”

“Thanks, but I really don’t care,” I snapped, cutting Lucian off. “I didn’t come here for a master’s in art history. All I want is to get Cali and get the hell out of here.”

Lucian turned to look at me, frankly surprised. “Well, that’s certainly honest.”

“What’s the point in lying to you?” I asked. “Are you going to believe me if I tell you that I’m super stoked to spend the night here?”

He gave me a searching look. “Have you considered that it could be in your best interest if Greyson spends more time with Aysel?”

“Give me a break,” I scoffed, shaking my head.

“Think about it,” Lucian said. “If Aysel joins with Greyson in a Seluna-blessed bond, that means you will have Caliana all to yourself. You wouldn’t have to share her with anyone.” He raised his eyebrows. “Isn’t that something you desire?”

This stopped me, and I let myself think about it for a moment. When he put it like that, I had to admit it did sound good. And if Greyson was with someone else, that would certainly mean fewer obstacles for Cali and me. But I wasn’t a fucking idiot, and I wasn’t about to make some shady midnight deal with this guy.

“Listen,” I snapped, “I’ve heard enough, and I can tell you right now that what your sister wants is never going to happen. If she thinks she can just pout or threaten and Greyson’s going to bend to her will and become her mate, she’s fucking crazier than I thought.”

Lucian’s brows drew together, and his eyes flashed. “I didn’t mean to upset you, Xavier, but you should be very careful when you speak about my sister. It would be most unfortunate if you called her a name you regretted.”

I didn’t like the tone of Lucian’s voice. I cracked my knuckles threateningly. “And you might want to wise up, Lucian. Aysel is using you—and probably everyone else around here—to get what she wants. If you don’t want to look like a complete dipshit in front of your pack, you might want to change that.”

Lucian narrowed his eyes and drew himself up to his full height. “I’m the prince,” he insisted, as though that settled the matter.

Clearly this guy was incapable of understanding what I was telling him. Or unwilling to understand it.

But before I could say anything else, there was the click of heels, and we turned around to see a guard walking swiftly toward us. He approached Lucian and leaned close, whispering something I couldn’t hear.

Lucian’s eyes went wide, as though what he’d heard surprised him. But when he looked over at me, he’d recovered himself. “Well, it seems as though Greyson has found his way out, once again.” He shook his head. “What is it with these Redwood Alphas? It’s almost as though they don’t appreciate all they’ve been given.”

I stared at Lucian, genuinely surprised. Greyson had escaped? How had he managed that?

Lucian turned to the guard. “Gather the others. Everyone to their posts. I want the whole house searched, from top to bottom. Leave no stone unturned.”

The guard nodded and left without a word.

I watched him as he disappeared around a corner, then I leaned against the wall, crossing my arms. It didn’t look like I was going to be helping out with this search.

*Can you hear me, Cali? Cali? Are you there? If you can hear me, say something.*

Nothing.

*Greyson, can you hear me? Are you out there?*

The irony of me suddenly wanting to hear my brother’s grating voice in my head wasn’t lost on me, but even using Kira’s enhanced mind link, I couldn’t reach either of them.

Lucian turned to the guard with us. “Take my guest back to his room.”

“Hang on,” I said, turning to Lucian. “I know Greyson better than you do. Let me help you find him.”

Lucian’s eyes flashed dangerously. “That came dangerously close to sounding like an order, Xavier Evers. You want to be careful with how you speak to me.”

It was clear that the news of Greyson’s escape had made Lucian agitated, and I shrugged casually. “No orders, just a strong suggestion. From Alpha to Alpha, of course.”

Lucian glared at me, then his gaze flashed to the guard again. “Take him to his room! Get him out of my sight! He’s no help to me at all!”

I wasn’t sure exactly why, but seeing Lucian look so earnestly upset made me smile. And if it hadn’t been for the guard coming closer—still brandishing his silver—this would’ve been my moment to press that advantage and take the upper hand against this emotional daisy of a prince.

But the guard slipped behind me, and I felt the point of a knife press into my back. I could feel the coolness of the silver, even through my clothes.

Lucian—back to his smug self-assurance once again—smirked at me. “Just relax, Xavier Evers. I’ll be down to visit you later.” He shrugged. “Possibly *much* later. There’s still so much for us to discuss concerning the lovely Caliana.”

Fury spiked through me, but the guard had his hand on my shoulder and his knife pressed against me, so there was nothing for me to do but turn away. He kept a firm grip on me as we made our way down the maze of passages and stairways and hallways until we reached the lower level.

The door of my room—my *cell*—was open, and as the guard pushed me through it, my whole body reacted. I *wasn’t* going back in there—there was no fucking way. He still had his knife, but he was shorter than me, and I was furious, so I just went for it.

In a flash, I twisted around and grabbed the guard’s knife hand by the wrist. He was surprised for an instant, but then he struggled, trying to free himself from my grasp. But I held tight and brought my knee up, smashing him in the balls.

Just as it happened, a sudden pain rippled through me too, though I wasn’t the one who’d been hit. It tore through me like a wildfire, just as the guard groaned and swung again. I gasped but kept fighting through this strange pain. With his free hand, he landed a punch to the side of my head, making my ears ring, but with all the adrenaline pumping through me, it felt like nothing more than a sting.

Seeing this, he growled and brought his fist up again, catching me in the chin and knocking my head back. I recovered quickly, but it gave him an opportunity to free his hand and bring the knife to my throat.

“Say goodnight,” he muttered menacingly.

I tightened my grasp, but the knife was already pressing into my skin. Panic was edging at my breath when a familiar scent reached my nose. I looked up just in time to see the guard collapse, falling to the ground like a sack of dirty laundry.

“Well, that worked.”

I looked up and saw Ava standing there, grinning at me, dressed as a guard.

She arched an eyebrow, looking smug. “Miss me?”

**Episode 2064**

MARTA

I looked around the disordered living room as everyone scurried to their places. Everyone else seemed to know exactly what to do, but I just stood there, feeling completely lost. Which felt like the story of my life.

“Where should I sit?” I shouted, fighting to be heard over the shuffle.

Lola pointed to a chair she’d hauled into place next to her desk. “Right there! You’re on the witness stand!” She tucked herself in behind the desk. “You’re being questioned. Ugh, Marta, haven’t you ever watched *Law and Order*?”

“Um, did it come out before I was trapped in a haunted house for fifty years?” I asked tartly. “Because if not, then no.”

Lola shrugged. “I don’t know. It might have. It’s been on for a really long time.”

“Just sit, Marta,” Lilac said, putting his hand on the small of my back and pushing me toward the chair. “It’ll be fine. It’s going to be just like *Perry Mason*.”

I gave him a small smile and took my seat.

Lola banged the hammer on the desk. “This court will come to order as we hear the case against Marta Zhao, who has been accused of bringing dead people back to life.” I scowled at her, but Lola didn’t notice. “The prosecution may proceed!”

When Big Mac—who was playing the prosecutor—stood and turned to me, I quailed. She was only supposed to be *playing* the part, but she must have been taking it very seriously, because the look in her eyes was icy cold and unrelenting.

“The matter is a simple one,” she said crisply, striding out to pace before Lola’s desk and my chair. She rounded on me. “Did you, Marta Zhao, use unsanctioned necromancy to bring someone back from the dead?”

She paused, waiting for an answer, and I looked up at Lola.

“You gotta answer the question,” Lola said.

I swallowed hard. “Well, it’s more complicated than that. There were extenuating circumstances,” I started weakly. “There was… It was a battle, and there was a lot going on, and, um… It was so loud and smoky, and there was stuff flying around—”

Big Mac slammed her fist onto her end table. “It’s a yes or no question, Miss Zhao! Did you or did you not use necromancy?”

“Yes!” I gasped, the answer startled out of me. I glanced around. Wasn’t someone supposed to be on my side here? Then I remembered—Kira was supposed to be playing the defense lawyer.

She was nodding encouragingly at me. *Just tell the truth*, she mouthed with a smile.

I straightened my shoulders.

“Yes, I used necromancy,” I said with more confidence.

Big Mac glowered. “And was this necromancy performed with or without permission?”

I glanced over at Kira again, but she was looking less certain now. The smile had slipped from her face.

“I did have permission!” I announced, with a flash of sudden inspiration.

Everyone in the mock court gasped. All eyes were on me as everyone turned to me with abject surprise.

Lola dropped her gavel with a clatter and looked at me, her eyes wide. “Wait, what?”

I nodded, trying to order my racing thoughts. “Yeah, I did. I was acting on the orders of the Alpha—well, *Alphas*—of the Redwood pack. I had been told to do whatever I could to defeat Letifer, with whom we were locked in battle at the time the necromancy took place. Letifer was attempting to destroy all living things. He was kind of a jerk,” I said with a small smile.

Behind Big Mac, I saw Lilac smile back.

Big Mac recovered from her shock with a shake of her head. “Never mind the Alphas. That is not the permission I am referring to. You did not have permission from the *council* to practice necromancy.”

“Well, neither did Letifer, and that guy was raising revenants left and right. Why didn’t they put shackles on *his* wrists?” I demanded, shaking my own wrists. I was starting to warm up. I could really picture Big Mac as one of the faceless prosecutors.

Big Mac seemed stymied by my question and leaned in, speaking in her regular tone of voice. “That’s an excellent point, Marta. If they’re so concerned about unsanctioned necromancy, why *didn’t* the council show their stupid faces when we were under attack?”

Kira made a disgusted noise from her defense table. “You know how the council is. They’re all talk, no action.”

Lola banged her hammer-gavel on her desk again. “Council is getting off-track. Proceed with your questions, prosecutor.”

“Right.” Big Mac nodded, then she turned back to me and pointed. “Forget about the council and what Letifer was up to. The only person you need to worry about is you. You *did* bring someone back from the dead that night, correct?”

“Yeah.” I pointed to Lilac, sitting next to Kira. “He’s right there. If you ask him, he’ll tell you it was all an accident. I didn’t mean any harm.”

Lilac—apparently eager to do his part for me—jumped to his feet. “That’s right. I’m the one Marta brought back. And I’m her character witness, too, and she’s got one of the best characters around. She’s super nice and totally not evil and she’s an amazing kisser and—”

Lola groaned. “Stop! Stop talking, Lilac! You’re not on the witness stand right now! You can only talk if you’re on the witness stand! Am I the *only* person who’s ever watched a courtroom drama on TV?”

Kira turned to look at him. “And just for the record, Lilac, maybe don’t announce that you two are kissing each other. It doesn’t really help your credibility.”

“But it’s so cute that they’re kissing,” Torin said, clasping his hands together.

“The court will come to order!” Lola yelled, banging her gavel.

Big Mac rolled her eyes. “What order?”

Lola flushed and got to her feet. “This is my courtroom, and there will be order!”

“Big Mac is right!” I said loudly, putting my hands up for quiet. The “jury” had started muttering, and things were threatening to get rowdy. “No one here really knows what the real trial with the council will look like.” I shook my head as I looked over at Lola. “Maybe this is all a waste of time.”

“Don’t say that,” Kira said gently. “Even if it’s not exact, we do have to be prepared. For everything.” She shrugged. “And it’s pretty clear that you’re not prepared for much of anything.”

I sat back down, heavily. “So what, then?”

“We need to refine your answers,” Kira said. “You need to stop giving away information that they haven’t specifically asked for. Stick to one story.”

“Yes,” Lola muttered. “Finally! Someone who *gets* it.”

Big Mac nodded. “Kira’s right.” She motioned for Kira to come closer.

“This is highly irregular,” Lola objected as Kira joined us at the witness stand.

Big Mac ignored her, and the two witches and I formed a little triangle, heads bent together.

“I don’t want to scare you, Marta,” Big Mac said, her voice low, “but Kira is right. We do need you to be more prepared. You need to be ready for any question they might throw at you. And you can’t get flustered—those vultures in the council will take advantage of that.”

I swallowed hard and looked between the two women.

“But what’s the worst that could really happen?” I asked, hoping for the best. “I mean, they’ll have to know I didn’t *mean* to do anything bad by bringing Lilac back. They’ll know that just by looking at him. He’s not evil or anything. He’s just a kid.”

Big Mac shook her head, looking grave. “The council doesn’t care about good intentions. And they’re not going to care about who you brought back. They only care about keeping order.”

“What do you think they’ll do?” I asked in a small voice.

Big Mac heaved a deep sigh. “Well, if they do find you guilty, the worst punishment they have is—”

“Death?” I rasped, feeling my blood pounding in my ears. “No. Don’t be crazy. They won’t kill me, will they?”

She shook her head. “No, not death. But it is possible that they could…” She shot a glance at Kira, who looked pale. “That they could trap your soul.”

It felt like my blood had just turned to ice.

“*What?*” I asked, barely able to hear myself over the roar in my ears. “Trap my soul? Like—”

Big Mac nodded. “Yes, like that poltergeist did. But this time…” She swallowed nervously. “This time, it would be forever. With no possibility of escape.”

I couldn’t breathe. It felt like all the air had been sucked from my lungs, and from the room. I gasped and choked as I looked from one woman to the other. In all the conversations we’d had since I’d received the summons, this had *never* come up. Not once.

How could the witches have kept this from me?

**Episode 2065**

GREYSON

Putting an arm around Cali, I pulled her protectively to my side. Whatever happened, I wasn’t going to let Aysel get anywhere near her. I glanced up and down the passageway as the alarm screamed over our heads. All that mattered to me was getting Cali to safety—I’d rip a princess apart if I had to.

“We’re leaving,” I said loudly, over the cacophony of the alarm, “and don’t bother sending any more invites to parties at your place. We won’t be accepting.”

Aysel, still looking pale and shaky from Cali’s attack, looked up at me, clearly furious. “You’re not going anywhere! A dozen palace guards will be arriving at the front of the house in minutes.”

“Let’s go now, then,” Cali said, looking up at me.

I nodded and, keeping my arm around her, pulled her down the passageway.

With a guttural sound reminiscent of a wounded animal, Aysel hauled herself to her feet and made a surprise lunge for me, her eyes bright with blazing rage.

I dodged and—weak and off-balance—she fell into an open doorway. I didn’t wait for her to get up, just slammed the door shut after her. Cali handed me a silver knife, and I rammed it into the keyhole. My wrists were still sore from the cuffs, but I used all my strength to twist the blade into the lock works, jamming it.

From the other side of the door, Aysel was screaming. Her cries of fury changed as she pulled on the knob, and she began to plead.

“Please, Greyson! Please! Let me out! Don’t leave me! Please! I’m all alone!” She sounded terrified. “I would never hurt you! Lucian put me up to this. He’ll kill me when he finds out. Please, Greyson! Open the door. Please, let me out! Take me with you! I’m not safe here! I never wanted to hurt you!”

She sounded so pathetic. She wasn’t even trying to shift to break the door down, but maybe this was part of her game. I was already reaching for the door when Cali caught my wrist.

*She’s lying*.

Cali’s voice thundered through my head.

*She’s trying to stall. She’s trying to keep you here, Greyson. Come on. Let’s go.*

I looked down at my hand, almost at the doorknob, about to let out the woman who had kidnapped me, tried to assault me, and threatened to kill my mate. And now I wanted to *help* her? What the hell was wrong with me?

Cali was exactly right, and I pulled my hand away. I nodded at her and followed as she led the way down the hall toward the front of the house.

We’d just reached the huge entryway when I put out a hand to stop Cali.

“Hang on,” I muttered. I stepped forward and peered into the silent hall. I looked around, checking all the shadowy corners, but I didn’t see any movement. I sniffed the air, but I couldn’t pick up any scents, either. None that were close.

I looked back at Cali, who was watching me anxiously, and gestured for her to move forward quietly. She nodded, understanding in an instant. We moved through the hall and to the door. I looked out the door, checking the wide lawn. That seemed clear, too. We were quiet as we moved across the sodden earth, and I led her into the trees. There was a wide path the Vanguard pack clearly used often, and I chose a different one. It was smaller, barely noticeable, but it felt safer. I kept looking around, kept checking the air, but everything seemed quiet.

We moved as quickly as we could, without making noise, and when we were far enough away that I couldn’t see the house anymore, I stopped for a moment and took a breath, feeling the tension in my neck loosening for the first time in hours.

“How are you doing, love?” I asked, turning to Cali.

She was pale and drawn, but she smiled as she looked up at me. “I’m okay. Better, now that I’ve got you out of that freaky sex cottage.” She shook her head. “That Aysel is a piece of work.”

I returned her smile. “You rescued me, Cali.”

She looked up, a little surprised. “Yeah, I guess I did.”

I leaned down at pressed my lips to hers. She reached up on tiptoe and slid her hands around the back of my neck. She breathed and opened her mouth to me. She felt liquid beneath my hands, and I could feel the release of the tension in her body as I touched her—it was how I felt as she touched me, too.

She pressed her tongue against my tongue, her chest to my chest, her hips to my hips. She wanted contact, and I wanted nothing more than to give it to her. She was still wearing the guard’s uniform, but I slid my hands beneath the jacket and up, feeling her skin warm beneath my touch.

“Greyson,” Cali murmured, dropping her head back.

I pressed a kiss to the hollow of her throat, and then—hating myself for it—I stepped away.

“We have to get moving,” I said, even as I brushed my thumb over her swollen bottom lip. “We’re not far enough away yet. Aysel was full of shit, but I’m sure she sent that guard. She might have sent them after us. Or—who knows—sent a drone airstrike. She’s capable of anything.”

Cali took a deep breath and nodded. “You’re right.”

“We have to get Xavier and go back to the pack house—”

She nodded. “We need Xavier, but—I can’t believe I’m saying it—can’t go without Ava.” I must have made a face, because she shrugged. “I know, but Ava helped me. I never would have found you without her. It would be wrong to leave her here.”

I looked at her for a long moment. More than anything, I wanted to keep Cali safe, but I understood her point. It had never been in my nature to turn my back on allies—not even my younger brother and his crazy-ass former mate.

“—but I have no idea where Xavier could be,” Cali was saying, running a hand through her hair and looking around hopelessly. “Ava didn’t know either. We couldn’t communicate through the mind link.”

“The last time I saw Xavier, he was being led to a cell down the hall from me,” I said, looking back toward the house. I shook my head. “It’s going to be dangerous, but we have to go back and get him out somehow.”

Cali looked up at me, her expression determined. She wiggled her fingers. “My magic is ready.”

I reached for her hand and laced my fingers through hers. “Let’s go.”

We headed back toward the house and eased open the door. It was quiet and still. We moved through the huge entrance hall, then through the wide hallways. I swept every new area as we arrived, keeping my senses on alert, my eyes peeled for any signs of movement.

I felt confident. I always felt better with a plan. I was finally in my element—I felt like an Alpha.

But I pushed that thought aside. I couldn’t be the Alpha—being the Alpha would put Cali in danger. I’d learned that much from the dreams. And this party was a perfect example of what that danger could look like.

We slowed as we came to an intersection, and I hugged the wall, looking slowly around the corner until I was sure there was no one coming. I nodded over my shoulder at Cali, and we advanced, though I kept her tucked safely behind me.

It bothered me that I couldn’t catch Xavier’s scent. The place smelled as though the staff had started cleaning up after the party—maybe that was masking his scent. And there were other concerns, too, now that I thought of it. I wasn’t sure how Cali and I were going to make it down to the basement undetected. We’d been lucky so far, but I figured if Xavier was still being held, there was probably someone guarding the door.

But I couldn’t worry about details now. I had to keep going. I’d figure the rest out as I came to it.

Cali and I had almost made it to the main stairs when I heard a scuffle, then a shout, just through a door up ahead. I stopped and made sure Cali was completely hidden behind me.

Then I heard a grunt that sounded oddly familiar, and I stepped forward and leaned around the doorway to look inside.

Xavier was there—his was the voice I’d recognized—and he was fighting two guards as more advanced on him. And—to my surprise—Ava was fighting beside him.

Xavier threw a punch that knocked one of the guards to the ground and looked up, right into my eyes. His eyebrows went up infinitesimally, then he waved me into the room, looking impatient. “A little help here?”

**Episode 2066**

MARTA

I stumbled out of the fake courtroom, tears streaming so fast and so thick, I didn’t even know where I was going. I must have made it up the stairs because I found myself in my room, and I threw myself down on my bed, my chest heaving with sobs. How the *hell* had I ever gotten myself into this mess?

All I’d ever wanted was to help people. I’d been listening to the dead whisper to me my whole life, and when I’d finally worked up enough nerve to explore my gift as a medium, Bert had found me and I’d been imprisoned in a haunted house for decades. And then, once I’d gotten free of that, I’d gotten stuck in some war that I had nothing to do with, and now some crazy council wanted to punish me for an accident!

I balled my hands into fists as the sobs shuddered through me. I just felt so helpless, like no matter how hard I tried, I just couldn’t figure out a way to control the trajectory of my own life. How had I spent so much time being such a passive participant in my own existence?

I cried for what felt like a long, long time. My throat was dry, and my eyes were burning like fire by the time I was done. I felt hollowed out, and I lay still, my face still buried in the blanket. I couldn’t see anything, but I heard the gentle chink of the door opening and shutting very quietly. There was the sound of someone padding across the floor, and then the mattress sank as someone sat down next to me.

Lilac put his hand on the small of my back, and the gentle pressure was so soothing, I nearly started to cry again.

“Marta,” he said quietly. “I’m right here. I’ll do anything you need me to do. I just want you to be happy.”

I shook my head. “How?” I asked, my voice muffled. I turned my head slightly. “How can I be happy? Look at what’s going on with me. Look at these,” I said, shaking a wrist so the bracelet circling it rattled. “It’s a punishment. A mark of shame.”

“No,” he said, catching my wrist and holding it firmly. “You’re wearing these because the council doesn’t understand what happened. I’m sure they’re not as scary as Big Mac is making them out to be. You just have to talk to them. They’ll take one look at you and see that you’re on the side of good.”

“That’s not what Big Mac suggested,” I rasped. I shook my head, tears leaking out of my eyes again. “Lilac, I know what it’s like to be imprisoned. To have your entire being *trapped*. I’m so scared to face that again.”

Lilac looked down at me, his eyes sad. “I know, too, Marta.” He bent and wrapped his arms around me tightly, like he never wanted to let go. “I don’t know what I can do, but I’m going to do everything in my power to stop that from happening.” He pressed a kiss to my temple. “You’re too important to lose.”

I turned my face to him and pressed my lips to his. If felt good to kiss him. It felt permanent, somehow. And validating, like I’d made the right choice in bringing him back. He slipped his hand around the back of my neck, tangling his fingers into my hair, and for a moment I let myself believe he could help me.

But only for a moment.

I pulled away, my thoughts too loud to ignore.

“Maybe this was a mistake,” I said miserably, sitting up and edging away. “Maybe I never should have come here.”

Lilac looked at me like I’d just slapped him. “But then we wouldn’t know each other.”

I didn’t look up. “You might’ve been happier.”

“Marta, I was dead. I definitely wouldn’t have been happier.”

I couldn’t help it. I smiled. I looked up and—catching his goofy grin—I even chuckled.

There was a knock on the door.

“Come in,” I called, wiping tears from my face.

The door opened, revealing Kira and Big Mac.

My smile slid away. “Did you follow me up here to scare me some more?”

Kira looked unhappy as she stepped into the room. “No. Of course not. We’re worried about you, Marta. That mock trial got kind of out of hand. We just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

I stared at her. “No! No, Kira, I’m not okay! Big Mac basically told me I’ll be getting my soul stolen away and locked up for the rest of existence. I am *not* okay!”

Big Mac looked uncomfortable. “Well, I might have exaggerated a little when I said forever. And there is always the possibility to appeal.”

“*Appeal?* And you’re just telling us this *now*?” Lilac said, goggling at her.

“Well, it’s really better to win these kinds of cases outright,” Big Mac tried to explain, still looking edgy. “I was trying to get you to focus on that.” She looked straight at me. “Marta, you have an incredible gift. You’re not just a medium, you’re a bridge. I’ve never met anyone like you.”

“If you tell the council about your gifts, they might understand that you didn’t perform the necromancy intentionally—that it was a true accident.” Kira shrugged. “No one could have predicted what happened.”

Big Mac nodded, her face grave. “I was playing the prosecutor downstairs to get you ready for what it’s going to feel like to be cross-examined. But in the real trial, both of us are going to be on your side, defending you. And we’re not going to let any of those council idiots hassle you or push you around.

Lilac looked between the two witches skeptically. “That’s really nice, but maybe we should call an actual lawyer. Do either of you know someone who’s good with witch law?”

Kira gave him a withering look. “That’s not really how it works.”

“Wait,” I said, looking over at her quickly. “Does that mean you know how it *does* work? Have you been to one of these trials before?”

Kira shook her head. “Not personally.”

I dropped back down on the bed with a moan. “I’m going to magic jail. I just know it.”

“Only if you keep talking like that, Marta,” Big Mac said sternly. “You can’t give up. And Lilac’s mention of witch law is actually giving me an idea.”

“Wait, what?” Lilac said, looking astounded. “Are you telling me there *are* witch lawyers?”

Big Mac glared at him. “No. But the council has a long history. We can get in touch with Steinar and Hypatia at the library. They can do some research for us, look into any precedents for unsanctioned necromancy trials. That way, we can start to prepare a really solid argument for anything they might try to bring against you.”

I sat up again. “That sounds okay,” I said, starting to feel a little better. I remembered Steinar. If he was on the case, I was sure we’d be able to get some good information. To call him dedicated to research would be a massive understatement.

Big Mac nodded firmly. “I think it’s our best shot. That mock trial isn’t going to help any,” she added, looking annoyed.

Lilac reached for my hand and gave it a squeeze. “See? There’s always a way forward.” He leaned over and gave me a quick kiss, apparently not caring that the witches were watching.

I smiled at him as he leaned back. Lilac was pretty amazing. Like me, he knew what it was like to have your soul stuck between worlds—and he’d thought his situation *was* permanent. But even when he was dead, he’d still had this relentless optimism and faith that things were just about to get better. He was so inspiring. I’d had reason to doubt a lot of my decisions, but maybe there was a very good reason why I’d accidentally brought him back from the dead. Maybe Lilac and I were meant to be together for some kind of future purpose.

He smiled back at me, and it felt like a pack of butterflies had gotten loose in my stomach. I supposed it probably also helped that he was very, very cute.

And there—behind the butterflies—was something else. Something warm and comforting. It was a faint stirring of hope. Lilac was right. Big Mac was right. I wasn’t going to give up. I was going to fight this stupid case. I hadn’t done anything wrong, and losing would mean giving up way too much. The thought of being imprisoned in some kind of soul purgatory was awful enough.

But then another thought hit me like a ton of bricks.

If I was tried and found guilty, and sentenced, what would happen to Lilac? He was caught up in the middle of all of this, too. Would they send him back to the spirit realm?

**Episode 2067**

XAVIER

Pure adrenaline pumped through me as I made my way across the room, landing punch after punch on the Vanguard guards. For such a tough-looking pack, their guards were weak-sauce, and no match for me. I hadn’t even had to shift, though there were a lot of them. I’d taken down at least a dozen, but a dozen more had just arrived, ready to rumble. So when I saw Greyson and Cali appear in the doorway, I was pretty relieved. A couple of extra hands weren’t going to hurt.

“Any day now, man!” I called to Greyson as I punched a guard in the face. The guard doubled over, and I kneed his mid-section. He gasped—breathless—and I tossed him to the ground. He stayed down, groaning in pain.

“Nice one,” Ava said, dodging as a guard swung wildly in her direction.

It felt strangely good to have her fighting at my side. She was an unknown quantity in a lot of ways, but she was a hell of a fighter, and when she was in my corner, I knew I could count on her. Which, considering her history, was saying a lot. Leaning to the side, she high-kicked a guy in the face, and I heard the crunch of his nose breaking as her foot made contact.

She grinned up at me as the guy doubled over in pain, clearly happy to be in the fight.

Greyson rushed in, fists swinging, and two guys went down. Cali shot a blast of magic and took another guy down.

“You were being led to a cell the last time I saw you!” Greyson yelled over the sounds of the Vanguard security forces frantically calling to each other. “How the hell did you get out?”

I ducked a wild haymaker and delivered two sharp blows to the guard’s sternum, knocking the wind out of him. “Same way you did. One of the royal highnesses let me out.”

Greyson punched his last guard in the throat and, tossing him to the floor, stepped toward me.

I stepped over a pile of prone bodies toward my brother. If we’d been different people, we probably would’ve hugged, glad to see each other safe.

But there was no way in hell I was *hugging* Greyson.

Though I had to admit, I was pretty relieved to see him alive.

And anyway, Cali solved the hugging dilemma by rushing toward me and throwing her arms around me.

“Xavier!” she cried, burying her face in my neck.

I closed my arms around her, holding her tight. “Cali.” My heart beat a rapid tempo. “I’m so glad you’re okay. You *are* okay, right?”

She pulled back and nodded. “I’m okay.”

“I was so worried about you,” I murmured, brushing a lock of hair out of her face.

She nodded, her eyes wet with tears. “I was worried about you, too. But the sun’s up. I don’t have the Luna marks anymore. We have to get out of here before Lucian finds us.”

“I hear someone coming,” Ava hissed, her eyes darting around.

“Out,” Greyson growled softly, pointing toward the doorway. “Follow me.”

Leaving the mass of unconscious and bloodied guards behind, the four of us stepped into the long hallway. I was sure I remembered how to get out of the house, but as soon as I stepped out, I felt disoriented. I was overwhelmed by the mingling smells wafting through the house. There had been so many wolves at the party that all the scents overlapped, and it smelled like the staff had started cleaning, which only made things harder to discern.

Greyson turned left down the hall.

“Are you sure this is the way?” I hissed.

“Yeah,” Greyson answered, but he didn’t sound certain.

Ava sniffed the air and looked around. “Someone’s moving toward us. We have to change direction. *Now*.”

Cali reacted first. She reached for the nearest door and pushed it open. Beyond it was another huge room, and we dashed inside, shutting the door behind us.

As my eyes adjusted to the dim light, I saw that it was a library, with shelves towering all the way up to the lofted ceilings.

“Great,” Ava said, looking around. “Maybe there’s a map of the house in here.”

I snorted darkly. “That would be helpful.”

Cali eyed the tall, mullioned windows. “Maybe we could smash the glass and get out that way. It might be faster. This house is just a gigantic maze.”

“We’re going to get out,” I said soothingly.

“We *were* out,” she said, her voice edged with fear. “Greyson and I made it out. We came back for you two, but now I feel so turned around in here, I don’t even know which way we came from.”

I looked at her for a moment, taking in the fear in her face.

“I have an idea,” I said, turning to Greyson. “We should split into two groups.”

“What? Why?” Greyson asked, frowning.

“We can move faster that way, and it would make it harder for anyone trying to find us.” I reached for Cali’s hand. “Come with me. I’ll keep you safe, okay?”

In my peripheral vision, I saw Ava glower.

“No.” Greyson shook his head. “No way. It’s a bad idea. We have to stay together.”

“But this way—” I started.

“Lucian split us up before, and that’s how he was able to keep us here, because he knew we wouldn’t leave without each other. No way.”

“That’s such bull—”

Cali held up her hands for us to stop. “No fighting!” she whisper-shouted. “We have to work together. We have to get back home.”

Ugh. I closed my mouth. She was right, and I needed to back down. It felt weird—and very much not natural—to *not* fight Greyson. We *always* fought. But she was right about working together, and I didn’t want to disappoint her.

I looked up at the windows. “I like the idea of breaking a window. The Vanguard pack might not be expecting that.”

Ava walked over to one of the wide windows and looked out. The glass was old and wavy with age, and she squinted through it. “This room faces the woods. If we could get out, we could get to the tree line in under a minute. Then we could shift and run.” Her gaze grew contemptuous as it landed on Cali. “I guess you could hitch a ride.”

I ignored Ava’s jab and looked around the library. There was a lectern with a heavy leather book on it. It was massive, and it looked like it could do the job, so I picked it up. The book must have weighed at least thirty pounds.

I walked over to the window and glanced back at the others. “Everyone ready?”

Everyone nodded.

There was something about seeing that that filled me satisfaction. This was what is felt like to act as a pack.

I lifted the book and aimed. I didn’t think I’d get another shot—the sound was bound to send people running toward us—so I need to hit the best spot on the first try. I hurled the book, and the glass shattered, leaving a gaping hole behind.

Behind me, Greyson and Ava had already shifted. Greyson had Cali on his back, and as I shifted to my wolf form, we leapt over the shattered glass and out the ruined window into the daylight.

Bounding toward the trees, I felt incredible. We were free. We had escaped, and soon we would be back in the safety of the Redwood pack house. We’d done it.

Just as I took a deep, free breath, a crossbow bolt whizzed past me, just millimeters from my nose. Close enough that I could see the glint of the silver.

Ahead of us, I saw a squad of guards emerge from the tree line.

Fuck.

Lucian was a step ahead of us. He’d anticipated this—he’d anticipated *us*.

I skidded to a halt and saw the others do the same. Cali slid to the ground, and I stood next to Greyson, shielding her from the guards, who had started to advance.

Ava was pawing at the dead grass, snarling at the encroaching Vanguards—all of whom were bearing gleaming crossbows and guns.

Lucian stepped out from behind the largest of the guards. He looked at all of us and shook his head sadly.

“It seems I wasn’t perfectly clear before. At the risk of being redundant, I’ll say it once more.” His eyes flashed dangerously, and his voice dropped to a lethal hiss. “You don’t leave until I let you leave.”

He made a show of walking a circle around us. His gaze slid to Cali, and the hungry, deadly look in his eyes gave me a jolt of true fear. I tore my eyes from him and looked at Cali—and tensed. Cali’s jacket and shirt were disheveled and slumping off one shoulder. One very bare shoulder—showing the now non-existent Luna mark.

“Now I’m *very* curious, because it appears we have a stranger in our midst. This lovely Luna isn’t really a Luna at all. Someone has lied to me.” He tipped his head and smiled in a way that made him look truly unhinged. “Do you know what happens to people who lie to me?”

**Episode 2068**

LOLA

My masterpiece, a.k.a. Marta’s mock trial, was now over. I’d seen a few court movies where people left in a tiff, but having the defendant, defense lawyer, prosecutor, and a witness all run out during a trial? That seemed like a *lot*.

The whole thing had been exciting, though. It felt good to have something to do that wasn’t related to me, for once. But I hoped that Marta was going to be okay. I didn’t want her to think that I was trying to have fun at her expense. I was really trying to help, and I hoped Lilac would reassure her about that…

After Marta was gone, we all started packing up chairs and rearranging the living room, putting things back in order. Jay alone had picked up at least half a dozen chairs, his biceps flexing against his T-shirt.

I would go help him, of course. I just needed a moment to admire him first.

“Who wants breakfast?” Torin exclaimed after everything was done. “Pancakes, anyone?”

I loved the sound of that. My stomach was rumbling—we’d been awake for hours.

Everybody else agreed, and Jay raised his hand, staring at Torin hopefully. “Can we have the whole spread? Like eggs, bacon, waffles, sausage—the works?”

Torin agreed excitedly. I couldn’t help but think that all that sounded amazing right now, regardless of my vampire-ness. Maybe it was my werewolf side coming out to play, eager to taste some delicious greasy food.

I took a seat next to my mate at the kitchen table, right across from Rishika and Artemis, who were chatting about Cali. I looked outside, and the sun had risen. A little confused, I turned to Artemis. “Wait, where *is* Cali? Aren’t the guys back?”

Before the trial had started, I knew they weren’t here, but I realized that I hadn’t heard anyone come in. I would’ve noticed all of them. Or if I hadn’t—too preoccupied with delivering justice for Marta—one of the patrolling wolves would have.

Artemis’s brows were furrowed. “I’m not sure what’s going on, actually. I guess the party was extended to breakfast, or they got too wild over there. But I don’t see Greyson going wild at a party.”

“That’s true,” Rishika said. She and Jay exchanged a tense look as I checked my phone to see if I had any messages from Cali. She had said that she would text me if anything dramatic came up. But there was nothing. How weird.

“Hey, don’t worry,” Jay said, taking my hand in his. “Cali, Xavier, and Greyson are all together. What’s the worst thing they could get into?”

There was a pause.

Rishika looked at Jay, Artemis looked at Rishika, and I looked at all three of them before awkwardly laughing. “Seriously? Have you met them?”

Everybody snorted, brushing that off.

“There’s no way the Alphas would’ve let anything bad happen,” Rishika said. “I’m sure they’re all fine.”

“Hey!” Torin clapped his hands. “All this isn’t going to cook itself!” He gestured at the ingredients he’d pulled out of the fridge before picking up some blueberries and running them under the faucet. “Who’s going to be my assistant?” he asked cheekily.

Jay smiled, kissing the top of my hand. “We’d better help the chef.”

A while later, there was a huge spread on the table—steaming piles of pancakes, waffles, eggs, bacon, sausage, fruit salad, freshly made whipped cream, maple syrup, various jams, and a dozen other things. As everybody grabbed a plate, I felt a sense of contentment. The pack was getting along wonderfully, and I had a home. I had my mate. Everything would’ve been perfect if I wasn’t feeling the urge to feed.

And when I said “feed” these days, I was referring to blood.

The blood club hadn’t done much to fix my appetite. It had caused more problems than anything else. *Thank you, Jacqueline.* But the thing was, I still wasn’t sure if animal blood was right for me in the long run. How often did I need to feed anyway?

At Tottenville, I’d had blood literally every day. Was that what I had to do here too? Because it sounded like a lot, and out of the realm of possibility. How could I even get access to so much of the red stuff?

I was gonna have to rob a blood bank, wasn’t I?

*Oh my god, I’ll have to become a blood bandit!*

As panic started to dance inside my chest, I reminded myself that I still had my best friend. Cali had said that I was her ride or die. Maybe we could find a place to sneak into and steal some blood? Preferably without dying in the process.

My thoughts were interrupted when I felt Jay’s arm snake around my shoulders. He leaned in, brushing his lips over my cheek. “Are you okay?”

He’d always been so attuned to my feelings. He was the most considerate man I’d ever met. And he had such a strong moral compass—he always knew the right thing to do. Maybe he would have some ideas about this bloody—literally—problem of mine.

“Let’s eat now and talk later,” I whispered in his ear.

After breakfast came to an end, Jay made eye contact again. “So? What’s up?”

I looked around—everybody was talking amongst themselves, picking up their dishes or still eating, but I wasn’t about to start this conversation in front of them. Especially not in front of Big Mac, who was probably still upset about the vampire debacle.

Clearing my throat, I said loudly, “Okay then, time to get dressed for real!”

I grabbed Jay by the hand and led him upstairs. When we got to our room, he seemed a little worried and confused. It was probably something that he had to deal with a lot when it came to me.

“Okay,” he said, his tone gentle. “What’s wrong?”

He was so sweet and so beautiful that I felt like sobbing. I wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling him down to me, kissing him deeply. He opened up his mouth for me, his grip on my waist getting tighter. For a brief moment, I lost myself in his taste, in the feel of his tongue against mine. But when I started to lower my hand from his abs to his hips, he gripped my wrist.

Staring deep into my eyes, he breathed, “Before things go further, you gotta tell me what’s happening with you. It feels like you’re trying to avoid the subject.”

I sighed deeply. Could I ever hide from him? I’d always wanted to be mysterious, but apparently Jay just knew me too well. We sat down on the bed, and he tugged me over to sit across his lap. I played with his hair a little, avoiding looking him in the eye.

“I just…” I swallowed. “I’m just not sure what to do about my vampire side anymore.”

Jay frowned. “*Is* there anything you can do about it? You’re a vampire, and that’s that. It’s part of who you are now.”

I met his gaze. “But what about blood? I still haven’t gotten the hang of where to get it. It seems like such a huge deal.”

Jay’s voice was full of understanding. He stroked my side. “You’ll figure out a way. And you can always just drink from me if you need to.”

I winced, facing him. “I don’t want you to be my blood bag. *Ugh.*”

He arched an eyebrow, tracing my chin with his thumb. “You’re not hurting me. It feels good.”

I scoffed, shaking my head. “I can’t keep doing that, though. And in general, being part of this pack, I feel a little…” I took a deep breath. “I feel really happy here. But also a little detached. And I have no idea how these feelings can exist at the same time. I feel like I’m so close to you guys, but also miles away.”

Jay looked concerned. For real now. “What do you want to do about it? How can I help you?”

I sniffled. “You’re so sweet, and I’m just—I’m so freaking annoying. I always have so many problems.”

He smiled, stroking my cheek. “I want to help you with all your problems, Lola. I know you would do the exact same thing for me.”

I sighed. “Yes, but you never have any problems. You’re, like, perfect.”

He laughed. “I’m not. It’s just that you have a lot on your plate right now—being a vampire first and then a werewolf-vampire hybrid isn’t easy. I don’t want you to worry about burdening me. I’m always here for you. To listen, to fight whoever I have to, to bring you cupcakes—whatever you need.”

“I love you so much, Jay,” I breathed, then kissed him again, pressing myself against him. Jay was so incredible that it made my heart ache. There was no one like him in the whole wide world. He was one of a kind.

And at that thought, another one hit me.

“Jay…” I trailed off, staring at him. “Do you think there are other hybrids like me out there?”

**Episode 2069**

“Do you know what happens to people who lie to me?”

Lucian’s implied threat was thick in the air. I shivered at his words. He suddenly looked and sounded more like an executioner instead of a weird prince. Gone was his charming and odd—albeit always creepy and occasionally threatening—behavior.

Now, there was real menace to his face.

I looked around as the circle of guards moved closer to Greyson, Xavier, Ava, and me. They were holding spears, crossbows, guns, swords—their weaponry was a mix of medieval and modern.

Xavier and Greyson quickly moved in closer on either side of me like a shield. I felt their bodies press against me while Ava hovered by my side as well. The heat coming from their fur pulsed as they created a chain to protect me.

But could they really protect me?

There were so many guards that I couldn’t even count them. I was overwhelmed—I couldn’t even fucking speak, which was a huge first for me.

“Really, Alphas?” Lucian’s tone was wry. “Isn’t either one of you going to shift and have a formal conversation with me?”

Xavier shifted back to human first, and it was with a growl. “You better back off!”

At the same time, Ava snapped her teeth at one of the guards who had a spear aimed at her. I noticed him flinching. Not so tough, were they?

“Back off?” Lucian chuckled. In an almost pitying voice, he told Xavier, “You have no leverage here, Xavier. You are powerless. Weak in front of my army.”

*The horrible arrogant bastard!* I mind linked. *How dare he!*

I opened my mouth to tell him off, but then Greyson shifted back to human, too. He gripped my arm, pulling me back. Pinning his gaze on Lucian, he said, “Let us leave, or there will be immeasurable consequences that you are not ready to deal with.”

Lucian actually laughed at that, and I could feel my blood boil.

“The Redwood pack would be intimidating under any other circumstances,” Lucian said. “But right now, you are simply outnumbered. You are all bark and no bite.”

I had had enough. He had no right to treat us this way. I was going to blast his fucking head off!

“Listen, you—” I started to march forward, but Greyson pulled me back again.

*Cali, no*, Greyson mind linked. *Lucian might be upset with you right now, but that doesn’t mean he’s stopped favoring you. We don’t know what happens next, so it’s in your best interest to let us be the bad cops.*

Frowning, I looked up at Greyson, at his beautiful, stern face, and realized that he was right. I couldn’t be impulsive right now. No matter how unfair this was. No matter how creepy and arrogant and literally evil Lucian was.

Of course, in the background, he was still going on with his villain’s monologue.

“First, you invoke a bond of Seluna with my sister, then you sneak off in the middle of the night, and now I discover that your Luna is a fake?” He was pacing up and down, hands flailing, and it was nothing like his usual dignified behavior. It would’ve been be funny if I didn’t consider him an actual kidnap-friendly monster. “Those are three strikes, all in a VERY short period of time!” he shouted. “You have abused my hospitality, and there will be consequences!”

“This is not hospitality,” Greyson said coldly. “This is abduction.”

“You’re a liar,” Xavier added. “And probably not that great a fighter if you’re hiding behind an army.”

“I’m not hiding behind my army,” Lucian said through gritted teeth. “I am a prince. And this is my party, and I can do what I want.”

I felt like singing, “It’s my party, and I’ll cry if I want to,”right in Lucian’s face. But that probably wouldn’t gel too well with Greyson’s whole “don’t antagonize the madman” plan.

Meanwhile, Xavier snapped, “You’re all talk, Lucian. If you’re so confident in your pack’s abilities, why don’t you shut up and prove it?”

Lucian laughed again. It was chilling.

He raised his hand, and a second later, more than thirty guards swarmed in. The ones holding spears and nets attacked first, the silver tips of their weapons gleaming. Ava evaded all the sharp edges, but when someone dropped a net on her, she was forced to shift back to human.

At the same time, Greyson was fighting guards on my right, protecting me while Xavier did the same on my left. Ava was giving it her best, tossing off the net and taking on four guards at once. I was frantic in the middle of their circle, trying to figure out how to use my magic without hurting any of them.

But every time Xavier, Greyson, and Ava managed to fight off the guards, more of them burst in. This happened twice, with the three of them taking out at least three dozen guards as more and more continued to swarm us.

There were just so *many* of them, and we…

We were completely and utterly fucked.

We had no way to win this fight.

Unless…

*Let me out in front!* I mind linked to Greyson*. Let me blast them!*

Greyson was panting, taking a fraction of a second to look at me, when one of the guards found a way through and grabbed me around the waist, pulling me away from him. I blasted the guard with my powers, purple light streaming from my fingertips. He was forced to let me go, bouncing away and knocking down another five guards before he tumbled to the ground.

I let out a scream of victory, but it was short-lived.

Another sea of guards came in to attack, and no matter how hard we fought, it just didn’t feel like enough. It was a miracle that nobody had been fatally injured yet.

By now, Ava had burns on her skin from the net, and she hadn’t shifted back to her wolf form, which meant that she was weakened. Greyson and Xavier were constantly mind linking with me, begging me to get back inside their circle of protection. But even as I stayed out, even as I used my powers to make the guards retreat, it wasn’t enough.

There was four of us, and an infinite number of them.

All the while, I could feel Lucian’s bi-colored eyes on me.

The satisfaction he emanated was sickening.

When our eyes met, I was so infuriated that I wanted to charge right at him, but then—

I felt a hand clap over my mouth.

I fought with all my might, but the guard behind me was massive, and I wasn’t a good physical fighter anyway. Greyson and Xavier knew that, and their wolves were instantly ready to attack—to save me—but they’d been distracted. Silver nets fell over them both, and they were forced to shift back to human.

“Don’t you fucking touch her!” Greyson growled at the guard.

“I’m gonna rip your throat out!” Xavier snarled.

Neither of my mates could do anything with the silver nets over them, though. Even Ava had fallen quiet, all her menace subdued as two guards held her back.

*This must be what defeat feels like*, I thought, helpless. My stomach had dropped, the adrenaline fading as panic rose inside me.

And then Lucian stepped forward.

“Ah, is that all the powerful Redwoods could muster? I expected more,” he said, mocking.

Xavier growled. “We’re only taking a breather. I can kick your ass any time, any place. Just the two of us, with no army to protect you.”

Lucian kept smiling. He was fucking infuriating, and I was glad that the guard was still covering my mouth. Otherwise I would have called him every name in the book, probably pissing him off enough to kill us all immediately.

“I understand your brother is the hothead, but I expected more from you, Greyson,” Lucian said. “My party has now been officially derailed. There’s always a little excitement and extravagance, but never the disrespect I’ve seen from you lot.”

“You treat us like prisoners after inviting us to a party, which goes against all rules of hospitality ever set by werewolves. You are the villain here, Lucian,” Greyson said icily.

Lucian seemed amused. He looked over at me, and the hungry look on his face sent chills down my spine. I struggled against the guard who held me, but it was no use. The man was pure muscle.

“I think what has hurt me the most is the deceit from this one…” He pointed at me, shaking his head with disdain. “Truly despicable. To pose as a Luna when you have not been graced with a true mark is sacrilege, and the fact that such an action even transpired in my house is an embarrassment.”

“*You’re* the embarrassment,” Ava scoffed, breaking her silence. “Telling people you have cornered that they’re weak when it’s completely uneven?”

I didn’t think I would live to see the day that I would consider thanking Ava, but it had happened.

“I’ve had enough of your nonsense!” Lucian said. “Take those three away!” He snapped his fingers toward Greyson, Ava, and Xavier.

*Cali!* Greyson mind linked. *Remember, he’s got a soft spot for you! Try to manipulate it so you can escape! We’re going to find you, no matter where he takes us!*

*Be careful!* Xavier said at the same time. *We’re going to come for you!*

I tried to mind link back, shoving the guard hard enough that he groaned and let go of my mouth. But then, before I could speak, before I could even breathe, Lucian marched forward and got within an inch of my face.

In a low, creepy voice, he said, “You’re coming with me, Caliana.”

**Episode 2070**

MARTA

I had spent a really long moment fantasizing about the worst possible scenario, and Lilac was staring at me.

“What’s up with you?” he said. “Wasn’t all that good news? You can beat this thing!”

“But if I don’t, it’s not just me on the line, it’s you too,” I said, blurting out the words. I sounded like I wanted to cry—mainly because I did.

Lilac blinked at me, clearly alarmed. And then, he pulled me in for a tight hug. He smelled so good, his arms warm and strong around me. I hugged him back with everything I had. I just couldn’t even conceive of a world where he wasn’t with me.

“Don’t think like that,” Lilac murmured in my ear. “If you go to magic jail, I’ll visit you every day—hell, I’d do some necromancy myself just so they throw me in the cell with you.”

I couldn’t help but laugh a little. He was amazing. Ridiculous, but so amazing.

“But if I go to jail and my powers are further revoked…” I swallowed roughly. “Something could happen to you. I’m the reason why you’re in this mess, but I’m also the reason why you’re able to exist in the physical realm. If I get put in magic jail, the implications for you could be severe.”

Lilac’s eyebrows arched. “What is *that* supposed to mean?”

“If they take my powers away, I don’t know if you’d continue to exist in the physical realm.” I winced the moment the sentence was out of my mouth. A splash of stress crossed Lilac’s face, making me feel even worse.

“Oh.” He paused. “I hadn’t thought about anything happening to me, but when you put it like that…” He leaned closer, pressing his lips against my temple. It made my heart ache when he whispered, “I don’t want to leave you.”

I was fighting tears and not doing a very good job of it.

Why couldn’t anything be *easy*?

“We need to figure this out,” Lilac said all of a sudden, abruptly breaking the hug and pulling me into the kitchen. I realized that we hadn’t even had breakfast with the others. Everybody was gone, apart from Big Mac and Kira, who were wiping down dishes. Lilac turned to me, his voice low. “I think the witches can help us. Though you should talk to them, not me. You’ll know what to ask.”

“Are you sure I’ll ask the right questions?” I asked sheepishly.

“They definitely like you more than they like me,” Lilac said with chagrin.

That, I couldn’t disagree with.

“You’re right,” I said. “We need to do this. We need to find a solution without a mock trial.”

The moment I took a step toward Big Mac, though, Torin blocked my way. He passed two plates full of delicious breakfast food over to us. With an air of professionalism, he said, “The trial is adjourned. My judgement—you have been sentenced to one tasty, tasty breakfast.”

Lilac and I thanked Torin and exchanged a look, half laughing, half rolling our eyes at the judge-chef’s antics. Once Torin was gone, though, I gave my plate to Lilac. I was too anxious to eat right now.

“I’m going to talk to them,” I whispered to him.

“I’m going to stay here in the corner and eat my food,” Lilac told me seriously.

I walked over to the two witches, who were hovering by the sink.

Big Mac saw me first. “Marta?”

“I just wanted to ask you one more thing.” I glanced over at Lilac, who was munching on his bacon. “When this trial happens, and if I’m convicted, what happens to him?” I pointed at Lilac. He gave an awkward little wave with his fork.

Big Mac and Kira exchanged a look.

My heart sank. It never meant good news when two witches looked at each other like that. I had learned that much.

“What is it?” I asked, my voice cracking.

“Well,” Big Mac said with a sigh, “if you lose this case, then there’s a chance the committee would want to send Lilac back to the spirit world. That’s the logical option that I see.”

My chest hurt. That was exactly what I’d been afraid of.

“But!” Kira jumped in, ready to ease the blow. “But that’s a big *if*. We don’t know how they’re going to react for certain.”

I rubbed my forehead, groaning. All this uncertainty was driving me up the wall.

Lilac approached, placing our plates on the counter. He hadn’t finished his meal. I knew he’d heard the witches’ answer. He hugged me from the side, sighing as he mumbled, “It’ll be okay.”

But his hands were shaking, even as he held me tight.

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Lilac and I were back in my room. He was pacing up and down, obviously stressed, and I couldn’t blame him. My mind was like a pinball machine, my thoughts bouncing between different endgames for what could happen with this trial.

“We need more information,” I said, opening up the mini-computer—a laptop, it was called—on my bed. “Big Mac and Kira only know so much.”

“But what do we search?” Lilac eyed the laptop skeptically. “Magical trials? That would probably just open up a can of worms about the Salem witch trials.”

“I don’t think we can use the normal internet…” I paused. And then I remembered something. “Big Mac had said something about the gargoyle Steinar, and a library. Maybe they’d have resources we could use there.”

Lilac gave me a confused look. “What kind of library?”

“The one Cali’s used? The magic one?” I said patiently, waiting for him to catch on. “I’m pretty sure she’s used it multiple times, right?”

“*Oh*, yes!” Lilac’s eyes widened in realization. But then he frowned. “I don’t have a magic library card, though. Do you?”

“No, but Cali does, and she’s—” I scowled. “She’s actually not here. How are we going to get her library card?”

A wicked expression dawned on Lilac’s face. “We could always—”

“We are *not* going to go through her stuff,” I said sternly.

My door was half open, and Torin startled us by sticking his head inside my room. “Did I hear someone asking for a magical library card? Because I have one.”

I gasped. “You do?”

“I got it because I helped save the library from crumbling,” Torin said proudly.

“Dude,” Lilac said, clearly impressed. “You’re a badass, aren’t you?”

Torin grinned, pleased with himself.

I stared at him, full of hope. “Could we borrow it?”

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Lilac was fussing over me like a puppy. I slapped his hand away before he could get to the laptop’s trackpad, and he winced. “I’m just trying to guide you, here!”

“I have learned how to use the internet!”

“But I have more experience,” Lilac said haughtily.

Torin narrowed his eyes at the laptop’s screen before examining his card, holding it up to look at it in the light. “I’m not really sure how this thing works, though. Maybe—” Suddenly, there was a strange mechanical sound. “Oh my Fae gods!” Torin squeaked, rubbing his eye. “It took a picture! Of my eye!”

Lilac looked intrigued. “It probably scanned it.”

“Place the card in position,” said a small voice. It was coming from the card.

“I think it means your eye,” I said, a little breathless. This was really cool.

Torin picked up the card, placing it near his eye. It made the mechanical sound again. Torin looked happy with himself before his expression turned sheepish.

“Um, hello?” he asked the card. “Can we surf the magical internet thing please?”

After a brief process, we finally managed to find the link on the laptop and pull up the library website.

“This is amazing,” I said under my breath. “Thanks so much, Torin!”

The Fae grinned.

Pointing at the corner of the screen, Lilac said, “There! Try the online chat function.”

“What’s that?”

Lilac gave me a serious look. “I said you’d need my guidance, didn’t I?”

I snorted, nudging him. This was actually fun.

“Go ahead,” Lilac said, after setting things up for me. “Write all your problems in that box, and Steinar will answer.”

That sounded pretty straightforward. I had taken typing lessons to become a secretary half a century ago, and using the laptop was quite similar, so I ended up typing out a long rambling message about law, the spirit realm, and magic consequences. Lilac told me it was perfect. Torin congratulated me. And then I pressed send.

“Now what?” I asked.

“Now we wait till he—” Lilac gasped. “Wait, he just responded!”

Steinar’s message read:

*Why yes! We do have books on that kind of thing. I was perusing our copy of* Torts & Torture *just this morning!*

“Ask him if he can send over the digital copies,” Lilac said.

I relayed the message, and then Steinar replied again.

*Well, there’s one issue—the relevant books aren’t online. And what’s more, the knowledge inside them is somewhat… volatile.*

Torin frowned. “Volatile?”

Lilac and I exchanged a look. “What’s that supposed to mean?” Lilac asked.

I swallowed roughly, my hands hovering over the keyboard. But before I could ask, Steinar sent another message.

*Given what you’ve told me, Marta, it’s probably better for you to come to me.*

**Episode 2071**

XAVIER

I was dumped unceremoniously into a cell, falling to the ground with a thump. I charged toward the three guards who’d pushed me in, but the cowards were quick to slam the door shut. And just like that I was trapped again, this time in a literal dungeon. Why did he even have this bullshit?

He was infuriating.

Letting out a string of curses, I looked around. Greyson and Ava had been locked up in their own cells right across from mine. Greyson seemed as pissed off as I was, slamming his fist into the ground hard enough for me to feel it. Ava, on the other hand, seemed suspiciously subdued.

I wasn’t going to ponder what the hell that was all about—I had other things to do, like go over the fight in my head and figure out what I should’ve done differently. If I’d been just the tiniest bit faster, I could have gone straight for Lucian’s throat. That gloating prick was all talk, but I was pretty sure that he wouldn’t be able to hold his own in a one-on-one fight. Not without a stampede of guards at his side.

“You okay?” Greyson asked. His expression was dark, his breath coming out sharp.

I glared at him. “Do I fucking look okay?”

He gritted his teeth, shaking his head.

Growling in frustration, I grabbed the bars of my cell and tried to bend them. “Goddammit!”

They wouldn’t budge, and the pair of guards watching us laughed.

“Those bars are triple reinforced, silver inlaid steel,” said the taller of the two. “There’s no way you mutts are getting out of here.”

“Call us mutts again, and when I get out of here, I will rip out your tongue,” Greyson told the guard in a low, eerie voice.

Both of them laughed again, but this time it was awkward. They didn’t say another word after that.

Fuming, I pushed away from the bars. I felt useless down here. I thought about shifting, but what good would it do? If the bars were as strong as these assholes said, I would only waste precious energy.

My skin itched—after releasing us from the nets, Lucian had given all three of us ill-fitting tunics that made us look like Monty Python extras. But admittedly, they were better than being entirely naked in a goddamn dungeon.

There had to be a way to get out of here.

We had to get to Cali—she had been ripped away from me so easily, so callously, and the amount of disrespect Lucian had shown needed to be punished. There was no way he was getting away with any of this. Nobody was allowed to treat Cali like that—I didn’t care if they were the king of the world, let alone the prince of some stuck-up pack like the Vanguards.

Once we made it out of here, I was going to make Lucian regret everything he’d said and done. But before that, I needed to find Cali and get her away from him.

I’d never been so furious in my entire life.

The moments ticked by, and I kept banging on the bars, trying to figure out if there was a weakness there. The whole castle was set up like it was a fucking Renaissance faire’s wet dream—there was no way the security here was as serious as these bozo guards claimed.

There was only one of them watching us, now—the rest of the guards had left. He was hovering by the entrance, eyeing all three of us. I was making the most noise, with Greyson a close second, but Ava was just sitting there, eyes downcast. I fell back down to the ground, panting, feeling like clawing my skin off.

“Where did they take Cali?” Greyson demanded in that same low, angry voice.

I realized that he was speaking to the guard. The guard winced slightly, then forced his expression back to his previous sneering bravado.

“Lucian does whatever he wants in here,” he said. “What happens to his prisoners is of no concern to me, as long as I’m getting a paycheck.”

I sneered. “Whatever he’s paying you, we’ll pay double. Triple.”

The guard looked at me and snorted. “I doubt it.”

Never in my life had I been shut down by a fucking henchman, of all people.

“Good one, you idiot,” Greyson told me wryly.

I scoffed. “You know we could fucking pay this guy off!”

“Yeah, if you had your wallet on you, or your cellphone to wire some cash,” Greyson said in that same sarcastic tone. “But no, you’re half naked in a cell, so none of that matters.”

I glared. “It’s not like you’re doing anything to help.”

“What the hell do you want me to do?” Greyson snapped, walking up the bars and slamming his fist into one. “We’re trapped in here.”

In the background, I saw the guard looking back and forth between us, like he was watching reality TV. Clearly he’d never been in a situation with two bickering Alphas.

“You know what?” I retorted. “This is all your fault! You didn’t do enough in that last fight!”

“It was your idea to come to this fucking party anyway!” Greyson said. “And you *wanted* to let Cali come with us!”

“My head is splitting,” I heard Ava say under her breath. She rose from the corner of her cell, then.

“Excuse me?” She waved at the guard, tucking her hair behind her ear. “Hi!”

Confused, the guard looked over his shoulder, like, “*Who? Me?*” And then he said, “Hi?”

Ava chuckled, smiling a little, and now I was properly distracted.

*What. The. Fuck. Is she doing?* I mind linked Greyson.

He frowned, watching too.

“I’m really sorry to bother you,” she told the guard, “but do you have something that fits better?” She gestured down at the tunic. “This thing is three sizes too big, and I feel like a sack of potatoes wearing it.”

The guard blinked at her slowly. “What?”

I couldn’t believe my ears. Greyson and I were bickering, sure, but we still had our eyes on the prize—we wanted to escape and, more importantly, get to Cali. This was just nonsense from Ava, per usual.

“Can you help me?” Ava said in a soft voice, moving closer to the bars. She then, very deliberately, let the tunic drop from one of her slender shoulders. At the same time, she told the guard, “I just feel so ugly in this horrible thing…”

The guard opened his mouth. Closed it. I kind of did the same, looking at her closely now—what was she up to? I needed to figure out her plan, of course. It wasn’t like I wanted to look at her bare skin or anything.

The guard definitely did, though. His gaze flickering between her shoulder and her face, he sputtered, “A-Apologies, I don’t—I don’t think I can do anything about that.”

“Oh, please,” Ava said, biting her full bottom lip, “I promise to be good. The fabric is so itchy—it’ll give me a rash. My skin is so sensitive, you know?” Tracing her pale, delicate neck, she gave the guard a sly look that I knew all too well.

The guy’s face turned a bright shade of red. “I guess… changing wouldn’t hurt? Wait here a second.”

He trotted to the other end of the dungeon hallway. As he opened a chest and rummaged through it, Greyson raised an eyebrow at Ava.

“What are you doing?” he whispered.

Ava looked between us, rolling her eyes as if we were morons. The likelihood of her succeeding at this little ploy was slim to none. And yet here we were wasting our time on it.

She was almost as infuriating as Lucian.

“Here you go,” the guard said, returning with a handful of other robes. “Hope one of these works.”

Ava smiled at him brightly, that same smile that I’d been lured in by so many times. I could hear the guard’s heart pounding.

Greyson looked at me, raising an eyebrow as if to say “You see where this is going, right?”

*Men are fucking idiots*, I thought, feeling oddly resigned.

“Could you please come closer?” Ava asked the guard innocently. “I think it would be much less time-consuming if you helped me find something that fits.”

The guard looked sheepish. “I’m not allowed to come closer than two feet.”

Ava pouted. “But how am I supposed to take off my tunic with that weird button in the back? It would be so much easier if you undressed me.”

The guard—the ultimate sucker—stepped closer to Ava. He was smirking now. “Well, if you put it that way…”

The moment he got within an inch of her cell, Ava grabbed him by the shoulders and slammed his head against the bars, hard enough for him to collapse to the floor.

“Well,” she said mildly. “That was easy.”

Dammit, it worked. Ava was going to be the first to get out, wasn’t she? I hated this. She was suddenly holding all the cards, and when she went through the passed-out guard’s pockets, she also found his keyring.

“I hope you’re planning to let us out too,” Greyson said tightly.

Ava looked between us with a smirk, unlocking her cell door. Then she stepped over the guard and twirled the keys.

“I have an idea of how we can get out of here,” she said, eyebrows arched. “But we’d have to leave Cali behind.”

**Episode 2072**

CHARLIE

Violet and I were still eating, hanging out in the dining room after I’d told the others that we needed a little bit of privacy. Truly an understatement there. I moved the fruit on my plate around with my fork, my head pounding. I couldn’t stop thinking about my mom’s ultimatum.

Violet could tell.

“We have to talk about this, you know,” she said quietly.

I took a deep breath, twisting to face her. She was so beautiful and sweet, and I was just… worried. I was so worried about her and what came next.

“The sad thing is that I don’t know if I can trust my mother,” I said. “So, she’s jumping on a plane to come see us. Is that too drastic?”

Violet’s eyebrow twitched. “I mean, we did almost die.”

I let out a shaky laugh at her wry tone, trying to shove down all the nerves. I held her hand. “I just mean… What if she goes off the deep end again? What if she’s more harmful than helpful?” I scrutinized her face—the soft pout of her mouth, and felt my heart pound. “If she ever does anything to endanger you, I’ll never forgive her.”

Violet brought my palm on her thigh, covering it with hers. “Hopefully your mom will be in a good mood and she’ll help us put the pieces together.”

I gave her a look. “That’s the most evasive thing I’ve ever heard you say.”

She snorted, shaking her head. I couldn’t blame her for sounding unsure. I was nervous too. What if my mom somehow pinned the blame on Violet? What if she tried to make out that Violet was the problem?

It *definitely* sounded like something my mom would do.

Here I was, trying to protect my mate, and there was every chance my plans would all come crashing down.

“It just feels like this is a mistake. I don’t trust my mother enough,” I muttered. “And it’s like, I can’t help but think that no matter what I do or how hard I try, something’s gonna go wrong, and you’re going to get hurt.”

Violet sighed, pulling me in for a hug. She held me for a moment, kissing my cheek, nuzzling my neck. Her scent wasn’t as soothing as it normally was, and my stomach clenched.

“You’re right,” she murmured. “Iris coming here is scary, but I think the danger we’re in is scarier. Whatever happens, we’ll face it together.” She pulled back, meeting my gaze, her hands cupping my face. “I’m happy that we’re in this together.”

“But what if my mom—”

“I think she loves you too much to do anything that would upset me,” Violet said, tracing her fingertips across my jawline. Her touch felt so good. “It’s more likely that she’ll solve this in no time.”

I swallowed, nodding. “You’re right.”

She smirked. “I’m always right. I’m the thoughtful, semi-mature one.”

“… who meets strangers in abandoned buildings in the middle of the night?” I arched an eyebrow.

She huffed. “Hey!”

I chuckled, leaning in to kiss her forehead, her cheekbones. She made a sound of contentment, and the way her skin felt under my lips made me shiver. I stared into her eyes, noticing the dark circles underneath them.

“Do you want to get some rest?” I asked.

“Only if you lie down with me,” she said.

I smiled. “Deal.”

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When we were halfway up the stars, we were almost trampled by Sage, Zainab, Rishika, and Artemis.

“What are you guys doing?” I asked, confused. “What are you even carrying?”

“Gear!” Zainab grinned, triumphantly holding up a sports bag.

“What gear?” Violet asked.

“I thought you were going on patrol?” I added.

Sage waved me off. “Ravi and a few others are out there right now. We’re on break!”

“And we’re going to use sticks to play on ice,” Artemis said with a grin. “Sage said that one of the ponds on the other side of the property—”

“Not the ghost pond?” Violet interrupted, concerned.

Sage scoffed. “Not that one. Another one!”

“It’s frozen,” Artemis said happily.

“And perfect for hockey,” Zainab said, all excited. “If you guys join, we can get a three vs. three game going. Come on!”

I looked over at Violet, whose cheeks were a little flushed. Her sleepy expression was gone.

“That could be fun,” she told me shyly.

I wasn’t sure if doing this was a good idea, with everything else going on. But with so many people around, what could go wrong? Besides, I hadn’t had a chance to practice my hockey skills since middle school.

“We’ll be down in a minute,” I told the girls, and they all whooped. “Just need to get some extra layers for the cold.”

Violet followed me, grinning from ear to ear as we trotted up the stairs. She was taking two at a time to keep up with me.

“Someone’s awake,” I commented, and she laughed.

“I haven’t played in so long! I think it’s going to be fun,” she said as I started going through the closet.

“I haven’t played since middle school,” I said, “but I feel like the number one rule is to stay warm.”

“Can I wear one of your shirts?” Violet asked, wrapping her arms around my waist before kissing the middle of my back.

I smirked, looking over my shoulder. “Of course.”

“I love smelling like you,” she mumbled, nuzzling me.

I turned to face her, raising an eyebrow. “If you keep doing that, I’m gonna forget all about hockey.”

“That’s a great idea,” she said, and went up on her tiptoes to kiss me. It was soft and sweet, her lips brushing over mine, her warmth making me feel so content. She tucked her arms around my neck, pulling me down closer, deepening the kiss. I broke off to breathe and kiss up her neck, taste the skin there, but then there was a loud *THUMP!* and we broke apart.

“What?” Violet said, gasping.

I looked outside, laughing. “They threw a snowball at the window.”

Artemis and Rishika were bouncing up and down, waving at us.

Violet laughed. “Let’s go show them how it’s done.”

Violet put on my sweater and my jacket, and I felt pretty happy with myself watching her wear them. It was kinda sexy too, and when I said that in her ear, she blushed furiously.

We caught up with Sage, Zainab, Rishika, and Artemis as they walked toward the pond.

“Glad to see you’ve remembered that there’s more to life than smooching,” Sage teased, and Violet nudged her with a smirk.

I just loved seeing Violet so carefree, especially after what she’d been through.

When we got to the pond, we created makeshift goals with sticks, and then we put on our skates. Rishika was kind of a pro—twirling around while Artemis watched in awe.

“Wow,” Artemis breathed, eyes wide. “She’s like a butterfly!”

“I’ve never seen Artemis look so smitten,” Violet said in my ear, snickering.

All of us clapped when Rishika jumped into Artemis’s arms, beaming before planting a kiss on her mouth.

“Okay, let’s get serious now!” Sage said, “Time to set up teams!”

It ended up being Violet, Sage, and me versus Rishika, Artemis, and Zainab. When we started playing, I realized that everyone was actually pretty good. I’d forgotten how much fun it was to be competitive when someone’s life wasn’t on the line.

The game kept going, until at some point, I was getting ready to set up a pass to Violet.

“Do it, I’m open!” Violet called, hockey stick in hand.

I grinned and sent the puck over to my mate.

But when I looked up from the ice, Violet wasn’t there.

“What the hell?” I said, confused. I looked ahead, and then to the left, far out from where the game was, and my breath caught.

How the fuck had Violet gotten there so fast?

*What was—*

Before I could finish my thought, Violet screamed, “Charlie!”

And then, she careened into the icy water.

“Violet!” I skated toward her, my whole body pounding.

*No no no no!*

Rishika, Artemis, Sage, and Zainab screamed her name too, rushing toward her. The air was cold against my cheeks, piercing as I forced myself to go as fast as possible, getting to Violet in a matter of seconds. Without thinking, I dropped on my knees and plunged my arms into the icy froth below, using all of my strength to pull my mate up and away from the broken ice.

“Violet, can you hear me?” I asked frantically.

She was cold, her eyes and nose red, her lips blue. She was shivering, coughing up water.

“We need to warm her up!” Zainab was yelling, and I rubbed Violet’s shoulders, completely terrified.

“What happened?” I asked, frantic. “How did you get here?”

Violet choked again, looking over at the tree line, then pointing with a trembling hand.

I saw a flash of a shadow disappear into the woods, running away.

Whoever it was, judging by Violet’s reaction, I was certain that they’d just tried to kill Violet. Fury surged inside me, the instinct to protect my mate roaring.

I had to catch whoever had done this to her.

**Episode 2073**

I was sitting on an armchair in Lucian’s chambers, trying to take everything in. The room was fabulous, out of this world—or, more specifically, out of this era. It was filled with bookshelves, ornate vases and candelabras, and the mounted heads of wild animals—some of which were wolves, which was NOT lost on me.

*Is Lucian trying to tell us something?* I thought, feeling just a little hysterical.

I felt like I was in the belly of the beast, and one wrong step could be the difference between everything being okay and Xavier and Greyson joining the mounted heads on Lucian’s mantlepiece. At the same time, I was feeling claustrophobic, despite the massive size of the room. My skin felt itchy, especially around my wrists, as if I was tied up with a phantom rope.

Lucian had released the physical ties on my wrists once we’d reached the room, but that didn’t mean anything. I had no idea what game he was playing. So, what, he’d removed the rope, so now we were buddies? I didn’t think so!

*You may be trying to make me feel like I’m not a prisoner*, I screamed at him inside my head, *but I know better, you Willy Wonka-like asshole.*

“Here,” Lucian said, pouring me a glass of clear liquid. He eyed me carefully. “It’s water.”

*He wants me to drink that? HA! AS IF!*

“I think I’ll pass,” I told him sharply.

He sighed, pouting. “Very well, then.” He drank from the cup before handing it back to me. “See?” he said. “It’s safe. I’m not a monster, you know.”

I remembered Greyson’s advice about not provoking Lucian, and I refrained from cackling right in his sexy Stockholm Syndrome-friendly face. Since I was parched and it wasn’t poisoned, I drank some of the water. It was the best tasting water I’d had in my life.

I must’ve made some sort of noise, because Lucian smiled. “It’s triple filtered through Norwegian glaciers before it’s shipped here.”

“Fancy,” I said, smiling tightly. “Fit for a prince.”

“I know,” Lucian said, looking proud of himself.

I reminded myself that since he’d removed the ties on my hands, I could blast him if he got too familiar. It would have to be a last resort, but at least I had that.

“Now, let’s get down to business,” Lucian said, sitting next to me at the table. “Why did you pretend to be a Luna?”

I peered at him, my eyes narrowed. “What do you intend to do with me and my mates?”

“I asked you a question, Caliana,” Lucian said in a low voice.

“I asked you a question too,” I said sweetly.

He gave me a look, snorting. “Fine. I appreciate your fire, and I’m willing to indulge you. If you answer my question, I’ll answer one of yours.”

*Should I lie?* I wondered. Would telling a lie put Xavier and Greyson in danger? For all I knew, Lucian could have them tied up behind the door right now and could have them killed with a single word.

I swallowed, biting my upper lip. Perhaps lying would be risky, but that didn’t mean I had to reveal the full truth. Despite his earlier assholery, Lucian still seemed to have that soft spot for me—whatever THAT meant—and Greyson was right. I could try to exploit it.

I sighed, trying to put on my best “I give up” face. “It’s not a secret that the Redwood pack has been through a lot recently,” I said. “We knew what an honor it was to be invited to a party at the Vanguard pack’s estate, so I was very excited and wanted to make a good impression…” I glanced at Lucian, who seemed pleased by my subtle flattery. “I wanted to arrive with a fully formed Luna mark. I hoped to prove to the Vanguard pack that the Redwoods are strong, and that the bond between me…” I paused—how could I best phrase this? Clearing my throat, I just said, “I wanted to show the world that the bond between me and my two mates was unshakable, and it is.”

Lucian arched an eyebrow.

My voice firm, I continued. “You can say what you want, but Xavier, Greyson, and I are fiercely loyal to each other.”

Lucian paused, taking in my face. Then he shook his head. “Fine, then. I will give you that.” He eyed me carefully, eyes narrowed. “I can tell that’s not the full story, though.” He looked intrigued. “You seem to be caught in the orbit of two Alphas. You appear to be completely torn between them.”

I waved him off, playing dumb. “Who? Me?”

Lucian sighed. “Oh, Caliana. Please don’t evade my question. I’m not just a master tactician—”

It was suddenly really hard not to roll my eyes. “I’m not evading—”

“—but I’m well read, too. I’m not like other Alphas.”

Oh my god! Was Lucian seriously pulling an “I’m not like other girls”? This amount of delusion was actually RIDICULOUS.

But then, this ridiculous asshole actually pulled the rug out from under my feet.

“From what you’re telling me,” he went on, “it sounds like you are a *due destini* mate.”

My stomach dropped. Hearing him say that phrase felt so unnatural. I knew that the *due destini* was a story amongst werewolves, but hearing Lucian address it didn’t sit right.

“Ah,” Lucian said, pointing at me. “From the look on your face, I can tell that I’m right. I’m also really good at reading facial expressions, among my other talents.”

No comment.

“Bottom line,” Lucian continued, “if you carry that curse, it means the three of you are caught up in each other. For you, mutual destruction is impossible to avoid.”

I pressed my lips together, biting the inside of my cheek. I was frustrated at myself and also angry at Lucian, who—okay, fine—appeared to be far less clueless than I’d originally thought. He felt like a very different kind of foe—he wasn’t like Silas or Letifer. There was something so subtly sinister about him. That, along with his huge following and apparently massive amounts of cash, made him very dangerous.

And here I was, needing to keep him appeased and/or trick him. Greyson believed that I could.

*That’s A LOT of pressure, isn’t it?* I thought wildly.

On the outside, though, I stayed calm. “I have nothing more to say, and fair is fair—you got an answer out of me, now I get one out of you. Please tell me that your chivalry isn’t all talk, and answer my question: what are you going to do with me and my mates?”

Lucian paused, staring at me. He stood up abruptly, strutting to the other side of the room. He pulled a book from the shelf and flipped through it idly, then walked back over to me and snapped it shut. I fought off a wince, but my heart was pounding.

*Don’t forget, Cali*, I told myself. *If worst comes to worst, you can blast him.*

I just hoped it wouldn’t come to that. I had no idea what the consequences would be.

“Don’t think for a second that I’m unchivalrous, Caliana,” he said sharply. “After all, it was you and your mates who made a mockery of my party.”

I swallowed down the urge to tell him to go fuck himself with a cactus. Instead, I said, “We were only trying to escape because you insisted on keeping us here when we didn’t want to stay.”

Lucian eyed me skeptically before sighing. “I’m willing to admit that I didn’t start off on the right foot with you three.”

I scoffed internally. *Understatement of the century*.

Without answering my question, the asshole switched topics. “What do you think about Aysel and Greyson? The link of Seluna is nothing to ignore. How would it make you feel if they were to become bonded?”

My eyes narrowed. “What do you mean?”

He smirked. “I’m just saying—it could save you from the *due destini*. Wouldn’t you like that?”

“What are you implying?” I asked, digging my nails into my palm to calm myself down.

Lucian sighed. “Oh, darling Caliana. There’s so much I could tell you.”

This man was testing me. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d stopped myself from exploding like this. How did he even know *anything* about the *due destini*, anyway? And if he *had* read up on it, he should’ve been aware that it was impossible to break…

Wasn’t it?

I shook off my intrigue. Keeping eye contact with Lucian, I said, “I know Greyson, and I know that he loves me. Aysel and my mate will never be anything more than werewolves from different packs.” I raised an eyebrow. “She’s delusional if she thinks she can trap him into something with one kiss.”

I heard a gasp right behind me, and I jumped.

*Oh god, what is it NOW?*

It was…

*Aysel*. Looking furious.

She rounded on Lucian. “You’re not going to let her say that about me, are you, brother?”

**Episode 2074**

GREYSON

I couldn’t believe what I’d just seen. Ava had single-handedly tricked the guard that both my brother and I had failed to terrorize. She’d just shown some shoulder, batted her eyelashes, and asked him to undress her.

And then she’d grabbed him and slammed his skull against the silver bars.

Wham, bam, thank you, ma’am.

Or not.

How could I ever thank *Ava* for *anything*?

And now she wanted us to leave without Cali? That was beyond bad, all on its own. *And* my pride had taken a huge hit. I’d been so distracted by my dumbass brother and his amazing ability to be as useless as possible that I hadn’t thought much about Ava’s role in all this. I hated that I was still stuck in a cage while she’d had the wherewithal to free herself, and now here we were, at her mercy.

*This is all your fault*, I mind linked Xavier.

*What did* I *do?* he demanded. *You saw what she was doing with the guard, you knew what was going to happen*. *If you hate the idea of her getting out so much, why don’t you start stripping down for the next guard that comes in here?*

*I wasn’t going to stop her from getting out of here, you jackass!* I said*. She might be our only shot at escaping, but that doesn’t mean I like it!*

*You’re a dick*, Xavier said, glaring.

*No, you’re the dick*, I replied. *And your ex want us to leave our mate behind!*

Xavier snarled, slamming his fist into the ground hard enough for the room to vibrate.

“Ahem.” Ava cleared her throat. “Can you two pay attention? The clock is ticking, and I’m exhausted. And hungry. So.” She jiggled the keys in front of us. “What do you say? You boys ready to bust out of here?”

Xavier and I exchanged a look. There was no need to mind link when I knew, for certain, where both of us stood on this.

“We’re not going anywhere without Cali,” I told Ava sharply. “You know that. Quit playing games and let us out.”

“Greyson’s right. Leaving with Cali is non-negotiable,” Xavier agreed gruffly. “We came in here together, we leave together.”

Ava shrugged. “I didn’t come here with you guys, and it seems like I’ve been an afterthought this whole time, so maybe I should just go.”

“Cali is our mate, and you’re just not,” I said in that same peevish tone.

Ava scoffed, looking over at Xavier. “That’s debatable.”

Xavier narrowed his eyes at her but kept his trap shut. I didn’t.

“Well, you’re definitely not *my* ex-mate,” I said. “I don’t owe you jack shit.”

“You’d better watch the way you talk to me, Greyson.” Ava jangled the keys tauntingly, and I shook my head, jaw clenching. Why had Xavier ever gotten tangled up with this walking human knot? Because he was a dumbass, of course—that was why.

Fortunately for him, I was *not* a dumbass. I knew how to use my brain—at least on occasion, and this was definitely the right occasion. Ava was a lot of bad things, but deep down, she was mainly a girl in fucked-up love.

Deep down, she was still human, and I could use that.

“If you wanna talk semantics, actually, you’re the one who owes *me*, Ava,” I said.

She laughed dubiously. “Are you for real?”

“Of course,” I said. “We let you into the Redwoods’ home when nobody else would take you in. We did that *after* you wore Cali’s face and tricked us into having sex with you. You violated us, you violated *me*, but I have been beyond tolerant with you. And that’s because Xavier”—I pointed at my brother through the bars—“for all his bravado, is clearly still feeling some type of way about you.”

“I’m not fucking feeling *anything*!” Xavier said.

“Please,” I snapped. “You let your murderous ex—who you literally *killed*—live with us! For free! It’s actually kind of hilarious, if you think about it.”

“You didn’t throw her out either!”

Xavier huffed as he looked away. I faced Ava, who had turned pale now. I looked her dead in the eye. “Anyway. It doesn’t matter. Apparently, none of the shit we’ve done for you matters, so…” I shrugged. “Go ahead. Leave us here to rot. Fuck us over, betray us like you always do. Knowing Xavier…” I arched an eyebrow, looking over at my brother. “Knowing Xavier, no matter what you do and how much he protests, he’ll probably still let you live in his house.”

Ava swallowed audibly, clearly affected, and Xavier punched the wall hard enough to make a dent. “Shut the fuck up, Greyson.”

I eyed Ava before glancing at my brother again. “You know Lucian’s gonna go after Xavier first, though. He’s the brute between the two of us, and Lucian doesn’t like that.”

“Fuck. *You*,” Xavier hissed.

“It’s true, brother,” I said. “Ava’s leaving, which means you’re done for.”

But Ava didn’t move.

For a moment, nobody spoke.

Ava’s jaw was tight as she stole glances at Xavier. My brother was trying his best to seem detached, but it wasn’t working. This messy duo was my ticket out of here—I could just feel it.

And then, I hit the jackpot.

“Shit, *okay*,” Ava groaned. She turned to Xavier’s cell and unlocked the door. Xavier leapt out, elated. But before he could even speak, Ava grabbed him by the nape, pulling him into a tight but very awkward hug. Her back was turned to me, and I was making eye contact with my brother, whose expression was thunderous.

For a split second, I flashed back to when Xavier had left me at the zoo in the Fae world. Was the bastard about to do that again?

For *real*?

No. No—my brother had grown since then. I’d seen it.

Just then, he broke the hug with Ava, plucked the keys out of her hand, and marched over to my cell.

“You had me wondering for a moment there,” I grumbled.

“You just talked so much shit about me that you would’ve deserved me leaving you here,” he snarked. I rolled my eyes, and he shoved the door open. As I walked out, he said, “Just keep all your thank yous and mushy whatevers to yourself. Let’s go.”

“Let’s go get Cali,” I said.

Xavier nodded sharply, his gaze intense. All three of us clustered around the passed-out guard, finding ourselves ready to escape from this castle for the second time in the same few hours.

“What’s your plan then, boys? Are you just gonna stand here?” Ava asked, breaking the silence.

“What do you mean by that?” I asked, arching an eyebrow. “It’s going to be *our* plan—all three of us.”

Ava sneered. “You two don’t need me. And I’m fully capable of busting out on my own.”

“You were part of this getaway. It’s not like you’ll get off scot-free—they’ll chase after you too.” I shrugged, pretending not to care. “But hey, if you just want to leave…”

Ava crossed her arms. “Maybe I do.”

I looked over at Xavier. “Xavier and I are getting Cali back. That’s our plan, and something tells me you’re not as keen to leave as you’re making yourself out to be.”

Ava glanced at Xavier, and I hoped that the jackass wouldn’t ruin this.

With a resigned sigh, he muttered, “You know we could use your help, Ava.”

Ava pretended not to blush at his praise. Clearing her throat, she said, “In that case, fine.”

The truth was that I needed Ava on my crew—she was obviously smart, and she kept her eyes on Xavier at all times. That made her a strategic asset right now. I would have to indulge her until I got what I wanted.

Namely, Cali*.*

I needed to get Cali out of here and back to the pack house.

End of story.

“Xavier,” I said. “What are you thinking right now?”

“My plan is simple,” Xavier said. “They caught us off-guard before, and we got surrounded. This time, we’re gonna be the ones to catch Lucian off-guard. We get to his chambers, subdue him, and get Cali back.”

Ava gave him wry look. “Only there’s one problem. Where the hell *are* his chambers?”

“She has a point,” I said. “Running around this estate all cavalier won’t get us anywhere. Besides, it’s morning, not the dead of night. The other guests will be getting up—a ton of people spent the night…” I paused, processing. “You know, Lucian probably *wants* us to act out. He wants us to give him a reason to treat us in the worst way possible. We can’t let him have that.”

Xavier gave me a sarcastic smile. “So what? We kill him with kindness?”

I nodded. “Something like that, actually.”

Suddenly, Ava’s stomach rumbled. Both Xavier and I turned to look at her.

“What?” she said defensively. “It’s the morning! I’m hungry.”

Abruptly, I realized exactly how much time had passed. We were talking hours, and I’d missed dinner. I was hungry too.

“I bet Lucian’s serving breakfast right now,” I said.

Xavier stared at me like I was nuts. “You’re not saying…”

I glanced between a dubious Xavier and an intrigued-looking Ava.

“As odd as this all sounds,” I said, “maybe playing it cool is the best way to save Cali. What do you say?”

**Episode 2075**

VIOLET

I gasped for air as I was pulled out from the water. My mind was reeling, and I couldn’t focus on anything other than how cold every inch of my body felt. My feet were numb and heavy, my arms weak and shaking. My lungs were both burning and freezing at the same time, my eyes stinging, puffy, and aching.

I could barely feel my face or see anything at all other than the bright sunlight. But at least I wasn’t underwater anymore. My ears were ringing, my teeth chattering from the cold, and I was full-on panicking, hyperventilating as I choked out water. But then Charlie’s voice broke through the freezing void once more.

“You’re safe,” he said. “I’m with you. You’re okay.”

I felt his warm embrace as my senses slowly returned to a vague definition of normal. But I was still shuddering uncontrollably. As if through a tunnel, I heard Charlie speak again, but this time it wasn’t a warm, comforting whisper. It was a shout directed to Artemis and Rishika.

“It’s in the woods! Right over there!”

“We’re after it—it won’t get away!” Artemis yelled back.

I heard the sounds of her and Rishika careening into the woods, their footsteps heavy but light at the same time, full of force and power.

I was so cold I could barely think.

“Here, this will have to do for now,” Charlie said. He wrapped his jacket around me, and I noticed that he was left with just his T-shirt. I wanted to tell him to put his coat back on, to be careful with the cold, but I could barely speak.

My voice was croaky as I stammered, “Wh-What’s going on?”

It felt like I knew the answer to that question, but I was too confused at the moment to pin it down.

“We’ll talk later,” Charlie said soothingly. “We need to get you back home.”

He looked over his shoulder and waved for someone. A moment later, Zainab and Sage helped pick me up. I was shivering so much that I couldn’t walk on my own. And as much as the two girls tried to help me stand, it just felt hopeless.

“I got this,” Charlie said sharply. He pulled me over his shoulders, then carried me fireman style as he dashed back toward the house. The other two ran after us.

This felt much faster. I held onto my mate with all my remaining strength, and after a few freezing moments, I was hit with warmth. When I opened my eyes, I realized that we were back at the pack house.

We were inside. *Finally*.

Kira was in the hallway, fixing her hair in the mirror. She was clearly startled to see us, gasping when she saw me. “What happened? Poor thing!”

“Tell Big Mac!” Charlie shouted. “Get hot water running right now!”

Kira nodded sharply and ran upstairs. Charlie brought me to the living room, sitting me down on the sofa, right next to the blazing fireplace. The heat instantly made things better. He took off the two jackets I was wearing, and somehow having fewer wet layers on me made me feel much less lost under the cold.

“It’s gonna be okay,” Charlie whispered in my ear, stroking my cheeks. “I’m going to take care of you.”

I was so grateful that Charlie was able to take charge of the situation. It was just comforting to know that he would always have my back. That the entire pack would always have my back. Torin, Orla, and others swarmed around me only a moment later, and they asked a million questions, their faces full of worry. But Charlie shook his head, his expression dark.

“Everybody, back off, let her breathe,” he said. “I don’t even know what happened, just that someone was trying to hurt her.”

“The bathtub is nearly full,” Big Mac called, appearing in the doorway with Kira.

Charlie picked me up bridal style and climbed the stairs two at a time. Somehow, though, I wasn’t shaken up. I just nestled my face against his big strong clavicle, my arms wrapped around his neck.

When we reached the bathroom, I took off my sweater and pants, then my underwear, and finally the feeling in my limbs started to return, just a little.

Charlie looked flushed, hovering over me. “What do you need from me? Should I help you into the tub? Anything you need, I’m right here.”

His voice was urgent but soft. I was still shivering, but I offered him a small smile. “You’ve already done so much…” I held out a hand. He took it gingerly, helping me into the tub as gently as possible, as if he was afraid I’d break.

The hot water felt like heaven against my skin when I sank in. I let out a noise of relief, and Charlie stroked my cheek, staring at my face in a way that made me feel adored. The warmth immediately gave me a jolt of energy and calmed my anxiety. Charlie, though, was still breathing heavily. He looked really worried, freaking out for sure, and I squeezed his hand, trying to reassure him.

“I’m okay,” I whispered.

He swallowed roughly. “What happened, though?”

My memory was a little hazy. But for Charlie’s sake, I tried my best to reconstruct the moments before I’d fallen. The ice had seemed so thick—it’d been totally fine up until I’d actually fallen. There was something sinister happening here—something magical, probably—and even though the hot bath felt amazing, I couldn’t help but feel another shiver run through me.

“I’m not sure,” I said quietly. “We were playing hockey, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw something glittering. Kind of flashing. I decided to skate over in that direction to see what trick of the light was dancing on the pond…”

It sounded so ridiculous when I said it out loud. I had been lured out and put into a dangerous situation, just because I’d seen something sparkly! How embarrassing.

Charlie looked like he could read every single one of my thoughts. “This isn’t your fault. We were just playing. We were supposed to be safe, especially so close to the house, with so many people around. This was impossible to predict.”

I took a deep breath. “I guess you’re right.”

He pressed his lips together, scrutinizing my face. “What happened after that?”

I swallowed. “Next thing I knew, I was falling through the ice. And then, when I was out of the water, even though my eyes hurt, I saw someone, or something, in the woods.” I stared at Charlie, his stare intense. “I pointed it out for you.”

The memory was much clearer now that my body had returned to its normal temperature.

Charlie pushed my wet hair from my forehead, kissing my cheek, then my temple. “You did amazing, Sunshine. It was incredible that you were able to point that out at all after what happened. If it hadn’t been for you, Rishika and Artemis wouldn’t have been able to give chase.”

I sat up a bit in the tub. My brows were furrowed in confusion. “Give chase?”

“Rishika and Artemis are on it. They’re trying to track whatever was in the woods. I chose to stay with you,” Charlie said, bringing my hand to his mouth to kiss it gently. “There’s no way I would’ve trusted anyone else with getting you back home safely. But once Artemis and Rishika find this person…”

My eyes were wide as I scrutinized Charlie’s dark expression. “What are you saying?”

“Whoever did this is going to pay for it,” Charlie said, matter-of-fact. I recognized the look on his face. I’d seen it in Minnesota when I’d been poisoned with the silver. Charlie wanted blood. “I’m going to be the one to deal with it. But not at your expense. My first priority was to bring you back home and get you warm.”

My chest felt tight with emotion and overwhelming gratitude. Charlie loved me, and I felt so lucky to have found him. Without another word, I gripped the sides of his neck and pulled him down for a kiss. My lips, still a little cool, warmed up and then heated in an instant the moment they touched his mouth. I opened up to him, let him lead, let him help me forget how scary these past few moments had been. I needed him as much as I knew he needed me. Especially right now.

He caressed my shoulder, my arm, and when he broke the kiss, he said, “You’re fine, Violet. That’s what matters the most. But you’ve gotta rest now, okay?”

I took in Charlie’s scent, so perfect and right for me. It was comforting. He felt like home. Exactly what I needed right now.

And then I realized something with a jolt.

“Whatever Artemis and Rishika are chasing after…” I trailed off. “Did you recognize the scent, Charlie?”

**Episode 2076**

Aysel’s wolf instincts had to be constantly tingling. How else could she always be in the right place at the right time? Well, it was probably the wrong place at the wrong time, now that I thought about it.

Aysel was looking surprisingly roughed-up for someone so fancy, and it took me a moment to remember that we had in fact had a tussle in her secret freaky sex cottage.

*She’s lucky I didn’t blast her head off!* I thought to myself, feeling a little smug but also annoyed. This whole thing was infuriating.

“*Due destini* or not, this woman is spitting nothing but lies,” she said, pointing at me. “They were trying to leave to flee from my judgment. But Greyson must stay and face the full wrath of the Vanguards. It is a matter of honor.”

Swallowing down my anger—and my general urge to tell her that she wouldn’t know honor if it bit her in the ass—I turned to Lucian. He hadn’t spoken a word yet. Instead, he was staring at me, as if waiting for a rebuttal.

Lucian was apparently not completely dazzled by his sister after all, and I realized that this was my opening. It was my only shot to prove to him, or at least try to show him, that Aysel was actually the villain here.

“That’s patently untrue, Aysel,” I fired back. “You wanted to kidnap Greyson for your own disgusting ends. If you wanted judgment, you would have left him in the cell.”

“Silly girl. Just admit that you’re afraid Greyson prefers me!” she exclaimed.

I rolled my eyes, because *seriously*? “You’re not my competition. Our reasons for leaving have nothing to do with you at all. The Redwoods may be proud, but we’re not stupid.” *Speaking of people who thought we were stupid…* I turned to Lucian. “You clearly let your sister into the room to hide behind the tapestry because you wanted to see how she’d react to me. And now that she’s heard the truth and knows her lie has come to light, her only choice is to double down. It’s obvious.”

This was all a bit of a shot in the dark, me trying to read a situation that I wasn’t entirely certain about, but I hoped it would land.

Thankfully, Lucian gave me a nod. It was literally the best nod in the entire world. The glance he shot his sister told me that he was also a bit weirded out by her behavior. Maybe he wasn’t *entirely* deluded. “Well, that sounds—”

“It doesn’t matter what she says!” Aysel hissed. “I wouldn’t believe a word that comes out of her mouth—she’s got the power of magic!”

“Yes, very curious,” Lucian said, his gaze falling back on me.

“You should know then that she blasted me back there in the cottage!”

“You mean the cottage where you tied my mate to a bed against his will?” I asked her, raising both my eyebrows in challenge.

She gasped, clearly offended. The nerve of this woman was out of this world! I felt like blasting her all over again, this time to draw blood. But then, there was Lucian to consider. I turned to look at him, nervous about how he was going to take all that information. He *had* seen me blast that guard earlier, so it wasn’t like he was getting any shocking new information.

He just seemed…

Intrigued?

He stroked his chin, squinting at me. “Most curious indeed.” He smiled a little, and alarm bells went off in my head. “All the more reason why it seems like we should get to know the Redwoods a little bit more.”

I blinked in shock for a moment before trying to hide my surprise. This was a most curious outcome indeed, as Lucian would’ve said. I wasn’t sure if I liked it or not, but him being intrigued by us probably meant that we’d manage to get out of here alive.

*Well! This isn’t scary at all!* I thought, feeling slightly hysterical all over again.

Lucian gave me an indulgent smile before turning to his sister. “Dear sister, you know I appreciate your opinions, but in this matter, I must say that I’m inclined to believe the Redwood side of things.”

Aysel gaped at him. She was apparently not used to rejection. “But—”

Lucian cut her off sharply. “You and I have much to discuss—but at a later time.” He clapped his hands twice, and guards poured into the room. He stared at Aysel. “For now, you shall be confined to the northeast courtyard and its adjoining chambers, under strict guard.”

Aysel seemed as astonished as I was. “Lucian! How could you? How dare you listen to them over me?”

Lucian ignored her, and I couldn’t believe this was happening. Like, whatever I’d done had worked. I could talk to people and get them to do stuff for me, somehow, apparently! My next step would be getting out of here, and getting Xavier and Greyson—and Ava too, ugh—out of the dungeon.

*I may have won this battle*, I thought to myself, *but there’s still so much to do…*

I watched, still a little shell-shocked, as Aysel struggled on her way out of the room with the guards. She was definitely not used to not getting her way.

*Tough luck, you evil bitch!* I thought to myself, waving at her with a smirk.

Lucian noticed, of course. He had been studying me closely, after all. His expression was deadpan. In a blunt tone, he said, “Don’t let this turn of events lead you to false confidence. You’re still not getting out of here until I say so.”

I scrutinized his face, realizing that Greyson was right—I could do this. Lucian was interested in me—interested in *us*—and I could figure out a way to exploit that. This was a game of chess, and I could be the winner of it if I played my cards right. Or was it my prawns?

*Dammit! Why didn’t I ever learn how to play chess?*

“Caliana?” Lucian said, interrupting my thoughts.

I cleared my throat, pretending to be very thoughtful and very important. “All good. What shall we do next?”

Lucian shrugged. “It’s morning, and last night’s fiasco has disrupted the day’s plans. Still, the key to a successful day is a good breakfast, so that’s where we’ll start.”

I suddenly realized that I was super hungry. Food would do me good, actually. Nobody ever escaped the clutches of a kooky brooding werewolf mastermind on an empty stomach.

“That sounds great,” I said. “And if your breakfast is half as good as your water, I bet it’s going to be delicious.”

Lucian shot me a smirk. Good to see that flattery still worked on him. He stepped out of his bedchamber and gestured for me to follow. “This way.”

He led me through a tower and a maze of hallways, and we walked for at least ten minutes until we finally reached the giant ballroom. If I lived here, I would’ve needed a map to even find this room. I did recognize it from the night before, but now it was set up like a hotel breakfast buffet. A bit more of a tame look than sexy Cirque du Soleil from last night. I saw line after line of food trays, filled with fruit, oats, breakfast meats, pancakes, and other treats.

The guests were milling about, looking pretty dramatically hungover. I was pretty sure most of them had had wild nights, but I bet they hadn’t been running through the woods or getting kidnapped or getting imprisoned multiple times over.

*The Redwood pack is special that way.*

As I stood next to Lucian, I followed his gaze as he took in each and every one of the great tables that his guests were occupying. And then…

Right in the middle, at the head of the table closest to me, I saw something that made my heart skip a beat.

Looking amazingly—*uncharacteristically*—calm, cool, and collected, I saw Xavier, Greyson, and Ava drinking coffee and eating grapes.

Eating. Freaking. *Grapes!*

*Oh. My. GOD!*

Xavier and Greyson made eye contact with me and Lucian, raising their mugs with big, shit-eating grins. It was the casualness of it all that was making my brain explode.

*They’re okay! But how did they make it to breakfast? How did they make it out of the dungeon? Did they get hurt at all?* I internally rambled, my thoughts running a mile a minute. And then I laughed under my breath, shaking my head.

God, was I happy to see them.

I loved them so, so much.

Whatever Lucian wanted to throw at us next, we’d get through it together. That was what we did. Nothing could stop the Evers brothers when they were men on a mission.

To his credit, Lucian did not seem shocked. Either that, or he was hiding it very well.

“Welcome,” he said with a cold smile. “We were expecting you.”

**Episode 2077**

MARTA

There was some sort of commotion going on downstairs, but I had my own things to worry about right now. Torin left the room to go check out what was happening, but Lilac and I were still glued to the computer.

I instantly replied to Steinar’s message, my hands shaking.

*Come in person? Now? Are you sure?*

With butterflies fluttering wildly in my stomach, I watched the chat box thingy. Nothing was happening. All I could see was three bouncing dots. I scowled, turning to Lilac.

“Why are those dots jumping around? What the hell is going on? Is Steinar’s computer broken? Is he really just typing dots over and over again? I don’t know Morse code!”

“Easy there, tiger,” Lilac said, chuckling. “One problem at a time. And this is actually not a problem—Steinar is just thinking about what to say.”

Just then, thank god, a line of text appeared on the screen.

*The laws of magic are very complex. And like I said—v o l a t i l e. See you soon at the library.*

He followed his message with a series of one, two, three… *fifteen* book-related picture thingies that Lilac said were called emojis. Steinar clearly wanted to make his librarian status very clear.

“Well,” Lilac said casually, “that settles it. I guess it’s time to take a trip. You want to drive, or should I? Or maybe we’re going to have to take a plane. I actually have no idea where this place is.”

I swallowed thickly, shaking my head. “Wait wait wait, we need to slow down! I don’t want to do anything without consulting my lawyers first.”

Lilac grinned, winking at me. “Good point.”

With a small smile, I followed him out of the room. The smile faded when I realized that the house was in a bit of turmoil—but the real kind, not just meaningless drama. Nobody was laughing or gossiping, and that was the first thing that made me worry.

Rishika and Artemis had just opened the front door, back from hockey, and they were panting. Neither of them looked happy, in fact they were talking to each other with dark expressions.

“What the hell happened this time?” Lilac whispered in my ear. “I had no idea hockey was so intense in this house.”

“Sports make people act very weird,” I said.

As we climbed down the stairs, we ran into Big Mac, and I asked, “Who won that hockey game? Everyone seems kind of… upset?”

Big Mac clicked her tongue at me, shaking her head. She glanced at Lilac before muttering, “There was… a situation,” her eyes flicked to Lilac. “Your sister fell through some ice, but she’s all right now, and she’s resting.”

“Shit, really?” Lilac said, his voice full of concern.

“You should go be with her,” I said. “Even if she’s asleep. I can handle what we wanted to talk about.”

Lilac looked distant for a moment, then he turned back to me, his look full of meaning. “If she’s asleep she won’t miss me for ten minutes. I think we should proceed.”

Big Mac raised an eyebrow. “Proceed? Marta, what’s going on?”

Just then, Kira walked down the hall, and I realized that this was the perfect moment for my request. Clearing my throat, I looked between the two witches. “Since you’re both here right now, I guess it’s the right time to tell you that I humbly request a consultation with my lawyers!”

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Lilac, Big Mac, Kira, and I ended up down into the basement, which was the only place that wasn’t full of people right now. We sat around the workout equipment, and I noticed Lola spotting for Jay as he did some reps in the corner. They looked very much into the whole process, clearly smitten with each other. It was nice to see.

“So?” Kira said, interrupting my thoughts. “What’s this meeting about? We didn’t intend to do any more work on the case today.”

I exchanged a look with Lilac, and he nodded encouragingly. I looked at the witches, folding my hands together. “Lilac and I may have taken things into our own hands.”

Big Mac rubbed her forehead, breathing very loudly through her nose. “Oh *god*. What is it this time?”

Lilac shook his head vehemently. “It’s nothing!” he said. “We just followed your advice and got in touch with Steinar. It looks like he’s got a lot of magical law resources that could help with the case.”

“I just want to be useful since it’s my life on the line, and now Lilac’s too,” I said to the witches. “I just want to make sure that no legal stone is left unturned. You know?”

Big Mac tapped her foot, crossing her arms. She and Kira exchanged a look, and once again, it was definitely not a good thing.

Big Mac took a deep breath. “I know that I originally told you that that was a good idea, but I’m not sure that Kira and I can leave the pack house right now to go to the library with you two. The Alphas aren’t back yet, and with the situation with Violet and the pond… Things are feeling tense.”

Lilac stood up, looking defiant. He had this expression that I’d never seen before—I was pretty sure that he’d stopped listening halfway through Big Mac’s explanation and was now just mad. A little like a puppy.

“I understand what happened to my sister, so don’t tell me how I should feel about her. I get that other people have problems, but I don’t want Marta’s issues to get tossed aside here. She’s helped the pack out countless times, now—she’s one of us, and she’s practically a witch just like the two of you are. Where’s your loyalty?”

Lilac had balls of steel. I felt really torn about standing up to the witches and asking for their help, but at the same time, I didn’t want to offend them. Either way, though, I felt really happy that Lilac was standing up for me. Literally nobody had done that for years.

Kira rolled her eyes, waving Lilac off. “Oh, come on. Don’t be so dramatic. Of course we want to help Marta—we’re really committed to it. But like Big Mac said, the fact that the Alphas aren’t back yet causes a bit of a conflict of interest.”

Lilac narrowed his eyes at the witches. “Then maybe you can think about what to do next.”

The two of them exchanged yet another look before Big Mac said, “Kira, let’s go back upstairs and discuss.” She stared at me. “We’ll keep you posted, okay?”

Lilac winked at me, and I hid a smile. It was amazing to know that he was my champion. After all these years, I knew that I wasn’t alone.

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“What is it that has everybody whispering?” Lola asked, after she, Lilac, Jay, and I went back up to the first floor. Everybody was having hushed conversations, being cryptic.

“Violet fell through the ice on the pond,” I said. I quickly continued at their concerned looks. “But she’s okay now, though.”

“What were you and the witches talking about in the basement?” Jay asked, looking curious.

“I was trying to get Kira and Big Mac to okay our trip to the magic library,” I explained. As I spoke, I felt Lilac squeeze me against his side, his arm around my shoulder. I hadn’t even realized it was there—I’d gotten so used to his touch that it felt like second nature for him to be so close to me.

“Oh, right!” Lola said, turning to Jay. “Remember when we went to the library, Jay? And then…”

As Lola started talking to Jay about their library adventure—probably a pretty dangerous one, actually—I leaned into Lilac’s shoulder. He kissed my cheek, whispering in my ear, “I’m right here. We’re going to deal with this together.”

I held him tightly, settling myself down. I was still a little skittish after the mock trial this morning, and it felt like the weight of the situation hadn’t fully hit me yet. But still, knowing that Lilac was on my side made everything ten times better.

“Thank you,” I murmured. He smiled. He was so cute that my heart started working overtime.

But just then, the moment was interrupted. I glanced over Lilac’s shoulder and saw Kira walking toward us. Her expression was as deadpan as ever, so I had no idea if the news was going to be good or not.

“So,” Kira said seriously, “I just debriefed with Big Mac. She says she can’t leave the pack house right now. The Alphas aren’t here, there’s too much up in the air, and your trial is still a few days away.”

My heart sank. Lilac scowled. I could see he was ready to fight for my rights, but then Kira spoke up again. “That’s fine, though. I’ll go with you.”

Lilac’s angry expression broke in an instant. He grinned at me widely. “See? I told you everything would be okay.” He kissed my temple, then said, “I’m going to go check on Violet, okay?”

I nodded, squeezing his hand. “Of course. I’ll come too in a second.”

As Lilac left, I smiled at Kira. “Thank you.” I was feeling pretty hopeful for once—not just about finding more knowledge, but about getting some air and time away from the pack house. I just needed a break after this morning.

“What do we do now?” I asked Kira.

“Figure out when to leave,” she said.

“Just be careful of their restricted section,” Jay said, a dark look passing on his face, “and you’ll be golden.”

Lola looked between me and Jay. “Wait just one second!” With a flourish, she said, “Jay and I are coming too!”

**Episode 2078**

XAVIER

I looked up into Lucian’s eyes when he saw us. He was good at concealing his emotions, that was for sure, but either way I could tell we had gotten one up the snotty little so-called prince. He managed to keep the shock off his face, but I knew that if it were up to Lucian, we’d still be locked up deep in this godforsaken estate.

I figured I could afford to have a little more fun with his discomfort, so in an effort to drive the knife in a little deeper, I lifted my coffee mug in mock salute. “Morning, Your Highness.” He ignored my overtures. Figured.

“Hey.” A voice on my left caught me by surprise.

I turned to see Mace standing next to us. He was fresh from the buffet and holding a plate piled high with bacon. “Hey yourself,” I replied.

“Did I miss something last night?” Mace asked, leaning close to speak quietly.

I snorted a laugh. “Yeah, you missed a couple of things.”

Mace frowned. “I’ve been watching everyone this morning—things are *tense*. And it’s not just all the regrets from last night. What’s going on with you guys and Lucian? You could cut that tension with a knife. It’s freaking me out.”

For a moment I hesitated, wondering how much to tell Mace. But as I looked around the ballroom at all the Vanguards, I knew I could use all the allies I could get. “Things got fucking weird. Lucian’s after Cali, Aysel made some crazy accusations about Greyson, and both Greyson and I were thrown into some kind of palace jail to “await judgment.” We tried to get away, and they dragged us back here. It’s a big fucking mess.”

Mace stared at me. “How much did you have to drink last night, man? Are you still drunk? Whatever these Vanguards put in their drinks is powerful stuff. It sounds like you were having some crazy-ass dreams.”

I rolled my eyes. “I wish this was a nightmare. Then I could just wake myself up. But it all happened, and that’s me giving you the short version. And I doubt we’re out of the worst of it yet,” I muttered, looking over at Lucian. “That’s why I’m still sitting here with these two,” I said, nodding toward Greyson and Ava.

“What do you mean?” Mace asked, shoving a strip of bacon into his mouth.

“I want to get out of this place,” I growled. “All I want to do is grab Cali and book it right back to the pack house.”

“So why don’t you?”

“Already tried and failed. All we got for our trouble was getting dragged back here. Lucian won’t let us go without his say-so.”

Mace’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t like the sound of that.” He looked over his shoulder at Lucian. “I don’t like someone coming in here and pushing other Alphas around. We’re all supposed to be equals—to respect each pack’s boundaries.”

I raised my eyebrows. “I agree. We should really do something to push back, don’t you think?”

Mace nodded. “Abso-fucking-lutely.”

“You know, I’ve been thinking,” Greyson started, leaning toward us. “Lucian’s relying on splitting up the packs. Classic warfare tactic. He plotted to keep all the Alphas apart last night, and he’s still trying to prevent us from talking freely. Look at him.” Greyson nodded toward Lucian, who was glowering at us. “He and his goons are watching every move we make. Check it out.” He used his coffee mug to gesture toward Andrei, who had his eyes on us.

“Gotta be honest, this sets me on edge,” Mace muttered.

Greyson angled his chair a little closer. “We should be able to work together to get out of here.” He glanced at me. “I think in this case, more Alphas could help rather than hurt.”

I looked up at Cali, who was still standing at Lucian’s side. He was holding her elbow gently, but it was clear as day that he wasn’t going to let her out of his sight. Which would make it trickier for us all to escape this palace of nightmares.

Mace took a seat, and the three of us bent our heads together.

“Just try to look natural,” Greyson said, reaching for a spoon to stir his coffee. “We want to look like we’re enjoying ourselves.”

Mace grunted and shoveled more bacon into his mouth.

“With Lucian keeping Cali so close, it’s going to be hard to put together a plan without more information,” I said.

“What kind of information?” Mace asked through a mouthful of toast.

Greyson shot a sideways glance at Lucian. “For starters, it would be nice to know what the hell he wants.”

We discussed exits and tried to remember the general layout of the palace, but the place seemed to have been designed to be intentionally confusing, because the more we spoke, the more confused we all felt.

Around us, the Alphas and Lunas were finishing breakfast and starting to peel off from the breakfast tables. There was chatter, and it was clear that no one knew what the hell Lucian was going to do next. It was also clear that this was causing some agitation with the other Alphas. I saw people eyeing the doors, guarded by Vanguard pack members, and I wondered what Lucian’s plan was. He was dealing with a group of werewolves who did *not* like to be penned in.

Maybe he sensed this, because Lucian got to his feet and clapped his hands for attention. “And with this humble meal, we conclude this Vanguard party. I’m so pleased to have met all the Alphas in this region, and I’m sure that we will all work together very well, long into the future. The Vanguard pack will continue to be in touch as myself and my family settle into this—our ancestral home. Thank you all for coming.”

The Vanguard pack members opened the doors to the ballroom and stepped back, allowing people to file past them and out of the room. I watched this with a spark of hope flaming to life in my chest.

Was that it? Had Lucian given up? Was he going to let us all go?

Greyson, Ava, and I got to our feet, just as three guards stepped over.

“Oh, and I’d like to have a short meeting with the Redwood Alphas, if you don’t mind,” Lucian called out casually. Far *too* casually. “If you gentlemen would follow me to my office.”

Keeping a firm hand on Cali’s arm, Lucian walked out of the ballroom.

Cali looked back at us as she was led out of the room, her expression scared and alarmed.

Mace got to his feet. “That doesn’t seem good,” he muttered. “You boys need help with… whatever that just was?”

“No,” I said quickly. “We’ve got it under control.”

“Well,” Mace said, sounding like he didn’t quite believe me. “I’ll keep an eye out for you.” Then he walked away, gathering up his retinue.

Greyson and I didn’t even have to look at each other—we both knew we had no choice but to follow Lucian.

Lucian led us through a short passageway, and we soon found ourselves in a large room. It was furnished like a library at a men’s club—all tall bookshelves, leather couches, and deep red rugs.

“You may leave us,” Lucian said, dismissing the guards who’d led us in with a wave of his hand. “But remain outside the doors.”

Great. So the prince could have instant backup if he wanted it.

“Caliana, my dear, won’t you sit down,” Lucian said graciously, gesturing to a rich brown leather armchair near the fireplace. When she was seated, he pointed to two hard, high-backed chairs situated in front of the desk. “You two can sit there.”

Ava stood back, near the door, not having been invited to sit anywhere.

I ignored the chair and looked straight at Lucian. “What the hell do you want, man? You can’t keep us here forever. There are going to be questions. And eventually our pack will want answers.”

“There already *are* questions,” Lucian said sharply, rounding on me. “Many questions. First, there’s the matter of my sister’s assertions about you, Greyson, which I intend to get to the bottom of. And there’s the small issue of the lovely Caliana representing herself as a Luna when she isn’t one.” He looked between the three of us. “I find myself very curious indeed about why you all lied to me about that.”

I looked over to Cali. She looked pale and was watching Lucian carefully.

“And then, finally,” Lucian continued, “I find out that not only is Caliana not a Luna, but she is a *due destini*.”

There was a beat of uncomfortable silence in the quiet room. It was still so strange to hear Lucian say the words, and it felt wrong that he knew their connection to us. I shot a glance over at Greyson, who looked surprised and angry. Cali still hadn’t said anything, but she was gripping the arms of her chair so tightly her knuckles had turned white, so I knew she was terrified.

“Fine,” I snapped, breaking the silence. “You want to settle the matter of your crazy sister’s baseless claim on Greyson? Fine. You’ll see that Greyson would never do any of that shit she’s claiming. But Cali’s Luna status and the fact that she’s”—I took a breath, hating that I had to discuss this with Lucian at all—“*due destini* is no concern of yours. That’s something that only concerns the Redwood pack.”

Lucian’s eyes flashed dangerously. “As a prince, *I* decide what concerns me.” He took a breath, his nostrils flaring, as though he were trying to get his anger under control. “But I realize all this won’t be solved immediately. The Redwood Alphas are therefore free to go. For the moment.”

Relief flooded through me, and I felt my fists unclench. But then Lucian spoke again.

“Caliana, however, will remain here with me.”

**Episode 2079**

LOLA

As I looked around, no one seemed particularly excited about my announcement that Jay and I were going to the Obaltarion.

Not even Jay.

He looked at me, confused. “What do you mean, you’re going too?”

“That’s not what I said,” I corrected. “I said *we’re* going, too. As in, the both of us. It’s perfect! For one, we’ve both been there before, so we can help out with finding it and stuff. And for two, the library is bound to have some information on vampire-wolf hybrids. I mean, if the information is anywhere, it’ll be there. And I want to find out all I can about them.”

“But why—” Jay started.

“So we can help Marta find information for her trial,” I said, rolling my eyes. “The pack sticks together, right?” I looked around.

Big Mac was already shaking her head. “No way.”

“What? Why not?” I demanded.

“It’s completely unnecessary,” she said. Her eyes narrowed. “And frankly, I’m not certain you’d be the ideal research partner in this matter.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked, bristling.

“Marta needs to focus. You’re too distracted by your quest for information about hybrids.”

That stung enough that I couldn’t come up with a fast retort. And worse… it wasn’t like she was entirely wrong. I *did* have my own motivations for wanting to go, after all.

“I totally get that you’re really interested in this, Lola,” Jay said quickly, obviously trying to head off a fight, “but maybe the Obaltarion isn’t the best place to start.”

I gritted my teeth as frustration surged through me. Why was no one else excited about my idea?

“I don’t know,” Lilac said with a shrug. “I think any help would probably be… helpful. And Lola *has* been to this place before. But we should probably get the Alphas’ permission before we all go charging off anywhere, anyway.” He glanced at the clock on the wall. “They should be back by now, shouldn’t they?”

While I appreciated Lilac’s mild support, I didn’t respond to it.

I turned to Big Mac, ready to make a stand. I had a goal now—something clear that I could accomplish—and nothing was going to stand in my way. “You know, you’re not the boss, Big Mac. Not of me, anyway. If I want to go to the Obaltarion, I’m going to go. And you should be grateful that Marta and Lilac will have my help. And my backup. Those witch council clowns seem to just swoop in whenever they feel like it. It’ll be a good thing for these two to have some muscle behind them—”

“Okay, okay,” Kira said, holding up her hand. “I think Lola makes some good points. If they’re going, then I don’t think there’s a need for me to.”

Heaving a huge sigh, Big Mac rolled her eyes. “Fine, whatever.” She shook her head. “I swear, this is like herding cats. But worse. At least I can talk to cats.”

“Great,” I said, smiling brightly. I turned to Jay. “I’m going upstairs to start packing. You should join me.”

Jay followed me through the hall and into my room, but when we got there, he didn’t seem eager to start packing. He watched as I pulled a backpack from the closet and started tossing in underwear.

“I think that’s going a little overboard, Lola,” he said after a moment.

“What?” I asked, pulling my sock drawer open.

“You think you’re going to need your entire wardrobe? We’re not going away forever. We won’t even be gone that long, will we?”

“No, of course not,” I said, opening the drawer filled with sweaters. “But you know me. I like to be prepared.”

“Lola?” Jay asked. “You’re okay, right?”  
 “I’m great! I’m just excited. I didn’t realize how much I needed a goal to work toward, but it actually makes perfect sense. This is something that has a clear destination, and I can even help Marta along the way.” I pushed the sweater drawer shut with my hip. “And it’ll be nice to get away from the pack house for a bit, don’t you think?”

“I guess,” Jay said slowly.

“I mean, we had that huge battle and everything, and now all this tension with the Vanguard pack. It’s a lot. It’ll be nice to get a little fresh air, away from it all. Though,” I added thoughtfully, “before I go, I do want to get Cali’s full report about the party at the Vanguard mansion. It has to have been pretty wild. The thing sounded so fancy. That dress they sent…” I glanced at the clock next to the bed and frowned. “Whoa. Is that right?”

Jay pulled out his phone. “Yeah,” he said, checking the time. “It’s after eleven.”

“Really?” A stab of worry shot through me. “I didn’t realize it was so late. Is it weird that they’re not back yet? I mean, I don’t know how fancy-ass parties at these magically hidden mansions work, but you’d think they’d be home by now, wouldn’t you?”

Jay frowned. “I guess so. It is pretty late. I’ve been wondering about Xavier, too.” He looked down at his phone again. “No messages. But they’re together. Greyson, too.” He shrugged and slipped his phone back into his pocket. “Best-case scenario, they’re all sleeping off a great time.”

Something about Jay’s words chilled me. “What’s the worst-case scenario?”

Jay winced. He shook his head. “Let’s not think about that, Lola. They’re fine. They’re together. And we can’t start worrying about the things we can’t control.”

“Maybe,” I muttered, watching as the time changed from 11:04 to 11:05.

“I’ll start worrying if I don’t see them rolling back in in the next hour,” Jay said as a way to break the obvious tension. “Come on. Let’s focus on something else. Let’s start thinking about what you want to look up at the Obaltarion. Where are you going to start?”

“Right,” I said, wrenching my eyes away from the clock and looking back at Jay. “Right. Well, I do want to help Marta get ready for her case. I wasn’t bullshitting anyone about that.”

Jay smiled. “I know that. But when you’re done with that, what do you want to find out about hybrids?”

I shrugged and pulled the closet open to grab a spare pair of jeans. “Mainly I want to know if what’s happened to me has ever happened to anyone else before.” I shoved the jeans into my backpack and looked over at Jay. “Is there anyone else out there like me? Has there *ever* been?”

Jay looked at me steadily for a moment. Then he stepped forward and pulled me into a hug, pressing a gentle kiss to my cheek. “I don’t know anything about hybrids, Lola, but I do know there’s never been anyone like you before. Not ever. And that’s how I like it.”

I smiled up at him, feeling warmth flooding through my body, and reached up to kiss his lips. I could feel the urgency of my hybrid questions tickling the back of my brain, and I was so grateful that Jay was standing at my side.

Heat pumped through my veins as I deepened the kiss, tangling my tongue with Jay’s. My backpack fell from my arms as we stumbled toward the bed. We crashed onto it—a tangle of arms and legs—both of us trying to pull off our own clothes and each other’s at the same time. The vampire heat was always with me, but it flared up now, and I was suddenly desperate to feel Jay’s skin against mine.

As soon as my top hit the floor, Jay dropped his head, kissing his way down my neck and my chest to my breasts. I leaned back, hissing as he circled his tongue around one nipple, then the other, lavishing each with attention as his fingers fumbled with the button of my jeans.

Undone, he slipped his hand down and into my panties. I panted as his fingers circled inside me.

“Jay,” I breathed. “Oh, god, Jay.”

He looked up, smiling. “Yeah? You need something?”

“I need *this*,” I murmured. I caught him in a kiss and slid out of my jeans and panties. I pulled at his boxers and sent them sailing across the room. Then I straddled him, kissing him hard. His hands were firm on my hips, grinding me against him, and the pressure was making me crazy.

Finally, I broke free and plunged him inside me.

“Oh fuck!” I screamed, and dropped my head back as the sensation of Jay burned through my body.

His breathing started to hitch as he drove into me, his hands sliding around my hips to my ass, holding me firmly in place on top of him. “I love you,” he murmured, his eye closed. “I love you, Lola.”

“I love you, too—” I started, but the rising climax took my breath away. I dug my fingernails into his chest, holding on for dear life as my orgasm broke over me. “Yes! Yes! YES!”

Jay came seconds later, and together we rode it out, slick with sweat and clutching each other hard.

I rolled off him, breathless, and settled into the crook of his arm.

Jay leaned over, his eye already sleepy, and pressed a kiss to my temple. “Amazing,” he murmured drowsily.

I smiled at him, but as the endorphins began to ebb, reality along with a nagging doubt crept into my mind. I hoped that this trip would provide me with answers, but… what if I never found any? What was I going to do if there was nothing in the library about hybrids and I had to face the fact that maybe I was all alone?

**Episode 2080**

*Caliana will remain here with me.*

My ears began to ring so loudly with panic at Lucian’s words that I barely heard Greyson’s and Xavier’s reactions to the statement.

But I could see it. Xavier narrowed his eyes and bared his teeth, snarling at Lucian, and Greyson braced himself like he was about to leap over the desk and tear the guy’s throat out. His muscles were taut beneath his clothes, and his grey eyes looked like thunderstorms.

I thought of the guards stationed just outside the door—ready to burst in at any moment—and quickly got to my feet.

“Let’s hear what he has to say,” I said, trying to prevent an all-out brawl.

Xavier shot a look at me. “I’ve been listening to this bastard all night, Cali, and I’m fucking sick of it.”

“We’re not leaving without our mate,” Greyson growled.

Lucian smiled calmly, then he looked over at me. “I’m glad to see *you’re* at least being mature about this, Caliana.”

I had to stop myself from rolling my eyes. What was this guy up to? Why was he intentionally antagonizing my mates?

Lucian steepled his fingers beneath his chin as he looked calmly back to Xavier and Greyson. “You know, if I truly wanted to, I could keep you all confined here forever. You have violated my hospitality in an effort to leave my estate before the conclusion of last night’s festivities, broken free of my guards after you were placed in holding cells after very serious charges were leveled against you… Have I left anything else out? Tell me, what would you do in my place? You’d be suspicious of the intent of any wolf who behaved as such, correct?” His eyes glided over Xavier and Greyson, and then to Ava, who was still standing near the door. “As it is, I don’t feel too concerned about the Redwood pack despite what I feel about its Alphas. That does not mean I am not keenly aware you may decide to continue to behave impulsively and foolishly. I am being benevolent in allowing you to return to your pack. Caliana shall remain with me until I can be certain you have left my grounds in peace. Consider her an insurance policy of my continued goodwill.”

I flinched. It was hard to hear someone talk about me like a tradeable item.

“Of course,” Lucian continued smoothly, “she’ll be treated as an honored guest in my home.” He looked over at me with a smile. “You will have anything your heart desires, Caliana. Do not worry; your stay will not be overlong.”

I thought hard, doing some quick calculations in my head. Both of my mates and I had tried to escape this mansion multiple times over the last twelve hours, and Lucian had thwarted us every single time. We could try again, but why would the next time be different? Especially when he knew how we’d escaped before? And—to add to that—every time we tried to get out of this place, there was a danger that one—or both—of them could be hurt.

Taking a deep breath, I looked straight at Lucian. “I will agree to your terms. As long as my mates truly are allowed to go back to our pack.”

“My dear, unlike some others, my word is my absolute bond.” Lucian dipped his head gracefully.

Behind me, I felt Xavier and Greyson react to my words, and the tension in the air grew thick.

*Just trust me, please. This is the best way to lull Lucian into thinking he’s in control of this situation*, I mind linked to Greyson, then Xavier.

Greyson snorted. *Look around, Cali. He* is *in control.*

I gritted my teeth. *Maybe I can learn something by staying here. Maybe I can—*

I gasped as Lucian stepped to my side and reached for me, lightly touching my shoulder right where one of the false Luna marks had been.

He smiled as he met my eyes. “I’m so glad you are beginning to see things my way, Caliana.” His fingertips traced lightly down my skin. “We really do have so much to learn from each other.”

My hands itched to slap him, but I controlled myself. I couldn’t go around doing things like that, not if I was going to stay here with him. I could feel panic starting to rise in my chest, but I tried to fight it down. Maybe this would be good. Maybe I *could* discover something helpful about Lucian and the Vanguard pack. Something we might not otherwise know.

I looked over at Xavier and Greyson. “I’m going to be fine,” I said, wishing I believed it.

“Of course she is,” Lucian said jovially. “I would never harm a hair on the head of such a beautiful and intriguing woman.”

Xavier’s eyes flashed, and his expression was so menacing, it was clear he wanted nothing more than to rip Lucian apart, but Greyson stepped forward, angling himself in front of Xavier.

“If we agree to this, and it’s a very big *if*,” Greyson said loudly, his voice just barely containing the growl of his wolf, “I would have a few conditions.”

I looked quickly between Lucian and Greyson, eyeing each of their wary expressions.

“We have to be able to reach Cali on the phone whenever we want. If she doesn’t answer right away, we’ll have to assume she’s in danger, and we’ll respond accordingly.”

Lucian considered this for a split second, then waved an airy hand. “Of course, of course. You gentlemen can’t seem to get it through your thick heads—I have no ill intentions toward the lovely Caliana. None at all.” He turned to look at me. “In fact, there is something I’d like to discuss with her.”

I stared at him, shaken. What did that mean? What did he want to talk to me about? Was it something related to the *due destini*?

“Absolutely not,” Xavier growled. “To any of it. There is no way Cali’s going to be staying here alone.”

“We could always consider this an act of war against the pack,” Greyson said, backing him up.

“And that would be a very foolish thought on both your parts considering I am the injured party in this unfortunate situation we now find ourselves in. I would like to work toward a more amicable solution. I said before, I bear no ill will toward your pack as a whole, but surely you must realize the delicate situation I find myself in now? Or shall I call for my guards outside?”

I looked at both of my mates—tall and strong and furious. They were ready to go down fighting for me. My throat tightened, and tears pricked at the corners of my eyes. I could always count on them. They were always going to look out for me. And—truthfully—it wasn’t that I *wanted* to stay here with Lucian, but there was this insanely curious part of my brain that just kept nagging at me. I felt like if I stuck around, I might be able to find out some things that could come in handy.

I just hoped I wasn’t getting in over my head.

“Go,” I said, looking at Greyson and Xavier. “Go home. I’m fine. This is just… diplomacy.”

Lucian smiled smoothly. “It will only be for a day… or so.”

*Or so?* What the hell did that mean? More than a day?

Xavier stepped toward me, his eyes alive with anger. “There’s no way you’re staying here with him, Cali.”

“I have to agree with Xavier here,” Greyson said, moving to stand next to Xavier. “Cali isn’t staying for *days*. You’ll know we’ve left in peace far sooner than that.”

I understood why they were upset, and I couldn’t disagree with their reasoning—it *was* going to be dangerous—but I held firm. I just couldn’t stop thinking that maybe Lucian knew more than he was letting on about *due destini*, though I didn’t bring that up to my mates. I needed to prove something here—that I could be a Luna, and that I could do this myself.

I took a deep, steadying breath and felt fresh determination wash over me. “I’m going to be fine. You need to trust me, okay?” I looked between them. “You do trust me, don’t you?”

Grey eyes and blue eyes flashed at me, angry and dangerous, and my heart beat hard. I’d put both my mates in a difficult position—and maybe made both of them angry.

“An Alpha always trusts his Luna,” Lucian said softly, his voice a little teasing. He snapped his fingers.

Before anyone could say anything more—or even react—the door burst open and the guards reappeared. They materialized beside Greyson, Xavier, and Ava. Their fluid movements made me keenly aware of Lucian’s earlier thinly veiled threat. They could have descended on them any time if the conversation had gone south. Xavier and Greyson would have held their own, but I’d seen just how many wolves Lucian had at his command. I’d do anything to prevent my mates from getting hurt. Anything.

“Please escort these guests out,” Lucian said. He smiled. “The party is over.”

Greyson and Xavier struggled as the guards shoved them out the door.

“Cali, don’t do this!” Xavier called out. “Cali, stop!”

“It’s too dangerous!” Greyson growled. “Cali, think, please!”

“You have to trust that I’m doing this for you,” I called after them as they disappeared out the door. “I know what I’m doing!”

I wished that were true. But I couldn’t let on how scared I actually felt. I had to be strong and show them how unafraid I was.

I followed after them, watching as the guards hustled them through the main hall and out the front door, the two of them resisting the whole way. I could tell they wanted to shift and fight, but then they’d end up back in a cell. Again. I watched from the grand entrance as Greyson, Xavier, and Ava were shoved into a waiting limo. One of the guards slammed the door after them and slapped the roof of the car. The limo tore off, spraying gravel as it sped away.

I stared after the limo until it disappeared from view, and even then, I stayed standing in the doorway, staring into the empty distance.

What the *hell* had I just done? I hoped it was the right call.

Panic seized me. I was alone. I was friendless. And I already missed my mates so much, it felt like they’d left holes in my soul.

Had I just made a horrible—potentially fatal—mistake?

I felt someone step close behind me, and Lucian’s voice snaked around me like smoke. “Caliana. It’s so nice to have you all to myself at last.”

**Episode 2081**

GREYSON

The limo sped down the driveway at a breakneck speed. Even so, I tried the doors, but they were locked. I turned and watched Cali through the back window. She was standing in the wide, grand doorway of the Vanguard mansion, staring after us, and she grew smaller and smaller as we drove away.

*I’ll be back soon, love, you know it. Don’t be afraid.*

But there was no response. I must’ve been too far away. The distance between us was just too great for the mind link to work.

I sighed as I turned around, glancing at the interior of the limousine. The seats were a creamy white leather, and all along one side of the car was an extensive bar setup, with a small refrigerator and shining crystal glassware. The floor was richly carpeted in the same creamy white, and the whole thing was spotlessly clean. The Vanguards sure liked to throw their money around.

As I looked around, my gaze came to rest on Ava, who smiled at me.

“Well,” she started brightly, “that went well.”

“Shut up,” I muttered, looking out a deeply tinted window.

“No, seriously, it went great,” Ava pressed. “We got out, everyone is alive, and Cali will be totally fine.”

“How can you possibly know that?” Xavier snapped. “That Vanguard mansion isn’t exactly a safe haven.”

Ava smiled at him. “That girl has managed to get out of far worse situations, and you know it. You worry too much, Xavier. You should focus on the positives.”

“Like what?” he shot back.

“Um, like we’re not imprisoned anymore?” She laughed. “I’d say that’s pretty positive.”

I watched Ava and Xavier go back and forth. She leaned toward him, looking happy and relaxed. She looked far too pleased about Cali being left behind. This was what she’d wanted, from the moment she’d gotten Xavier and me out of our cells—a feat even I had to admit we owed her for. But still, I was going to have to talk to Xavier about her, and soon.

Leaning back in my seat, I tried not to keep letting my mind drift back to Cali, alone with that freaky wolf prince. We hadn’t had much of a choice in leaving her behind—it was either agree to the insurance policy, or fight our way out of the estate… and we had seen how well the latter had worked already. Still, I ran a hand down my face. The rage in me demanded I do more.

And I would.

I flexed my fingers and breathed out, trying to slow the rapid pace of my heart. At the very least, maybe having something to focus on would help me not lose my mind, thinking about Cali every second we were apart. Everything in my soul was telling me that I should *never* abandon my mate the way I had. I felt like I was going to crawl out of my skin, leaving her behind at that place—but Cali’s words came back to me in full force. *Trust me*. How many times had she asked either me or Xavier to do that? That she was strong and capable enough to handle herself? And how many times had we both swooped in before allowing her to fully prove it despite her repeated insistences?

Even if I didn’t like what she was doing, I knew her. I knew she was strong. And I did trust her. And she must have had some kind of reason. I had to hold on to that.

But the thought of leaving her in Lucian’s clutches made my blood boil, and when I looked down, I saw that my hands were clenched into tight fists again.

I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself down so my head didn’t explode. One thing was for certain—if Lucian thought even for a second that he was done with the Redwoods, he was a damn fool.

“So,” Xavier said, looking over at me, “what’s the plan to get Cali out of that place?”

We did need a plan, but I shook my head. “Not now.” I tipped my chin toward the Vanguard driver in the front seat.

Xavier scowled and leaned back, crossing his arms over his chest.

We rode the rest of the way in tense silence, though halfway there I spied a bottle of forty-year-old Irish whiskey in the bar. I could see Xavier had as well. He grabbed it without another word.

“What?” he said at the look I shot him. “I can’t steal one little thing from that prick?”

Hard to argue with that.

The driver turned up the road, and the pack house came into view. It had never looked better. I was so eager to get out of the damn car and back with the others. The faster we gave off the illusion of being good wolves, the faster we could come up with a plan to get Cali back.

“Thanks a lot,” Ava called to the driver, waving.

I looked up at the porch, where Rishika was coming down the steps.

“I heard a car coming and figured it must be you. Where the hell have you all been?” she asked. “A lot of stuff happened that the Alphas should’ve been involved in, instead of partying all night,” she added, eyeing the bottle of booze in Xavier’s hand. “And all day.”

“It wasn’t exactly a fun time, okay?” I snapped. I forced myself to take a breath. “I want to hear about everything that happened, but we’ve got some news, too.”

Artemis stepped out of the house and looked down at us. “Where’s Cali?”

I shook my head. “We’ll explain everything when we get everyone together. I don’t want to have to do this more than once.”

“Do what?” Artemis demanded as we walked up the porch steps. “Where is she? Greyson? Xavier? Is Cali coming home?”

“Yes, Alphas. Do enlighten the rest of the pack,” Ava said, clearly getting way too much enjoyment from this.

Artemis kept asking questions, but the moment I stepped across the threshold, I stopped hearing her. The moment I entered the pack house, I felt like I could finally breathe again. The magic of the place was there to greet me. This was my home—where my pack lived—and this was where I was going to come up with a plan to get Cali home safe. I hadn’t realized until that moment how much I hated the Vanguard mansion. I hated it because it was where I’d been chained and jailed and threatened, but I probably would’ve hated it even if that shit hadn’t happened. I would’ve hated it because it was another Alpha’s home. Not mine.

“Greyson.” Artemis stepped up next to me and glared. “Where is Cali?”

I took a deep breath, then looked over at her. “If you want to know what happened, then call everyone together in the living room,” I glanced over at Xavier and saw him give a nod of agreement. “It’s time for a meeting.”

It didn’t take long for everyone to gather, and the mood in the living room was tense and wary as the last few people found seats on the floor. My mother sat next to Big Mac on the couch, looking nervous, and even Torin—perched on the arm of a wing chair—was looking around anxiously.

“Is this meeting going to take long?” he asked quietly. “I was planning a buffet lunch, and I still have some things to get done—”

“Quiet down, everyone,” I growled. I scrubbed a hand across my eyes and looked out at the sea of faces turned up to mine. “There’s a lot to go over, so pay attention. I don’t want to have to repeat myself. The first bit of news is that we’ve seen for ourselves that the Vanguard pack are total bastards. They’re liars and not to be trusted. Secondly, the Alpha’s sister, Aysel, is making up some crazy shit about her and me. It’s all to stir up trouble. Whatever you hear, don’t believe a word of it. And, lastly, the pack seems to worship a moon goddess. We should probably find out what the hell’s going on with that.”

My announcement was met with a stunned silence, which I guess wasn’t all that surprising. I didn’t think anyone had been expecting this kind of report.

“Big Mac,” I said, turning to the witch. “Can I get you to start researching this moon goddess, Seluna? They seem really into her, and the more we know about her, the better.”

“But what about Cali?” Lola asked suddenly. “Like, where is she?”

“Greyson and I are going to be checking in with Cali regularly, making sure she’s okay—” Xavier started.

“But where *is* she?” Tom asked, actually looking fed up for once in his life.

“There’s been no word from her, and you gentlemen are not offering any kind of answers,” Orla said. “If you know something about my daughter, you need to start talking. Now.”

And to finish the family trifecta, Artemis stood, sizing me up. “Well, Greyson? Where the hell is Cali?”

I could feel a muscle twitch in my jaw. “She’s still with the Vanguard pack, but we’re going to go get her. As soon as possible.”

Artemis jumped to her feet, her face flushed with fury. “Are you kidding me?” She glanced back and forth between Xavier and me.

Tom got up. “You *left* her there? *Alone?*”

“This is bullshit!” Artemis continued.

“I can’t *believe* you left her behind—” Orla started.

“If any of you think for one second that I *wanted* to leave her, you’re a damn fool. Now stop screaming at us. We need to make a plan.” I looked over at Xavier. “Now.”

Xavier nodded. “What did you have in mind?”

I thought for a moment, going over what I could piece together of the Vanguard mansion floor plan in my head.

“We’ve been inside. We know how many guards there are. We can figure this out.” I felt a jolt of fear as I thought about Cali with Lucian. “We *have* to figure this out.”

“Are you serious?” Ava groaned. “We only just got out of there with our skin still attached, and now you want to charge headlong back in?”

Xavier nodded. He eyed the pack, who were all still listening closely to us, then gestured toward the door. “Lucian thinks we left with our tails between our legs. We’ll show him that he only gave us time to regroup.”

We turned to step away, but I stopped when I felt a hand on my shoulder. When I turned, Artemis was behind us. She was glowering up at us. “Cali’s my sister. If you two are going to get her, I’m coming too.”

**Episode 2082**

VIOLET

I watched Greyson and Xavier, who were both staring incredulously at Artemis. Artemis appeared bound and determined, while Ava seemed rather annoyed about the whole thing. The whole pack was watching them. No one said a word, but the air seemed to hum with tension.

These last few days had been hard enough with all the threats of violence. I’d tried to find a moment’s peace with my mate in that hot bath, but now here I was again. Things were hard enough without pack members being kidnapped too. I felt for Cali. Sure, my situation was different, but we were both getting the short end of the stick recently, so I could relate.

But I had to worry about not getting killed right now. I couldn’t be of much help to Xavier or the others.

I shot a glance over at Charlie, who raised his eyebrows. He reached for my hand and gave it a squeeze.

“I’d never leave you behind, Violet,” he said quietly.

I smiled. “I’d never let it get that far, Charlie.”

He chuckled, but we both looked up as Greyson started talking again.

Greyson looked tired and grim, but determined, as he spoke to Artemis. “Okay, listen up. We’re going to take a small unit back to the Vanguard property to get Cali out. But we have to act methodically. We’re not going to get a lot of chances at this, and the one thing we can’t afford is to do something rash and unplanned.”

“I’m not going to do anything unplanned,” Artemis snapped, glowering at Greyson. “I’m very much planning on kicking every ass that I see.”

Greyson looked over at her. “I know how you’re feeling, Artemis, and can’t say I don’t agree. I want to storm that castle, too. But we have to be smart about this. You have to trust me on this—there’s a lot going on in that place that we don’t understand yet.”

Artemis looked frustrated. “Listen, Greyson, if you don’t like the way I’m planning on doing things, then you can just stay out of my way—”

“No,” Greyson shot back. “Now listen, Artemis. I know you’re worried, but this is what it means to be a pack—we work together, and we trust each other. Okay?”

“He’s right,” Xavier grunted, “And you know how serious it is when I say that. If we’re going to do this, you’ll be doing it based on our play, got it?”

He stared at her until she gave a single short nod.

“Okay,” she said, her voice tight.

“Okay,” Greyson repeated. He looked around at the rest of the pack, looking very much in control, looking very much the Alpha. “Now, I heard there was some excitement around here, too. What happened? Rishika?”

Rishika stood from her place on the couch. “Well, the biggest thing that happened here is that someone tried to murder Violet.”

The room got very quiet, and all eyes turned to me.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Xavier demanded. It was hard enough to tell one Alpha we had problems, but two? That just made me doubly nervous, even though it wasn’t like it was my fault!

Rishika shrugged. “Exactly what I said.”

Xavier turned to me, his eyes flashing dangeriously. “Violet? What happened? Who would want to murder you?”

I could feel the eyes of the pack on me, and I shifted uncomfortably next to Charlie. “I don’t know, but it wasn’t their first try.”

“Wait. What does *that* mean?” Xavier asked.

“What happened here was the second attempt on my life,” I explained.

“The *second* attempt?” Greyson snapped, looking horrified. “What the hell—”

I put my hands up and tried to explain. “It all happened really fast, and you two have been dealing with the Vanguard thing, so Charlie and I have just been trying to handle this ourselves—”

“No way!”

Both Xavier and Greyson spoke at once, and—shocked at their moment of total agreement—everyone in the pack turned to stare at them.

Xavier shot an annoyed glance at Greyson, then took a step toward me. “Listen to me, Violet. You are part of this pack, and no pack member ever has to deal with something like this alone. Okay?” He looked around, speaking to the group. “From this moment on, the issue of who the hell is trying to kill Violet is a pack matter.”

Greyson ran a hand through his hair. “So this means we’ve got another threat to handle. It’s starting to feel like someone’s trying to pick off the Redwoods one by one.” He sighed and looked over at me. “Okay, tell us what happened. With *both* murder attempts.”

I looked over at Charlie, who nodded encouragingly, then back at the Alphas. “The first attempt didn’t happen here. I got this message that I needed to go to a location—alone—or Charlie would be in danger. So I went—”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Xavier muttered, shaking his head.   
 “And I followed,” Charlie said quickly, earning a grim nod of approval from Xavier.

“And we were locked inside this old movie theater in town. There was someone there—”

“Who?” Greyson asked.

I shook my head. “I don’t know. We didn’t get a chance to see who it was. We were trying, but then the chandelier fell and started a fire. We barely got out.”

Xavier passed a hand over his eyes. “Insane,” he said quietly.

“And what happened here?” Greyson asked.

“She was skating on the pond,” Rishika spoke up, “and she fell through the ice.”

Greyson frowned. “Could that have been an accident?”

She shook her head. “We’ve got evidence that the ice had been tampered with. It was intentional. And there was someone in the trees. Artemis and I chased after them, of course,” she said, heading off Xavier’s question as he opened his mouth to ask it, “but whoever—or *whatever*—it was had too much of a head start. We couldn’t catch up.”

“This is just *great*,” Greyson said, a muscle twitching in his jaw.

“I’ve ordered an increase in boundary patrols so no one else can sneak onto Redwood land,” Rishika said.

“Good thinking,” Xavier said, nodding.

“And I should probably mention that my mom’s coming to help,” Charlie added. Everyone looked at him, surprised. “I called her,” he said with a shrug. “She’s a hunter, and she’s going to get to the bottom of this. She should be here later today.”

“A *hunter*? In our pack house?” Xavier snapped.

“She won’t hurt anyone here, you have my word,” Charlie said.

“I want her monitored at all times,” Xavier replied. To which Charlie nodded immediately.

“Violet and I will be with her.”

I wasn’t sure how much I liked being volunteered for hunter-watch duties, but I wasn’t about to argue at the look in both Xavier’s and Greyson’s eyes.

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When the pack meeting had wrapped up, Greyson had asked me to compile all the information I had about the two attempts on my life—texts, locations, everything I could find. But for the moment, I settled back on the couch. It was just Lilac, Rishika, Charlie, and me in the living room, and I was feeling warmed from my bath and from Charlie’s nearness. But inside, I was still chilled when I thought back to the old movie theater and my plunge below the ice. I still couldn’t work out *why* someone was targeting me. What had *I* ever done to anyone?

Rishika looked around. “I’m glad you’re all here. I wanted to tell you what happened after Charlie got Violet out of the pond, but I haven’t had the chance yet.”

I leaned forward, my heart beating hard. “What happened?”

“I followed the figure into the woods, but they were already really far ahead. I wasn’t even able to scent them, which is really strange.”

“Strange how?” Charlie asked.

Rishika gave him a long look. “It means that whoever it was came well prepared for what they were going to do and had a method to avoid being tracked afterward.” She let that information settle for a moment, then leaned forward. “And there’s more.”

“What?” I asked, swallowing nervously.

“After I lost the trail, I went back to the pond and took a good look at that ice. You were right, Violet. Someone *had* messed with it. It was really obvious, even without looking that closely. Someone had cut it away. Anyone standing on that patch would have fallen through.”

“I knew it,” I said grimly. “The rest of that ice was way too thick.”

“Yeah, but there’s a problem,” Rishika said. “How did they know you’d be there?”

I frowned. “I don’t know what you mean.”

But Charlie was nodding, apparently understanding. “With the first attempt, you were responding to that text. This morning, we just happened to go to the pond. There was no way for the killer to have known what we were planning, and no way they could’ve prepared the ice ahead of time. There was no way anyone could have known you’d be joining the hockey game.”

I looked between Charlie and Rishika, realization slowly dawning on me. “That means whoever it was had to have been watching us.”

“Watching *you*,” Rishika corrected. “Knowing exactly what you were doing, and when.” She raised her eyebrows. “It means whoever it was could be watching you right now, Violet.”

I shivered and I wrapped my arms around myself, hugging tight. The thought that someone was watching me was bone-chilling, and suddenly I felt as cold as I had been when Charlie had pulled me out of the icy pond. It was bad enough imagining someone watching me from afar, but then another terrible thought occurred to me.

For someone to know exactly where I was and what I was doing… That had to mean they were watching me constantly.

Was it possible that whoever was doing this was a pack member?

**Episode 2083**

I flopped back onto the large bed. It was—without a doubt—the fanciest bedroom I’d ever seen, never mind stayed in. The four-poster bed occupied the center of the room and was covered with silk sheets and a fluffy, snowy-white duvet. The curtains at the windows were a pale blue silk, and the blue wallpaper was embossed with a delicate silver pattern. The place was fit for a princess, but I was miserable.

It was the same bedroom—well, bedroom *suite*, because it had a small sitting room off the bedroom, and a huge bathroom—I’d been given the night before, and luckily the door locked from the inside. Though, even as I’d locked it, I’d had the strange feeling that if it came down to it, a locked door wouldn’t make that much of a difference. Not with Lucian walking around the place. That guy was like an Alpha 2.0. Every guard and pack member in the place jumped whenever he spoke, and I’d seen for myself how fast they responded to his orders. The moment the limo carrying Xavier and Greyson had disappeared from view, he’d pulled me inside and demanded the mansion be shut up like a fortress.

*Or else.*

That was what he’d said. *Or else.*

At the time, he’d told me it was for my protection, but I knew that was bullshit. I hadn’t believed him then, and I didn’t believe him now.

I stepped off the bed and walked across the white carpet to look out the huge windows. I pressed my nose against the glass, trying to determine exactly how far down the ground was. It was *far*. I hadn’t realized how high up I was, but the ground was a dizzying distance below me. So, I looked to the sides of the window, trying to see if there was anything I could climb down. No luck. It just didn’t seem like I had a lot of options, and my Fae magic wasn’t exactly useful in this kind of situation.

I leaned against the window and stared out at the sky, though I wasn’t really seeing anything. Now that I had time to think about it, I was surprised that Lucian hadn’t asked me about my Fae magic yet considering he’d watched me blast one of his elite guards with it.

Maybe he was waiting for the right time. That man did have a flair for the dramatics. I might have even found that amusing if I wasn’t stuck here as his prisoner—well *guest* by his own standards, but I knew what being held hostage felt like.

The thought made me shudder. I didn’t want Lucian to know anything more about me. It was bad enough that he knew I was a *due destini* mate. If he found out I was Fae, he’d probably have me locked up in some secret Vanguard lab for testing.

As I stared out of the window, feeling hopeless, my phone buzzed. My heart fluttered when I saw that it was a message from Xavier.

*We made it back to the pack house, and we’re already working on how to get you back home. Be strong, okay? I’m just a phone call away when you need me.*

I smiled down at my phone. Seeing his name on the screen made me feel better, and it felt good to know that the whole pack was aware of the situation.

But my smile disappeared when there was a knock on the door. I whipped around, my heart pounding. What the hell was it now?

There was another knock, still soft, but slightly more insistent. For a moment, I considered ignoring it completely, but I figured that whoever was on the other side probably wouldn’t let that fly, so I strode over and opened the door.

Lucian was standing in the hallway, and when I opened the door, he strode inside without waiting to be invited.

“Hello, Caliana.” He looked around. “I do hope you’ll be comfortable here. It’s our finest set of rooms, you know. Other than my own suite, of course.”

I rolled my eyes. “Of course.”

Lucian had left the door open, so I moved to shut it. Before I did, I peeked into the hall to see if the guards were still stationed outside the door.

They were.

Lucian seemed very at ease in the room. He wandered over to the closet—now devoid of the guards Ava and I had stashed earlier—and pulled open the doors, looking idly at the clothes hanging inside. They weren’t mine. I hadn’t even realized they were there.

He pulled out a long red dress—more of a gown, really. Long and slinky, made from velvet. He looked at it for a moment, then crossed the room and tossed it across the bed.

“What’s that for?” I asked, eyeing the dress.

“That’s what you’ll wear to dinner tonight,” he said casually.

I bristled immediately. “I am an *adult*, and I can choose what I wear, thank you very much.”

Lucian smiled at me, but there was something satisfied about it, and it made it feel as though he’d just won a point in our little game.

I’d meant to sound independent, but my words had come out sounding indignant, and maybe a little petulant.

Whatever. I didn’t want to debate dresses, so I turned to face him. “Why am I really here?”

“Pardon?” he asked politely.

“If your purpose was really to find out what happened between Aysel and Greyson, you would have wanted Greyson to stay, since he’s the one most directly connected to what happened. Or *didn’t* happen,” I added sourly.

Lucian sat down on the bed and leaned back on one arm. “You need to try to see things from my perspective, Caliana.”

“What does that mean?”

He sighed. “Yes, I want to get to the truth of the matter, but even you have to admit that the Redwood Alphas have shown a distressing tendency to disobey polite requests to stay put.” He ignored my eye roll. “I would rather not conduct my inquiry while also dealing with two testosterone-charged werewolf pups running around my house.”

“So what am *I* doing here?” I demanded.

“I felt the best way to ensure their compliance would be to hold something they wanted.” He gave a small shrug. “You.”

“I think you’re underestimating what lengths they’d go to to get me back,” I muttered, shaking my head.

“They are welcome to try and break the terms of the truce, and on their heads be it.” The threat was said so congenially I almost missed it. “I’m simply being practical,” he said. Then he smiled. “Though it is a pleasure to have you here. I didn’t get much of a chance to speak to you last night at dinner. I’m looking forward to a much more… *intimate* experience tonight at dinner. I have so many questions for you.”

“What kind of questions?” I asked cautiously.

“Well, clearly you have a very unique background. And a very special future.”

I gritted my teeth. “You know, I’m not all that interested in making polite chit-chat. You should focus on getting this business with your sister sorted out as soon as possible so I can get out of here.”

Lucian sighed and looked up at the high ceiling. “Yes, Aysel can be a handful. This isn’t the first time she’s made life difficult for me.”

I stepped forward, suddenly interested. “Does that mean she’s claimed to have a bond of Seluna with *other* men who already have mates? This has happened before, with other Alphas?”

Lucian raised an eyebrow. “No. Greyson is the only one.”

This was not what I wanted to hear.

“Aysel has… urges,” Lucian explained. “And she doesn’t like to be told that she can’t have something she wants.”

“Oh, like my mate?” I asked waspishly. “She was practically throwing herself at him last night.”

“Yes, well…” Lucian shrugged airily. But then his expression darkened. “I don’t like the idea that she hasn’t been honest with me, however.”

I looked at him, wondering if he’d just revealed his weakness. “Is that something she does a lot? Ignore you? Lie to you?”

Lucian looked up at me, and there was a flash of anger in his eyes that made me take a wary step back. My heart fluttered in my chest, and I got the distinct impression that—however smoothly he spoke to me—Lucian could be very dangerous indeed when he was provoked.

He got to his feet. “*Anyone* who disobeys my orders will learn to not do so again in a hurry. And the same goes for anyone who lies to me.” I had the uncomfortable sensation he was including me in that, given my own deception with the Luna marks. “And that includes my own flesh and blood. Don’t you worry, Caliana. I will discover what happened between Aysel and Greyson last night.”

I marshalled my courage. “And what if it takes you more than a day or two to come up with an answer and you have to send me back?” Panic started to rise in my chest. “Or what if you don’t like the answer you get?”

Lucian moved toward me with astonishing speed, and when he spoke, his voice was low and controlled, but it still sent shivers down my spine. “Oh, I don’t think you want to find that out, Caliana.”

**Episode 2084**

XAVIER

I’d been moving through the pack house, trying to deal with all the loose threads that were popping up—helping Rishika plan out border patrols, making sure we had eyes on the woods, double checking that the pack house’s doors and windows were all secured—but it was hard to concentrate. I couldn’t stop thinking about Cali. I couldn’t even go a minute without wondering what she was doing at that moment, if she was okay. I hated the separation and the feeling that I couldn’t protect her if she was scared or in trouble. And I knew the only way to get rid of my worries was to get her back home.

But until that happened, there were other problems pressing for my attention here at the house.

I walked into the living room where Big Mac, Kira, Marta, and Lilac were all standing and talking with Lola and Jay. Lola was sitting on the couch, looking pale and shaken. She had been beside herself since she’d heard about Cali.

She looked up at me as I walked into the room. “Hey, there you are. I’ve been thinking, and I don’t think I should go to the Obaltarion after all. Maybe I should stay here, try to help out. I feel like I have to do something.”

I rubbed my forehead just above my eyes, where a headache was starting to form. I should have anticipated Lola wanting to stay while Cali’s safety was on the line, but a rescue mission might be easier without her breathing down my neck. “No, you should go. And when you get there, there’s something I want you to look up for me. I want to know everything there is to know about this moon goddess, Seluna.”

“Seluna?” Lola asked. “I’ve never heard of her before today.”

I nodded. “Yeah, me neither. But like Greyson mentioned, the Vanguards are obsessed with her. They’re worshipping her over there, and I want to know why. We need to learn as much as we can.”

“So it’s okay if we go?” Marta asked. “Because Lilac made a really big deal about getting the Alphas’ permission.”

Lilac looked at me, nodding gravely.

“Look, there’s so much shit going on,” I said. “My focus needs to be on Cali.”

“But we really need—” Marta started and cut herself off.

Jay nodded. “I get it, man. You never know what’s going to happen with a threat like the Vanguards. They’re an unknown quantity at this point, and if you want the pack at full strength until the threat is over, count me in.”

I nodded, grateful that Jay was so loyal. “Appreciate it, man,” I said. “Luckily, I don’t think we’re about to head into a war, but the one thing we know for sure about the Vanguard pack is that they can’t be trusted.”

“So we *can* go?” Lilac asked.

“Only if you stop asking me.”

Marta turned to Lilac and started whispering. Big Mac leaned in, listening hard.

I turned and walked out of the room—I needed a moment to myself. It had been nonstop for me for hours, ever since we’d left the Vanguard mansion.

Actually, it had been nonstop insanity from the moment we’d walked into that place.

Up in my room, I shut the door and looked down at my phone. I’d texted Cali, and she’d just replied.

*I’m doing fine, but I wish I was home. I miss you.*

I smiled down at the screen. It was good to know she was missing me as much as I was missing her. I leaned against the door and looked at her words, thinking about how much I wanted her home. I could feel my chest pulsing with a dull kind of ache as I thought of her.

I guess I’d never expected heartache to involve literal pain… Suddenly, I stood up straight, alarmed. It wasn’t heartbreak that was causing the pain—it was the black veins on my chest.

Stepping in front of the mirror, I pulled off my shirt to take a look at what was going on.

What I saw in my reflection did not fill me with confidence.

The veins had grown way more prominent—they were black as tar and swirled in an angry pattern across my chest and shoulders. And the pain emanating from them was a constant throb.

Yanking my shirt back over my head, I charged down the stairs. “Big Mac! Big Mac? Where are you?”

She stepped out of the living room, looking irritated. “Who’s yelling? What the hell’s the matter now?”

“Would you get in here?” I snapped, tipping my chin toward the small office off the living room.

“What?” she demanded again as she followed me in.

I yanked off my shirt. “Look at these!”

She looked at my chest, unimpressed. “Yeah, you’ve still got ‘em. So?”

I ground my teeth. “They’ve gotten worse. Just now. Like, in a matter of minutes. And I’m in pain. Is it possible that Lucian is doing something to Cali that’s causing this to happen?”

“Like what?” Big Mac asked.

“I don’t know. Something that’s forcing her to choose, or affecting the *due destini* curse in some way?”

“All right, calm down, Xavier,” Big Mac said, putting up her hands to stop me. “Whatever’s happening, it’s probably got nothing to do with the Vanguard pack, or even with the fact that Cali’s in danger.” She shrugged. “Sort of.”

“What the hell does that mean?” I demanded.

She sighed. “The thing you have to understand is that the magic of the *due destini* curse is ancient, and it’s very powerful. It’s highly unlikely that this Lucian character can do anything to affect it.”

“So what’s causing this, then?” I asked, pointing to the blackened veins swirling across my chest.

She looked at me for a moment. “Stress?”

“What?”

She shrugged. “Think about it. It’s possible you’re so worked up about the situation with Cali that the veins are just reacting to all the stress in your system.” Her eyes scanned my chest. “They’ll probably fade again, like always. I’ve got a potion, if you need it.”

“You do?” I asked, surprised.

“Yeah, it’s called Advil, and you can get it at the pharmacy in town,” she said tartly.

“I don’t need a painkiller,” I growled, “I need an answer.”

“Well you’re not the only one,” Greyson said, striding into the office. He glanced over at the witch. “Excuse me, Big Mac, but my brother and I need to have a little chat.”

I stared at Greyson. I didn’t like his tone—hell, I *never* liked his tone—but I pulled my shirt on as he led the way out of the office. He headed toward the stairs, away from the rest of the pack, clearly in search of some privacy.

“Hey, how are the veins on your chest?” I asked.

If he was surprised by my question, he let it slide. “They haven’t gotten worse since the last time, but they haven’t improved, either. Why?”

“Nothing, mine are the same as well,” I said gruffly. Maybe it was a mistake to bring this up.

“Okayyyy,” Greyson said into the awkward silence. “Look, can I talk to you about Ava?”

I groaned. “Why? What’s she done now?”

He gestured for me to follow him into his bedroom. Man, it must be serious if we were going for some added secrecy. Greyson shut the door behind him before turning back to me. He narrowed his eyes. “I saw the way she was looking at you in the limo this morning.”

“How was she looking at me?”

“Like she’s still obsessed with you. Did you do anything last night to encourage that?”

“What?” I snapped, furious. “No. Of course not. It was *Ava* who kissed *me* last night—”

I stopped, seeing Greyson’s shocked face.

Shit, maybe I’d said too much.

“Okay, listen,” I said quickly. “Through no fault of my own, I found myself in a… situation with Ava last night. I was pretty drunk—really drunk, actually—and she basically took advantage of me not being quick enough to get out of the room before she threw herself at me.” I ran a hand through my hair, thinking back on the night. “I think she was drunk, too. It was really strong wine. What the hell was up with that place? Everything about it was weird.”

“Wine?” Greyson asked. “I only had champagne, and it felt like I was down for the count. That’s how Aysel was able to get so close to me. I can’t remember the last time I felt so out of it.”

I stared at him as a realization dawned on me. “Hang on. You had champagne, I had wine… We drank different things, but they had the same effect. And it’s not like we’re a couple of lightweights, either. I can hold my liquor—”

“So can I,” Greyson added.

“But last night, it was like I was sixteen and weighed a hundred pounds.”

“Me too,” Greyson muttered, catching on.  
 I shook my head. “Whatever happened, it sure as hell wasn’t natural.”

The light in Greyson’s eyes went from curious to enraged in a matter of seconds. I could guess what had set him off. I could feel my own heart picking up speed. “If they drugged us, then they could be drugging Cali right now. We have to get to her, Xavier. Now.”

**Episode 2085**

GREYSON

It took everything I had in me to control my rage and not fly off the handle. I knew there was something weird going on last night. And that wasn’t even including all the stuff about moon goddesses and creepy wolf princesses trying to trap me into becoming their mate. All the Alphas were acting even wilder than usual, doing things they normally wouldn’t—at least so openly. It was obvious we’d been drugged. Probably to have everyone get their inhibitions low enough for who knows what purpose.

I looked at Xavier, who I could tell was equally angry. “I think it’s clear what kind of pack these Vanguards are,” he growled. “There’s nothing to stop Lucian from doing something to Cali right now. He could have her drink something, or eat something, and she’ll have no idea. She’s alone there now, with no one she can trust, and it’s all our fault.” He was getting angrier with every word. “We both fucked up. And we need to fix it.”

“We’re on the same page about that,” I said, nodding. “But there’s no way to know who exactly was behind it. It could have been Lucian, but it also could have been one of Aysel’s tricks. They’re both loose cannons.”

“You’re right about that.”

I blew out a breath. “The bottom line is that we need to get Cali out of there, and we need to do it quickly.”

This seemed to satisfy Xavier. “Now that we know you’re not dead, maybe Artemis and I take the south flank, and you go north around the perimeter.”

I nodded. “That works for me.”

We were doing enough standing around talking about it. I wanted to act. If Lucian was doing something to her, he was going to pay in blood. We never should have left Cali there, at her insistence or not. I was her mate. It was my duty to be there for her and to protect her.

*Hell of a job you’re doing, Greyson.*

“Let’s do this,” I said. “Go in, get out. Don’t stop for anything. Nothing else matters but getting Cali out of there.”

“You got that right.”

Xavier and I nodded at each other. Then, just as we were about to go our separate ways, he hesitated. “Be careful, yeah? We can’t risk another fuck-up, not now.”

What was this? Concern? From Xavier?

“I always am, brother,” I said with a nod. “Anything for Cali.”

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We found Artemis downstairs and pulled her into a small sitting room by the front door.

“We need to talk through going to the Vanguard estate,” I said, shutting the door behind us.

Artemis looked at me seriously and crossed her arms. “What’s the plan?”

“I’m going to go over now,” I started. “Scout things out.”

“The plan is to get in and get out as quickly as possible,” Xavier said. “We get Cali and get the hell back here, and we do our best not to alert anyone.”

Artemis looked between us. “Are you sure we shouldn’t just go together? All three of us. We’d be stronger in pairs—or in trios—or whatever?”

“I want to scout on ahead and make sure you guys get a clear access point,” I said.

“And if that doesn’t work?” Why was I not surprised to hear my brother come at me with an instant rebuttal after we’d actually agreed on something moments earlier? “You know, because of all the guards, and magic… or whatever moon goddess mystic shit Lucian’s got going on?”

“Then we’ll regroup.”

Xavier nodded. “We can do that. There was that room, the one with the fountain. You know the one?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I can find it.”

“We’ll meet there.”

“We can try,” I said quickly. “But if we catch Cali’s scent, we go after her.”

“Agreed,” Xavier said. “Good luck.”

“Good luck, Greyson,” Artemis said. “Now let’s stop talking and get out of here already.”

I nodded and turned, heading for the front door. As I stepped out into the cold winter air, my thoughts turned to Cali. I just hoped to hell I could find her. It was my only goal.

Then I turned toward the Vanguard estate and started out.

When I hit their territory, I started along the fenced perimeter, looking around for a weak spot. They had to have something in place to check for intruders, and I didn’t want to trip any alarms, so I didn’t even try to scale the fence. But I had to find my way inside.

I wanted to stop thinking about Cali potentially being drugged right now, but I couldn’t shake the idea. Especially while I was this close to rescuing her. She was all I *could* picture. What if Lucian or Aysel had her held down somewhere? Or she was sipping a spiked drink without knowing? She would be so vulnerable. She could be passed out somewhere, unable to defend herself with her magic.

I felt myself teetering on the edge of a serious brooding session, but then I heard a sound behind me in the woods that pulled me from my thoughts.

Figuring it could be one of Lucian’s guards, I dodged out of sight. Beneath the cover of a downed tree covered with leaves, I looked around, keeping an eye out for any movements. I needed to stay out of sight until I could assess the situation. I knew that giving myself away too early could be dangerous for Xavier and Artemis.

I heard another rustle in the leaves just to my left—not very far way. But it was a small enough sound that I could tell whoever had made it was working hard to be quiet. *That* put all my senses on alert, and I went into predator mode. I was stressed and angry about Cali, and I was ready to track this asshole down—whoever it was. *I* was the hunter, not the other way around.

Keeping my head down, I moved quietly in the direction of the sound. My instinct was to shift, but I resisted. Whoever was out here, I didn’t want to tip them off too soon.

There was a break in the fence just ahead of me, and I moved toward it, but I stopped again when I heard the sound of movement in the underbrush. The movement seemed to stop when I stopped, like the other person was listening as well. But I was patient, and I waited until—

*There it was*. The sound of a soft footstep in the dead leaves.

I did shift then, dropping to the ground on all fours. It was easier to use my senses in my wolf form, and I took a deep breath, filling my lungs, looking for a scent. It was definitely a wolf, but who? I was going to track them down.

Suddenly, whoever it was started running, and I took off after them. The trees around me turned into a blur as I sprinted after the sound. That was how it always was when I tracked—I narrowed my focus completely. There was only one thing in the world, and it was the sound in front of me—my target.

I leapt over a pile of withered brush and landed on the soft, muddy ground. Whoever was running hung a right around a copse of leafless maples, and I swung around, barely managing to keep myself from sliding sideways.

The path grew steep, and I dropped my head, pushing hard. The object of my pursuit was just ahead of me, and—frustrated—I put on a burst of speed. They were just around this next curve.

And then the next curve.

And then the curve after that.

This path twisted like a snake, and try as I might, I just couldn’t make up any ground between me and the runner up ahead. It was starting to feel not as though someone was running away from me, but as though I was being toyed with.

I *hated* that feeling.

When the path opened up into a clearing, I stopped for a moment, looking around, trying to get a sense of where I was. I needed to figure out how to cut this person off. As a wolf, I was measurably better at hearing and scenting, but whoever my prey was, they must have had some gift to avoid being tracked.

I ground my teeth with frustration, but the clearing was quiet, and I had to decide what to do next.

I was about to turn and head back toward the pack house to alert the others of this when I heard something that made me freeze. It was the sound of something moving on the other side of the clearing.

Swiveling my head, I looked around quickly, scanning the clearing.

On the far side of the open field, something emerged from the woods, sauntering out from the shadows of the trees. It appeared to be a human, but who?

And then suddenly I smelled something *very* recognizable.

**Episode 2086**

XAVIER

“So you’re on top of this, right?” I asked Rishika for the third time.

“Yeah, I’ve told you I got it, Xavier,” Rishika assured me. “I swear.”

I looked over at Jay. “And you’ll keep an eye out for anything that looks irregular when you go out on your patrol?”

Jay laughed and pointed to his one eye. “That’s a good one. I’ll keep an *eye* out.”

“*Jay*,” I growled.

“Yeah, man, I will,” he said quickly. “What’s the big deal? You’ll be around to make sure everyone’s doing what they’re supposed to be doing. Can’t you hassle people as they finish their patrols, instead of in one big sweep?”

I didn’t answer him. I glanced up at the clock. Artemis and I needed to get going soon. I didn’t want too big of a window between when Greyson got to Vanguard land and when we followed, but I needed to lock everything down before I left. “I just want to make sure everyone’s got what they need to reinforce our perimeter.”

“We’re good,” Rishika said, wrapping her hands around her mug on the dining room table. “You can stop worrying about us now and go back to worrying about your mate.”

Joke was on her, because not only was I worried about Cali, I was also worried about my stubborn brother, not that I’d ever admit that out loud. Still, I didn’t want the Vanguards to do anything to him while he was scouting ahead. We all needed to be on it if we were going to get Cali out.

I nodded at Rishika and headed toward the kitchen, where Big Mac and Kira were standing by the door, talking. “And you two are heading out to cast those protection spells around the boundaries, right?”

“We’re going out right now,” Big Mac said. “Just making sure we’re on the same page.”

“Xavier, I made you this.” Torin jogged over to me with a plate that was loaded with a turkey sandwich and a bunch of grapes. “I figured you probably hadn’t eaten much since you got home.”

I hadn’t eaten anything. Not since I’d gotten home, and not since I’d swallowed a mouthful of coffee at the Vanguard breakfast.

“Thanks,” I muttered, accepting the sandwich from Torin and taking a bite. I was trying to stay focused—trying to remember everything that needed to be done for the pack—but I couldn’t stop my brain from running in circles.

I looked around. Big Mac and Kira were heading outside to cast the spells, and the rest of the pack seemed occupied with preparations for the border lockdown, so I started looking around for Artemis.

She was in the living room, looking out the window while Sage and Zainab chatted on the couch.

“Hey,” I said, striding over. “I need to talk to you. Alone. It’s about our plan.”

Artemis’s eyes lit up. “Okay.” She followed me into the den. “Is this about going back to the Vanguard house? You don’t want to wait on Greyson?” she asked the instant we were alone.

“Yeah, it is, but we’re not involving the pack right now, so I want to keep it under wraps.”

“Why not get the whole pack?” Artemis asked. “More strength seems like a good idea.”

I shook my head. “They’d be expecting that.”

“But *we’re* still going, right?” she asked.

“Of course,” I snapped. “I’m not going to let Cali be held hostage so Lucian can play house with her.”

“So what’s the plan?” Artemis asked, leaning closer.

“We rendezvous with my brother earlier than anticipated. We don’t give the Vanguards any time to plan, or any extra advantage. We get to Cali. And if we can’t find her—because that place is a fucking maze—I’m hoping we’ll learn *something*. I want you to use your best bounty hunter skills. I know you’re frothing at the mouth to get Cali out of there.” I gave her a half-smile. “I know you love your sister. So, are you still in?”

Artemis didn’t even hesitate. “What kind of question is that? When do we leave?”

“Soon.” I glanced at the clock over the mantle. “Really soon. You should gather anything you might need, but be discreet about it. We don’t need everyone knowing what we’re doing.”

Artemis grinned. “I’ll be back in a few,” she said, and slipped out the door.

I looked after her for a moment, then pulled my phone out. I dialed Cali’s number, though without much hope that she would pick up.

So my heart skipped a beat when she picked up on the first ring. “Xavier?”

“Cali,” I breathed, relief flooding through me at the sound of her voice. “How are you? Are you okay?”

“I’m okay,” she said. “I’m okay. I miss you. I wish I was home.”

“Me too. What’s going on there?”

“Well, apparently I have to go to some formal dinner with Lucian tonight, and it’s not the best news I’ve ever heard,” she said, sounding annoyed.

An alarm bell started to ring in my head. “Hey, you need to be careful about what you’re eating and drinking there, okay? Try to avoid drinking any alcohol if you can get out of it.”

“Why?” she asked.

“I’ve been thinking about it, and I’m pretty sure the drinks at the party were drugged.”

“*What?*” Cali gasped. “Drugged?” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “Are you sure about that?”

I was just about to answer when there was a small rustling noise on her end.

“I’ve got to go,” she said quickly, and the call ended.

I looked down at the blank screen, frustration and fear racing through me. Why had she needed to go so quickly? What was happening? It made me crazy that I couldn’t be there to protect her. I hadn’t even had time to tell her that I was coming to the Vanguard house to get her.

For a moment, I considered calling her back, but she’d hung up because she’d needed to, and I didn’t want to put her in any more danger.

Artemis appeared in the doorway. “I’m ready. We should go now, while we’ve still got some light.”

I nodded and slipped my phone back into my pocket. “Let’s go.”

We moved through the pack house causally, then slipped out the back door before anyone could ask us where we were heading.

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The woods near the Vanguard house were thick and quiet. Artemis was slightly ahead of me, moving carefully through the underbrush. I’d never been in a situation where I could observe her closely, and I had to admit, I was impressed with her skills. She was silent and watchful, and she moved as though she were ready for anything. I was glad she was with me. I’d never pictured myself with a Fae bounty hunter on my team, but she was a pretty great addition.

Artemis paused when she heard a crow caw and looked up, watching it rise from a pine just above us and into the sky. She looked back at me. “You know, I’m glad you didn’t refuse my offer of help.”

I wanted to laugh, wondering if she could read minds, too. But instead, I shrugged. “Hell, if I hadn’t wanted you here, the odds are that you’d be following me anyway, right?”

“Or already there,” she said, smirking. Then the smile slid from her face. “All I know is that I’m not going to leave my sister in danger when there’s something—anything—I can do to help.”

I gave her a long look. “You know, you and Cali are a lot more alike than I thought.”

Artemis looked surprised for a moment, and she had just started to smile when she whipped her head around, clearly sensing something. She put up her hand, signaling for me to be quiet.

“We’re getting close to the Vanguard perimeter,” she said, in a nearly silent whisper.

I nodded and looked around. I was hoping we’d be able to get ourselves all the way into the house. Cali had mentioned some dinner with Lucian. Which was a useful piece of information, because it told me that they’d be in the formal dining room again.

I was just glad I knew the basic layout of the house—that was going to help a lot in trying to get around.

Artemis and I both moved cautiously through the trees. Everything was quiet—there wasn’t even a bird call.

And then my phone vibrated.

I grabbed for it convulsively and put it on silent—the last thing we needed was this stupid thing giving us away.

I looked up, into the trees, and the Vanguard mansion that lay just beyond them. That stupid ugly place. I scanned it, but saw no sign of Greyson. *Should we wait? Would Greyson give us a sign? Fuck, this was a stupid plan.*

I shook my head. “We have to get in there,” I whispered.

Artemis nodded, then peered up at me. “What’s your call, Alpha?”

**Episode 2087**

I looked at the closed door, my heart beating fast. The noise in the hallway had been small, but it had startled me so much I’d hung up on Xavier. But, as I listened, I realized that it was just the low rumble of the guards outside changing shifts. I looked down at my phone, regretting hanging up on Xavier.

Idly tapping my fingers on my dark screen, I considered texting him to let him know I was okay, but I wasn’t sure that was such a good idea. My thoughts were racing. Xavier’s warning about drugged food and drink was making me feel slightly panicked. What could I do? I didn’t know how long I was going to be here. How long could a person go without food? It was a while, but I knew water was a lot more vital. And even if I could go a day or two without food, wouldn’t refusing to eat make Lucian suspicious?

What was I supposed to say when he started asking awkward questions?

*Oh, I’m sorry Mr. Prince Person, one of my mates told me that you slip roofies in the drinks.*

Yeah, I was sure that would go over *real* well.

An accusation like that was bound to make him angry, and I had no proof. Just Xavier’s theory. I thought back to the night before. I hadn’t *felt* drugged then, and I didn’t now. It was hard enough to gauge what would set a man like Lucian off. I had no intention of figuring that out while trapped here.

Was it possible that whatever the Vanguards had put in the drinks, it had only been given to the Alphas?

I turned and looked at the red dress that Lucian had thrown across the end of the opulent four-poster bed. I was supposed to wear it for dinner, and that dinner was going to suck.

I looked back down at my phone. Maybe I could just order a pizza and have it delivered to my room?

That hopeful thought burst like a balloon when there was a soft knock on the door.

“Who is it?” I asked warily.

“It’s me,” Andrei replied. “Lucian wants to meet you down in the garden. He wants to ask you a question. Will you walk down there with me?”

“And if I say no?”

“Prince Lucian said you might. He also said to tell you he’d advise against it.”

Well, when he put it like that, how could I possibly refuse?

I opened the door a crack and looked out. Andrei was standing there, holding a dark blue wool coat over his arm. When he held it up, I saw that it looked like my size.

“What is that?” I asked.

Andrei raised an eyebrow. “It’s cold outside, and Lucian wanted you to be comfortable when you spoke to him.”

I stared at him for a moment, then took the coat with a huff. “Fine. What’s this all about anyway?” I asked. I slipped the coat on and was annoyed to realize it fit me perfectly. “Does he want to talk about the Aysel issues?”

“I don’t know,” Andrei said, gesturing down the hall. “The prince doesn’t confide in me. It’s my role to simply do as he bids, not to pry or to bother him.”

“Sounds like a great gig,” I said tartly, buttoning up the coat.

“Lucian made it clear that I was to escort you to the gardens. That’s all.”

“*Escort*.” I snorted. “Yeah right. More like *herd*.”

Andrei gave me a sideways look as we headed down the wide staircase. “You’ve got this all wrong, you know.”

“Do I?”

“Of course. You’re an honored guest. Lucian takes your safety very seriously.”

I didn’t believe that. And I believed it even less coming out of Andrei’s mouth. Why was he being so polite to me all of a sudden? Maybe Lucian had him under orders.

“There shouldn’t be that much danger between the house and the garden, unless some of the Vanguard pack members were planning to attack me as I walked out,” I snapped.

Andrei looked at me, truly shocked. “No one would attack you.”

“You’re sure about that?” I demanded, narrowing my eyes.

“Of course I’m sure. No one in the Vanguard pack would dream of going against their prince. It’s just that…” He thought for a moment. “The Vanguard pack has made some enemies over the years. We have to be vigilant about safety. Lucian would never forgive himself if you were harmed while under his protection.”

I let this information sink in as we crossed the large entrance hall, heading toward the door.

“This is the kind of treatment everyone under the prince’s rule will enjoy,” Andrei went on.

I looked up at him quickly. “You know, not everyone is dying to live in a monarchy. Usually it’s the kind of government that really only works out for the monarch.”

Andrei gave me a cool look, then shook his head, like I was missing something obvious.

But what it was, I never found out, because we’d reached the gardens.

Lucian was standing just inside the gates, wearing a long coat of dark grey wool that made him look taller and more intimidating than ever. When he looked at me, I could see that the color of the coat made his eyes seem more penetrating.

Andrei bowed and walked away without a word, heading back toward the house.

I took a deep breath and tried to quiet the rapid beating of my heart. “What was the question you wanted to ask me?”

Lucian looked at me for a moment more, then turned and gestured to the large, perfectly groomed garden. “Tell me the honest truth. Should I rip all this out and have a pool built here?”

I stared at him, dumbfounded.

“*What?*” I finally managed. “You hauled me outside to ask me *that*?”

Lucian held my gaze for just a moment, then his face cracked into a smile. “No, of course not. I’m just kidding. Though I *am* thinking of putting in a pool, just over there.” He gestured to the far corner of the garden. “That’s not what’s on my mind now, however.”

For a moment, I was struck speechless. I’d been so angry and offended by him, but now that he’d smiled at me—joked with me—I was realizing just how charming Lucian could be. When he wanted to be.

But his expression had grown serious again. “No, I brought you out here to ask you something I can’t ask anyone else. I’m relying on your good nature, Caliana.”

I couldn’t help it, I leaned toward him, intrigued. “What do you need help with?”

“I have access to a certain… *item*. It’s like a truth serum, but magical.” His frown deepened. “Normally, I’d never even think of using it on Aysel. Not only is she my sister, whom I love dearly, but she is a princess, and should be above such things.” He started to pace up and down the garden path. “I really only keep the serum for situations like a security breach, or some lowly interloper who’s got information that I need to know.”

“But?” I prompted when he didn’t go on.

“But,” Lucian said, looking up at me, “I can’t be one hundred percent certain that Aysel will tell me the truth if I ask her. And I need to know if she and Greyson really did share a connection under Seluna.”

He looked at me, and I could see genuine angst his eyes. His appeal for help felt real.

“What would you do in this situation?” he asked. “Can it be right to use the serum on Aysel?”

If I was totally honest with Lucian, I would tell him that all he had to do was trust Greyson’s word, but I figured that would probably fall on deaf ears. Lucian was *not* a trusting person.

I took a deep breath. “Look, I think we all want the same thing. We’re seeking the truth, right, and if it takes a dose of this serum to make Aysel tell the truth, then isn’t that worth it? I mean, you’re not going to trick her into it, are you? You’ll let her know she’s taking the serum first?”

“Of course, in fact, she has already been made aware,” Lucian said immediately. He sighed. “The choice is truly Aysel’s. I’m just providing the means to get a true answer.” He thought for a moment, then looked up at me with a smile. “Thank you, Caliana. I know only you could have offered such clear-headed advice.”

“You’re… welcome?” I said, feeling slightly awkward.

He offered me his arm. “We should go together to Aysel’s room.” He took a deep breath. “Let’s get this over with.”

We returned to the house and made our way upstairs. Andrei, who had been waiting just inside the doors, followed us, along with yet another guard.

When we reached the door, Lucian looked at the guard stationed outside. “I ordered my sister to remain in her room. Is she in there now?”

The guard nodded, and Lucian opened the door.

Aysel was just inside the door, pacing anxiously. She looked over at us as we entered. She leapt forward and clasped Lucian’s hands. “You can’t make me take that serum, brother! The last person you used the serum on didn’t take it well, remember?”

Lucian did seem to remember, and he hesitated.

I wondered what had happened to the last person. Had they gotten sick?

Lucian gave his head a small shake. “We have changed the formula since then. You know that.”

Aysel’s gaze slid to me, and her expression changed from pleading to icy cold. She let go of Lucian’s hands and stepped back.

“I’ll take the serum, but I want to see it tested first.” Her eyes bored into me. “Make *her* take it.”

**Episode 2088**

GREYSON

I woke up to an overwhelming urge to vomit.

“*Ugh*,” I moaned.

My head spun, and I couldn’t seem to get my bearings. I didn’t know which direction was up, where, exactly, I was, or what the fuck had happened to me.

It was like the worst hangover I’d ever had, but on steroids. And I had a feeling deep in my gut that when I did remember what the hell had happened, I wasn’t gonna be laughing off a night of partying too hard.

The last thing I remembered was seeing someone, just a flash of a body in motion, and then being attacked from behind.

The slow, creaking gears in my mind shuddered to a halt. *It was an ambush.*

“Fuck.” I hadn’t even seen them coming.

I peeled my eyes open and blearily looked around. This place… It looked familiar, somehow. Had I been here before?

I blinked a few times, allowing my eyes to adjust now that I was well and truly conscious. My eyes really focused on my surroundings, and dread rushed in.

I was back in Aysel’s goddamn sex cottage. *Dammit! How did she get me back here again?* It was like a much more horrifying version of *Groundhog Day.* I shuddered at the mere thought of what fresh, kinky hell the were-princess might have planned for me.

Knowing where I was only spawned even more questions. Was Aysel the one who’d brought me here? She was strong, but I’d never thought of her as *that* strong. And if I’d been taken, did that mean Xavier and Artemis were compromised? Was this whole mission fucked now?

Fury pounded in my skull alongside my headache. How the hell we were gonna save Cali if we couldn’t even make it into the palace without something going horribly wrong? I needed to get the fuck out of here before Aysel returned, maybe try to rendezvous with Xavier and see whether or not this mission was even salvageable.

My only source of hope was that Aysel clearly didn’t keep her big brother in the loop about everything, especially when she thought he might say no. If I could get out of here, maybe she’d keep my presence in Vanguard territory quiet. Then Lucian would never find out about this rescue attempt.

I sat up, ready to get the fuck out of this creepy-ass cottage, and realized my hands were cuffed together with silver handcuffs.

This was just getting better and better.

Hands still cuffed together, I jumped off the bed and headed to the door. It was annoying as fuck to try to open a basic doorknob with my hands bound, but it wasn’t impossible. In theory. In reality, it didn’t matter, because the door was locked tight.

I pulled hard on the doorknob, then kicked at the door. It wouldn’t budge. It was thicker than a normal door, and it seemed to have extra security measures. Because of *course* Aysel’s creepy sex cottage would have panic room-level security.

I blew out a breath and scanned the rest of the cottage. Surely there was something in here that could help me. A key, or even something strong enough to break the door down. My eyes snagged on a pair of men’s pants laid out on the bed. I didn’t know how I’d missed them when I’d woken up, but I quickly yanked them on.

Even if they were a gift from Aysel, wearing them was still preferable to being naked when she showed up again. Knowing her, she’d get the wrong kind of message if she found her captive naked. She might make some unfortunate assumptions about my level of interest in her when what I really needed was for her to let go of this weird obsession she had with me. Because even if I set aside the whole kidnapping and trying to assault me thing—a *big* if—there was still no way in hell I’d ever be with her.

I loved Cali too much to betray her.

*Speaking of Cali…*

I still needed to find her, to make sure she was okay and get her home where she belonged. I tried to reach out to her through the mind link.

*Love, are you there?*

Nothing. The cottage was probably too far away from the main house, which was a disaster maze of its own. The best thing to do was to just get the hell out of here. As if I needed another reason.

The front door creaked open, and I tensed, waiting for Aysel to make her next move. Whether that turned out to be a full-on attack or some attempt at seduction, I had no doubt that it would be a mindfuck of epic proportions.

But it wasn’t Aysel. It was Andrei.

I leapt forward, brandishing my cuffs. “*Andrei*?You’ve gotta help me. Aysel attacked me and brought me here again. Can you help me break these cuffs so I can get out of here?”

He just stared at me in shock. *Huh. Maybe he’s just shocked to see me here in the cottage.*

“We don’t have much time,” I pressed. “Who knows when she’ll be back. Do you know where the key is for these things?” I held up my cuffed hands again. I couldn’t have been more explicit about asking for his help.

Andrei frowned. “You think Aysel brought you here? For what?”

“I don’t know!” I huffed, so anxious that I started to pace back and forth in front of the bed. “But I can’t imagine she’s got anything good up her sleeve. The last time she brought me here, she chained me to the bed. I can only imagine she’s got something similar planned this time around.”

Andrei’s eyes narrowed, and his cheeks went a splotchy red color. I stopped pacing. What did he have to be so pissed off about? Did I dare hope that he was angry on my behalf? Fed up with Aysel’s antics? It seemed like a long shot, but it sure would’ve been a silver lining to this shitshow.

Suddenly, Andrei charged forward and rammed into me. I fell backward onto the bed with a shocked cry, and Andrei leapt forward as if to continue his attack. I kicked my foot out and made contact with his chest, throwing him back against the cottage wall. The wooden beams creaked with the impact.

*Okay, scratch that. Andrei is just as crazy as Aysel.*

I immediately booked it for the open front door, but Andrei grabbed one of my feet and yanked. I hit the ground hard, the breath knocked clean out of my lungs.

Andrei flipped me onto my back and loomed over me, his face contorted with fury.

“Wait, wait,” I rasped, holding my hands up. “Whatever she told you, it’s not true!”

“She didn’t tell me anything,” he roared. “I heard about you with her at the party! How dare you defile such a beautiful woman!”

No string of words could have shocked me more. “What the hell are you talking about? Aren’t you here on Aysel’s orders?”

“No, I’m doing this *for* her. To defend her honor against garbage like you!”

I blinked. *What the hell? Is* everyone *here absolutely batshit crazy?*

“I want nothing to do with Aysel, or anyone else in this ridiculous pack!”

Andrei frowned down at me. He was no longer seconds away from snapping my neck, but he still didn’t look convinced that I was the victim here. And I needed to convince him of the truth, or I might never get the hell out of here.

I held up my still-cuffed hands in surrender. “Can we just talk? Please?”

His brows rose, but he moved back to let me stand. I brushed myself off and glanced at the door, mentally measuring the time it would take me to cross that distance.

Andrei moved to stand in front of me. “Don’t you dare try anything. No one even knows you’re here, so no funny business.”

It was my turn to be surprised. *So Andrei is working completely alone…* Maybe this wasn’t a worst-cast scenario after all. Maybe I could use this as an opportunity to sneak into the main house. I was already on the grounds. If I could just get out of this cottage somehow, I’d have a straight shot to the palace. To Cali.

But first I needed to convince Andrei that I wasn’t a threat to Aysel. “Look, it’s clear you’re very loyal to Aysel. She’s lucky to have someone like you looking out for her interests.”

His chest puffed out just a little bit. “Princess Aysel is a very passionate woman, but people take advantage of her because of that.”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. This guy clearly had no idea what his boss was truly like. Because when I heard the words “Aysel” and “take advantage,” my own experiences led me to a very different sort of understanding.

Still, I needed to play along. “It’s true that I appreciated how beautiful Aysel was at first. But that was it. I just admired her from afar. Nothing more.”

But Andrei wasn’t buying it. Not yet. I decided to try another approach.

“You know, it makes so much sense now,” I mused.

He perked up at that. “What are you talking about?”

I shrugged. “Oh, it’s just the way Aysel spoke of you. It was clear to me that she respected you, but now I see that there’s something more going on between you.”

“Wait. She talked about me?”

I had him. Hook, line, and sinker.

I nodded. “She did. It was clear to me that she was struggling with her feelings.”

“Really?” He smiled. “I didn’t realize she felt that way.”

“I think it’s just a matter of being honest with her about your feelings, you know? Women appreciate honesty. And hey, maybe I can help you, but…” I trailed off, looking down at my hands. My heart was racing. This was risky, and I had to tread carefully, but there was a chance it just might work.

“But what?” Andrei pressed.

I held up my handcuffed wrists. “Could you maybe let me go first?”

**Episode 2089**

Absolute horror rendered me speechless. What the actual hell? I did *not* want to take this truth serum—especially not if it had weird side effects!

“Um, no thank you!” I said. I had *not* signed up to be a guinea pig when Lucian had pulled me into his family’s drama.

To my further horror, Lucian didn’t immediately reject Aysel’s suggestion. Was he seriously considering it?

*Well, too bad. Because there is no way in hell I’m taking some crazy truth serum. They’re gonna have to find a different test subject.*

“Brother,” Aysel continued sweetly, “I will take whatever you ask me to, but you wouldn’t make your dear sister take something that could hurt her, right? We have to test it first. Plus, don’t you have questions for your guest?”

Lucian hummed thoughtfully. “What a fascinating proposition.”

*No!*

Cold dread wrapped its claws around me. Was this all some sort of trap? Had I willfully and naïvely walked into this situation? Had Lucian and Aysel been planning this all along? It made sense, in a way. It seemed much more likely that Lucian would try to trap me into giving up information on the Redwood pack, rather than enlisting my help to figure out his sister’s claim on *my mate*.

*Oh my god. I’m such an idiot.*

Aysel nodded. “And, of course, if it works on our guest and does not cause any adverse side effects, I would be all too happy to take the serum myself.”

I gave her my best scowl. The one I reserved for true villains, like Letifer and men’s rights activists. How could Lucian believe even a single word that came out of her mouth? She was laying it on so thick! She was obviously trying to manipulate him… And the worst part was that it actually seemed to be working!

“You can’t do this to me!” I blurted out. “I do *not* consent to taking this serum. This wasn’t the deal!”

Lucian frowned, as though I’d confused him. “I’m a *prince*,” he said slowly, like I was stupid. “And you are nothing more than a guest in this house. I can make or change deals however and whenever I like.”

A retort was on the tip of my tongue, a reminder that I might not have been a true Luna, but my mates were the co-Alphas of the Redwood pack, and forcing me to take this crazy drug would *not* end well for the Vanguard “royalty.”

And then I realized it was useless to argue. As long as Lucian believed his position as prince put him above everyone else, there was no way I could reason with him. There was no arguing with someone who believed it was their innate right to do whatever they wanted.

No, I had to convince him it wasn’t a good idea to use the serum on me. That even if he had the right to make it happen, that didn’t mean it would be beneficial to him.

*My god. The mental gymnastics with this guy…*

I cleared my throat. “Lucian, please. I’m just… concerned. This could cause a big issue with the Redwood pack, and if you do this, there’s no going back. Didn’t you say you didn’t want to start any fights with the other packs in the area?”

There. I’d used his own words against him. And since Lucian clearly didn’t love anyone else half as much as he loved himself, this was my best chance to get away serum-free.

“That’s true…” He seemed to consider my point. “I have no intention of starting any unnecessary wars, of course.”

My shoulders slumped with relief.

“But,” he added, “sometimes a battle here and there is necessary. You understand, don’t you? The word of Seluna is nothing to trifle with.”

Just like that, all that fear and dread rushed back in, wrapping so tight around me I could barely breathe. “Are you really going to force me to take the serum?”

He hummed sympathetically. “I understand your concern, Caliana. But please, do me the courtesy of understanding my perspective. My sister is right—we do need to test this new version of the serum before it can be used on her. Besides, I’m fairly certain it won’t kill you.” He smiled at me, clearly expecting complete submission.

Well, too bad.

I stepped back. I never should have agreed to stay here. I turned on my heel and sprinted toward the door, but a guard blocked my escape.

I spun back around to see Aysel smiling maliciously.

“What is your problem with me?” I demanded. “I don’t understand why you seem to hate us so much.”

Lucian shook his head. “We don’t hate you. But when you are royalty, you have to assert your power from time to time.”

I frowned. “And forcing me to take an experimental serum is an appropriate time for you to flex?” Maybe it was naïve, but I just didn’t get this whole royalty charade, or how anyone could be so devoid of empathy that they genuinely believed they could do whatever the heck they wanted, even when it hurt people. “How can you be royalty? Nobody’s ever even heard of you!”

This was the wrong thing to say. Lucian gave me a look that sent chills down my spine, but then, just as quickly, his expression smoothed out.

“It’s true we’ve been away for a while,” he conceded, “but that’s why we’re back: to reclaim our birthright.”

Oh god. He really believed in all of this royalty crap. He was absolutely delusional—and somehow the focal point of his royal crusade had something to do with me and my mates. Controlling us, destroying us, assimilating us—I wasn’t sure which. But none of those options sounded particularly appealing.

I forced a smile. “I understand. But… aren’t royals supposed to protect their people? If we’re your subjects, why would you do this to us? Why hurt us when kindness would go so much further?”

“You are very wise, Caliana. And the Redwood pack is lucky to have you.” His words didn’t give me a single ounce of comfort. “The truth is, I do intend to protect my subjects, to earn their love, but before love comes respect. How can I expect my subjects to respect me if I don’t first teach them how to treat me? Show them that I expect their loyalty and their discipline, and that in exchange, they can trust me to lead them to greatness?”

These were the words of a madman. A tyrant. I shook my head. “You can’t force people to trust you.”

His gaze softened into something like pity. He took a step closer and, before I could attempt to put any more space between us, he caught my hand in his. His touch was gentle, but his grip was as strong as cold iron. “Trust in this, Caliana—I will show my subjects every kindness they are owed. But first, I need to root out any sources of discontent or competition to my claim. And, unfortunately, I have reason to believe your pack is at the top of that list.”

“No,” I breathed, but he wasn’t listening. He wouldn’t listen, no matter what I said.

“Guards,” Lucian called, my hand still caught in his grip. “Get the serum.”

I looked helplessly at Aysel. Maybe, just maybe, I could convince her to help me. Tell her I’d put in a good word about her to Greyson.

Except there was no way I was going to do that.

But she looked as pleased as the cat that ate the canary. I suddenly realized that while Lucian believed he was doing his “royal duty,” Aysel was just in this to hurt me. The odds were not in my favor here. Still, I had to try.

“Aysel, please. The Redwood pack doesn’t want to do anything to hurt the Vanguard pack. Why can’t we just be left in peace?”

“You don’t want to hurt me?” she scowled. “It hurts me when something I want is kept from me.”

I blinked. “Greyson? He’s a person with his own free will. You can’t force him to be your mate.”

“I can do anything I want! I’m a *princess*!”

Dear god. These people were absolutely nuts.

Lucian looked over at his sister, his voice soothing. “You’ll get what you want soon. You just need to be patient.”

She smiled, apparently mollified. “Yes, Lucian.”

The guard returned, carrying a small metal case. He set it on a small table with a chair on either side of it.

“Please, don’t do this!” I cried. “Greyson and Xavier will never be okay with this. We can still avoid a fight between our packs.”

Lucian let me go—just in time for Aysel to grab me roughly by the shoulders and shove me into one of the chairs. Her grip was bruising and immoveable as stone. I needed to act—Greyson had told me to use my magic whenever I thought I needed to. Now seemed like a good time. I raised my hands, but just as I did Lucian shoved my sleeve up and said, “This might sting a little.”

Then Lucian plunged the needle into my arm.

**Episode 2090**

XAVIER

“Xavier,” Artemis said again, “what’s your call?”

I didn’t know. *Fuck.*

“Wait,” I told her. “Don’t do anything. I’m going to try to see if I can connect to Greyson.”

With a deep breath, I shifted and tried to reach out to my brother. If he was somewhere here, hopefully I could reach him

*Greyson?* I tried to mind link with my brother, but there was nothing but silence on his end of the link.

Where the fuck did he go? I blew out a breath, frustration boiling in my gut. If Greyson were still on the perimeter of the Vanguard estate, he should have left us a sign or something. The fact that he wasn’t responding could only mean one of two things: he was somewhere else entirely, far out of range of the mind link, or he was unconscious.

A mean little voice in the back of my mind reminded me that Greyson could simply be ignoring me, but that didn’t seem likely. Things between us had been better lately. And besides, this wasn’t about us. It was about bringing Cali home. If there was one situation in which I was confident Greyson *wouldn’t* blow me off, it was this one.

When I shifted back, Artemis said, “Well?”

“Nothing. *Fuck*,” I muttered.

This wasn’t looking good. Now I had Cali *and* Greyson to worry about. The thought brought me up short. I realized with a surprised sort of certainty that I… cared about my brother. Or, at least, I had a begrudging respect for him.

This time last month, I couldn’t have cared less if something had happened to Greyson. Hell, I probably would have celebrated it. But things had changed. *We* had changed. And whatever had happened to Greyson, I was gonna find out.

I met Artemis’s gaze. “We’re sneaking in.”

“Are you sure?” She frowned. “What about your brother?”

I told myself not to be offended by the concern in her voice. Artemis and Greyson, they had an understanding. A connection that she and I hadn’t yet managed to build—not that I’d tried. Still, that dark voice in my mind asked whether she’d be this worried if I were the one MIA in the middle of Cali’s rescue mission.

I told the voice to mind its own goddamn business and focused on the task at hand.

“There’s no way Greyson would just take off, so he must be inside somewhere. And he can handle himself. If for some reason he needs help, and we can help him, then we’ll try. But the priority right now is Cali.” I watched Artemis’s face carefully. “Can you handle that?”

She nodded. “I’m not going to stop until I get my sister out of that place.”

I nodded. “Then let’s go.”

As I looked up at the palace rising in the distance, my stomach tightened with guilt. *I never should have left Cali here. What the hell was I thinking?*

At the time, I’d felt completely backed into a corner and Cali had clearly been pulling the “trust me” card. Leaving Cali with Lucian had honestly seemed like the safest option for everyone. But I shouldn’t have let anything convince me to leave my mate behind, including Cali.

And once I got her back, I was gonna beg for her forgiveness. It was nothing less than she deserved.

We slowly made our way onto the palace grounds. Everywhere I looked, that same ostentatious wealth was screaming at me, from the elaborately trimmed and immaculately cared for garden, to the huge marble statues dotted throughout the grounds.

Artemis’s eyes widened as she took it all in. “What the hell? Did we travel back to the Fae world or something?”

“Ugly, right?”

She nodded. “Very.”

I cleared my throat and looked around. “Lucian seems to be pretty self-important. He probably thinks all this opulence makes him seem powerful.”

Artemis poked a statue’s exposed arm. “Being rich doesn’t mean you’re important. It just means you’re lucky.” She looked down at the plaque at the foot of the statue. “Seluna, Goddess of the Moon.” Her brows knit together. “Seluna… Huh. That sounds familiar, somehow.”

My brows rose. “You’ve heard that name before? Lucian and his followers seem obsessed with her. I think they worship her, or at least respect her deeply. I can’t imagine even their devotion to a moon goddess coming close to how much they worship themselves.”

Artemis seemed deep in thought while I waxed poetic on one of the Vanguard pack’s many failings.

“I’m sure I’ve heard it before,” she said. “I just can’t remember when or where.”

Now it was my turn to frown. “Wait, what would a moon goddess have to do with the Fae?”

“Maybe she *is* a Fae.”

“But they call her a goddess. Somehow, she’s got something to do with werewolves specifically. Maybe it’s the moon thing.”

“Maybe it’s a magic thing?” she reasoned. “And magic *is* a Fae staple.”

“Huh. Yeah.” I tucked that bit of insight away for later. It was probably a mystery worth unraveling if we wanted to better understand the Vanguard pack, but we didn’t have time to investigate the origins of goddesses right now.

I had to rescue Cali.

We were moving through the large hedges that sectioned off the gardens when I stopped Artemis with a raised hand. I lifted my nose and sniffed at the air.

“What is it?” she asked.

“There’s a strange scent…” I turned and met her eyes. “There are wolves nearby.”

She tensed and readied her daggers. Silently, I motioned for her to hold until my signal. Hopefully she understood the motions and we wouldn’t blow our cover right at the start.

Artemis nodded just as footsteps crunched on leaves nearby. I waited, listening and scenting the air, until just the right moment, which came when the guards were practically on the other side of the hedge, a mere foot away from where we were crouched.

I gave her the signal, and we lunged through the hedge and attacked. It took only seconds to knock both of the guards out. I was impressed with Artemis’s skill. I knew she was fierce, but I often forgot that before we met her, she’d made ends meet by being a skilled bounty hunter. She certainly knew how to take down a target—a fact for which, in this moment, I was oddly grateful.

We made our way along the hedges, keeping close to the shadows so as not to be seen by any other guards or Vanguard pack members. We took out another pair of guards, but as we neared the house, the scent of wolves only got stronger.

*There have to be even more guards here.* I couldn’t tell how many, exactly, but the sheer amount of werewolf scent told me it was more than just a couple. I motioned for Artemis to stay put while I scouted ahead, crouched low so I couldn’t be spotted over the hedges.

There were half a dozen guards stationed in front of the house—if we were fast, we could handle it. If we made a racket about it, we could be in trouble. What Lucian didn’t seem to be running out of was bullshit and loyal pack guards.

I doubled back to where Artemis was waiting for my report.

“How does it look?” she whispered.

“Bad. There are six of them right in front of the house. Too many for us to fight quietly. If we try to engage them, they’ll call for backup.” I racked my brain for another solution. Those guards were standing between me and rescuing my mate, which was fucking unacceptable. “I don’t suppose you can use your magic to blast them?”

She shook her head. “It’d be really loud. If you’re worried about making a scene, blasting might not be the best approach.”

I growled. “If we knock them all out, then nobody’s calling for help. It’s a risk I’m willing to take. I don’t know another way into that building, and we’ve come too far to fail now.”

Artemis hesitated.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s just… I’m not sure if my magic will even work,” she admitted. “Not after everything that happened with Letifer and breaking a promise to my mother.”

My eyes widened. “What do you mean? I brought you here because you’re Fae. Between the two of us, you’re supposed to be the heavy hitter .”

“You brought me here because I was a *bounty hunter*, and Cali’s my sister.”

“None of that will matter if we can’t even get inside.”

Before Artemis could reply, a shout echoed through the gardens. A guard raced up to the house, and even in the distance I could hear him reporting to the others. “I found two guards knocked out near the edge of the gardens. We have a security breach!”

*Fuck.*

Maybe we needed to head back and come up with a better plan. I’d been depending on Artemis’s magic to get us into the house. I speared her with a look. “Can you use your magic? Yes or no?”

She swallowed audibly, then nodded. “I can try.”

“You’d better do more than try, or we’re toast.”

She straightened her shoulders, took a deep breath, and stepped out from behind the hedges, her hands raised in front of her.

Were we going to be totally screwed?

**Episode 2091**

LOLA

I stood next to the car, my packed bag already tucked away in the trunk, waiting for Marta and Lilac to grace us with their presence so we could begin our journey to the Obaltarion.

I checked my watch and sighed. “Would it kill them to hurry up?”

Jay chuckled. “In any other scenario, you might be the one running late. Ease up on them.”

I glared at him. “I had perfect attendance in high school. Some of us know how to be on time. Others…” I pointed at the couple in question, standing in the open doorway of the pack house and arguing over something Lilac had packed in his bag.

“To be fair, this is a pretty last-minute decision.” My mate’s expression sobered. “Are you sure you wanna do this? I mean, Cali’s still with the Vanguards, and those crazy vampires were on your tail the other day… Plus, we just finished fighting Letifer and the revenants. Are you sure a big, dangerous adventure to that death trap of a library is what you need right now?”

I looped my arms around his neck. “Xavier and Greyson are going to get Cali—I’m not worried about that. They’ll get her back safe and sound,” I said, believing it. “And I think given my own circumstances, Cali will understand why we’re going.”

“As long as you’re sure,” Jay said.

“I am,” I said. “You’re overthinking this, baby. It’s gonna be a quick trip anyway. Vancouver Island’s like a hop, skip, and a jump away. We’ll have Steinar to help us with the info gathering, and we’ll be back before you know it. Worst-case scenario, we might get a papercut or two. Unless… you don’t think you can handle all that academia?” I teased.

His brows rose. “Oh, I can handle it.”

“Books. Tomes…” I dropped my voice to a sultry tone. “*Appendices*.”

“You really know how to drive a guy wild.” He dropped a kiss onto my forehead. “Okay, I’ll stop objecting, but for the record, I think it’s fair to be concerned. Exactly none of our best-laid plans have panned out the way we thought they would, including that library.”

I couldn’t really argue with that.

Lilac and Marta finally made it to the car and dropped their backpacks into the trunk.

“Sorry that took so long,” Lilac said. “Had to check on Violet and let her know what was going on.”

“All good,” Jay said.

“Are we ready?” Marta asked, gripping her bag tightly.

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We all piled into the car, pausing to wave goodbye to Big Mac, who stood on the porch watching us pull away.

“We’ll be back soon! Don’t worry!” I called.

Big Mac just glared at me. Then I noticed Marta waving goodbye to Big Mac from the back seat, and the witch *waved back*. Revolutionary. The witch had really softened since Marta had joined the pack. It was nice to see a warmer, more maternal side of Big Mac.

I glanced over my shoulder at Marta. “She really likes you, huh?”

Marta’s eyes widened. “I guess so.”

I smiled as we pulled out of the drive and onto the side road that would eventually take us to the highway. Then a blur of movement caught my attention.

I frowned. “I think there’s something running alongside the car.”

Had something happened? Was the pack trying to get us to come back?

I looked over at Jay with wide eyes. “Do you know anything about this?”

He shook his head. “Maybe I should pull—”

Laughter sounded from the back seat, coming from Lilac. He grinned, his face pressed to the window. “It’s Plum!”

My brows rose and fell. “Oh. What are we doing to do with him? We can’t exactly check him as luggage.”

Lilac frowned and sat back in his seat. “I guess I didn’t think of that. Does this mean Plum can’t come with us?”

I sighed. “He should stay here. There’s no use for a loose wolf in the library. If anything, he’d probably get in the way. Besides, my point still stands. We can’t take him on the plane.”

“Is that safe?” Marta asked. “What if it hurts Lilac to leave his wolf behind?”

“It’s just for a couple days.” I craned my neck to look back at Lilac. “Do you think you can handle being away from him for a day or two?”

He looked disappointed, but he nodded. Lilac could really keep a stiff upper lip when the situation called for it.

“This might actually be for the best,” I added. “Maybe Plum can help guard the pack house while we’re gone.” It would certainly appease some of Jay’s worries if there was another wolf around to protect the house.

Lilac shrugged. “Fine.”

Guilt tugged at my stomach. The last thing I wanted was to upset Lilac. I knew firsthand how much it sucked to be without your wolf. I’d been completely cut off from mine, after all. If anyone could understand what Lilac was going through, it was me.

But that didn’t change the fact that we needed to travel quickly and lightly. And figuring out how to get a giant wolf roughly the size of a full-grown bear onto an airplane just wasn’t something we had time for right now.

*I’ll make it up to him*, I promised myself.

We stopped at a gas station to grab some snacks. I didn’t know about Marta, but werewolf guys sure worked up an appetite, even just driving. I wasn’t hungry, so I waited with the car while everyone else went inside.

As I filled up the gas tank, I got a whiff of… something.

Something… familiar?

I looked around, eyeing the parked cars and the ones in the gasoline bays, the various gas station customers coming and going, and forest wrapped around the station. As far as I could tell, there was nothing strange.

Then I caught the scent again, and I wrinkled my nose.

It was weird, the way I scented things now as a hybrid compared to when I’d just been a wolf. With my vampire side added on, I had a whole new catalogue of olfactory sensations, and sometimes it felt like my werewolf and vampire senses were constantly fighting for dominance. I was still getting used to all the ways—big and small—that being a hybrid had changed my entire world.

But one thing was for sure: there was definitely something weird out there.

I took a step toward the woods and called out, “Who’s there? What do you want?”

To my utter shock, Jacqueline stepped out from behind a tree, her hands raised in front of her. “Fine, fine, calm down. It’s just me.”

I blinked. “What the hell are you doing, following us?”

“It’s not like I had a choice! You left without me!”

“Um… No, you just weren’t invited.”

“Wow, Lola.” She shook her head in disgust. “Well, invitation or not, maybe I didn’t want to be left behind. You ever stop to think what a lone vampire would feel like in a house full of wolves?”

Huh. Now that she mentioned it, I hadn’t thought about her at all. Maybe because my world didn’t revolve around Jacqueline the way she clearly thought it should. It wasn’t personal—she just wasn’t anywhere near the top of my list of things to worry about.

“You’ll be fine at the pack house. Nobody’s going to hurt you there.”

“Right. Like I trust that. I don’t necessarily like you or Jay, but you’re the only ones I trust to not murder me in my sleep.”

Her ability to compliment and insult in the same breath was truly something to behold.

I rolled my eyes. “Jacqueline—”

“Plus,” she added, “I can help you.”

“How?”

“Did you even think to bring blood with you?”

I opened my mouth, but I had nothing. I had completely forgotten about the blood aspect of everything. What if I got hungry at the library? I hated feeding on Jay so much, and I would obviously *never* ask Lilac or Marta.

Jacqueline smiled knowingly. “I’ve been around a while. I know how to procure blood in a humane way. One that doesn’t involve a blood club.”

“Fine.” I sighed. “You can come, but you can’t slow us down.”

I led her to the car just in time to meet Jay, Marta, and Lilac, whose arms were full of snacks. They all looked surprised to see our newest traveling companion.

“Jacqueline, what are you doing here?” Jay asked.

“She’s coming with us,” I replied. “So, let’s go. We don’t want to miss our flight.”

We piled into the car again, now with Lilac in the middle seat and me driving, and continued our journey.

On the way, I kept catching movement out of the corner of my eye. Something moving through the woods. Plum must not have given up yet.

Suddenly, that blur of movement darted into the road right in front of the car. I slammed on the brakes to avoid hitting them, but not before I realized it wasn’t a wolf at all. It was a person!

“What the hell?”

The car swerved and fell into a ditch, and the airbags deployed a split second later. I smacked my head on the window, and stars were still dancing across my vision as the figure walked over.

They had to be some kind of supernatural being, I dimly realized. There was no way a human could have moved that fast.

They ripped the door off its hinges and yanked me out by the collar of my shirt. Recognition plowed into me.

It was the vampire from the blood club. The vampire who had chased us all the way back to the pack house. Echo.

He sneered. “We’ve got some questions for you… you. You’re coming with us… us.”

**Episode 2092**

Lucian depressed the plunger, and the serum flooded into my arm. The injection stung like the world’s worst hornet sting. Like an entire wildfire, burning its way through my veins. I hissed through gritted teeth as he pulled the needle out and carelessly dropped the now-empty syringe back into the metal container.

Even with the needle out of my arm—because surprise, surprise, Lucian was absolute garbage at bedside manner—the pain didn’t go away. It burned hot through my entire arm and up into my shoulder.

“What the hell is this?” I whined, my breath catching at the bright-hot sensation.

Lucian watched my reaction with narrowed eyes, like I was some kind of science project, and then nodded. “Well, this is promising. No hives.”

I gasped. “What?”

“Calm down, Caliana. Everything’s going to be just fine. If the serum was going to kill you, it would have done so already.”

*Wow. How comforting!*

Aysel sauntered forward, her full lips curved up into a smirk. I wanted to smack it off her face—and then smack her a few more times for good measure.

She eyed me with pure delight. “Can I ask her the first question?”

Her psychopath brother laughed. “Come now, Aysel. You know how this works. We have to wait for it to take effect first. Let’s give it some time.” He waved a guard over. “Please escort Caliana back to her rooms.”

The guard grabbed me by the arm and hauled me out of the chair. I let out a yelp of pain. His fingers were digging into my skin right below the injection site. The burning sensation increased tenfold under the pressure.

“Do be careful with her. After all, she’s our guest.” Lucian’s lips curved up into a smile.

In that moment, I wanted nothing more than to blast both of these royal psychopaths across the room. Maybe a few times, just to make sure they got the message.

I scowled at both Lucian and his crazy sister as I was escorted out of the room. *Xavier and Greyson are going to save me* *from you. And when they find out what you’ve done to me, it’ll be curtains for you both. And I won’t save you from them.*

The second my feet hit the carpeted hallway, Aysel slammed the door shut. When I was brought back to my opulent guest room-slash-prison cell, I considered slamming my own door shut and perhaps throwing a temper tantrum the likes of which the Vanguard pack had never seen.

But it wouldn’t have done any good. I was trapped. Lucian and his sister were calling the shots, and that wasn’t changing anytime soon. So I just flopped down onto my annoyingly comfortable bed and tried to keep from using my arm. The pain had dimmed down to embers now, but it had been replaced with some low-key wooziness. Maybe with a side of nausea?

*Are these the side effects?* My heart pounded a new rhythm at the thought, and I took a deep breath to try to calm myself. *It could just be the stress. This is a scary AF situation.*

I really did feel sort of… floaty? And my arm still ached. Was the serum taking hold? Would it actually work? I shivered at the thought of being at Lucian and Aysel’s mercy, unable to stop myself from spilling everything about the Redwood pack to two people who were barely acquaintances.

*Don’t think about it. Focus on something else.*

What I really needed was to figure out a way to get out of here before Lucian and Aysel came back to interrogate me. I had no idea what they’d ask me, or how long they’d be able to question me before the serum wore off, but there was no way I’d do anything to betray my mates or my pack—not without a fight.

This serum was entirely new to me, like something out of a science fiction novel. I didn’t know how it worked. Would I have any control at all? Would I be able to use loopholes or evade the truth, even a little bit?

I sighed and forced myself to sit up, wincing at the pressure on my still-tender arm. There was too much I didn’t know. I couldn’t risk sticking around long enough to undergo their interrogation. I needed to get out of here before they could put their serum to the test.

I rushed to the window and pushed it open. Looking down the side of the palace from the open window definitely brought on a new level of wooziness. I gripped the edge of the window tight and forced myself back. Well, jumping wasn’t an option. Nor was trying to sneak into another room via the outside ledge. If I fell, I’d definitely break my neck, which would effectively keep the Vanguard royals from questioning me, but still wasn’t a great option.

*Maybe I can make a rope out of the bedsheets, like in movies? I tried that once, and it was fine. These thousand thread count sheets have to be good for something…*

The breeze blew in through the open window, and I let out a sigh. Oh, it felt so good on my face. I hadn’t realized I was so hot until I opened the window.

Smiling, I leaned out a tiny bit to feel more of the breeze. It tingled its way across my skin. Air had never felt so good! My smile widened into a full-on grin, and I laughed at the sheer joy of cool air on my heated cheeks.

*Oh god. I sound kind of drunk.* I blinked. *Actually, I* feel *kind of drunk.*

My head was spinning, but in a nice way. I didn’t feel sick. I just felt… free. Maybe this situation wasn’t so scary after all. I mean, here I was in this beautiful room in a real-life castle! Wasn’t it every girl’s dream to be held hostage in a tower?

I laughed again and spun in a circle. This wasn’t a bad situation at all! I’d just been overthinking things earlier. Just like I always did. But no more! I resolved to stop overthinking. Stop worrying. Stop wondering “*what if?*”

I was going to be present and happy, and life would be perfect and easy. Now, if I could just figure out how to get rid of all the yucky guilt that came with loving two guys at the same time. And *brothers* at that! What luck! It was like I was living one of those steamy Harlequin novels with the shirtless guys on the cover.

I pictured what Xavier and Greyson would look like on the cover of one of those books. Shirtless, of course. Standing there next to each other all broody-like. And the title would be something like *Two Alphas to Love* or whatever.

I outright cackled at the thought. Those would absolutely fly off the shelves! We wouldn’t even need to write anything. We could just bind two hundred blank pages together and stick my sexy mates on the cover. Who wouldn’t want to drool over them?

I flopped back down onto the bed, caught in a fit of giggles.

Sighing dreamily, I pictured myself as a Regency heroine in an elaborate red dress with a low, lacy neckline and a corset. There I’d go, walking through the beautiful castle garden at midnight, the full moon glowing overhead. And my love would meet me at the fountain in the center.

In my mind, Xavier stepped carefully through the flowers, shirtless but wearing old-timey breeches. He took me into his arms and kissed me in an exaggerated romance-novel sort of way, the way that made the leading ladies swoon.

He whispered, “I love you,” and I whispered, “I love you too.”

Then he set me upright and spun me around—to fall into Greyson’s waiting arms. He dipped me low enough that I could smell the roses as their petals brushed my cheek, and he somehow kissed me mid-dip.

“You’re my one true love,” he told me.

I smiled. “And you’re my mate.”

Then he lifted me up so I stood between them.

“What about the *due destini*?” I asked.

Xavier shrugged. “What about it?”

“Aren’t you worried?”

Greyson shook his head. “We don’t care anymore. All we want is you.”

“But what if one of you gets hurt? You could die!”

“We don’t care,” Xavier said.

“Yes, you should choose,” Greyson added.

I frowned. All that giddiness evaporated. “No, I can’t choose. You know that.”

“It’ll be fun,” Greyson pressed. “Just choose!”

Xavier smiled, but it almost looked menacing. His voice took on a sing-song cadence, “Just choose!”

“No!” I cried. “I can’t!”

I shot upright and found myself back in my grandiose four-poster bed. Aysel was standing over me with an evil grin smeared across her face. Lucian stood beside her, watching me without a hint of emotion.

My stomach clenched. “What are you doing here?”

“You were having quite the daydream,” Aysel said. “You were muttering about that nasty *due destini* curse.”

My heart began to race. *Oh no…*

“So, let’s see if the serum worked, Caliana,” Aysel drawled. “What do you really think about me?”

The answer was immediate. “I think you’re really pretty, but you’re a psychotic bitch.” I gasped and slapped my hand over my mouth. That was something I would *think*, never say. “I didn’t mean to say that.”

Aysel just laughed and glanced at Lucian. “Wonderful! It seems the serum is working.” She looked back at me, her eyes narrowed like a predator about to go in for the kill. “Tell me, what is your answer?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Be honest,” Aysel chided. “Who do you choose? Greyson? Or Xavier?”

**Episode 2093**

XAVIER

I watched, my heart pounding and adrenaline pumping through my veins, as Artemis lunged out in front of the cluster of guards with her hands raised in front of her.

Nothing happened. Not so much a twinkle of magic erupted from her fingertips.

The guards stared at her in shock and confusion for exactly two seconds before they jumped to attention and charged straight at her. Artemis didn’t move an inch.

“Artemis!” I shouted. “Do something! *Anything!*”

I watched a bead of sweat slide down the side of her face, and her face screwed up in concentration. The guards were only a few feet away now. One more second and they’d be on her, and as tough as she was, Artemis was no match for seven werewolf guards—not without her magic.

Suddenly, magic shot out from her palms and slammed point-blank into the cluster of guards. Every single one of them went flying back into the house, their bodies making an unsettling crunching noise against the stone exterior. Not a single one of them got back up.

I blinked. *Shit, she just concussed that whole squadron with one shot.*

When I looked back over at the Fae powerhouse, I noticed her swaying on her feet.

I rushed over to catch her. “Are you okay?”

She leaned into me and nodded. “Yeah. Just… drained. I’m not used to using my magic anymore, I guess. Stuff like that has never made me this tired before.”

I looked back at the pile of limp guards. “So taking down half a dozen guards in one shot is old news, then?”

Her lips twitched, and she pushed away from me to stand on her own strength. “Believe me, I can do better.” Then that ghost of a smile disappeared. “Or, at least, I could.”

“Hopefully we won’t need to use your magic again.”

“I don’t think I could, even if I wanted to,” she confessed. “Not until I recover.”

“And… How long do you think that’ll take?”

She shrugged. “No idea. I’ve never needed to recover before.”

“Okay then.”

I tried not to dwell on it. Artemis was a bounty hunter. I was a wolf and a mercenary. This was something we could both handle. She’d gotten us in the door. If that was all she did, then she would still be responsible for us getting through the most important step. But I would be lying if I said we wouldn’t need more of her magic inside the house. There would certainly be more guards, and if they swarmed us, we would really have our work cut out for us.

But then again, so what? I’d been up against worse odds than this, with meaner enemies than pretty boy Lucian. We’d figure it out as we went, and in the end, we’d still walk out of here with Cali.

I grabbed some clothes from an unconscious guard, dressed, and then I pushed open the front door. It creaked and got stuck halfway, because it had sort of been blasted off its hinges by Artemis’s attack. Running footsteps echoed on the marble floor in the house, heading in our direction, and I pulled Artemis into a dark side room.

I watched around the edge of the door as another group of guards ran past. Artemis hadn’t been kidding when she’d said her magic wouldn’t be quiet.

*Guess I should have taken her word for it.*

We listened as the guards headed away, and I tried not to count the seconds as we waited for the coast to be clear. Now that so many guards were literally up in arms, our window of opportunity was closing fast. We needed to find Cali ASAP, hope that along the way we found Greyson, and get the hell out of here, or there was a good chance we wouldn’t be making it out at all.

Finally, when quiet had settled back over the house, I gestured to a back door on the other side of the room. I wasn’t sure where it led, exactly, but it was probably for the best if we avoided the main hallways for now.

Artemis must have been thinking the same thing, because she nodded in agreement, and we snuck out the back door, which led us to yet another marble corridor—one I didn’t recognize.

I tried to remember the layout from the party. That night was hazy, and the house itself put most labyrinths to shame, but I was fairly certain I hadn’t come back here.

We walked as quietly as we could down the corridor. Even the tiniest of noises seemed to echo off all that marble. I spotted a giant, ornate door at the end of the hallway and pushed through it.

Recognition slammed into me. The Moon Favor ceremony fountain was nestled in the center of the courtyard room. I had been here before—I’d just arrived through another door. From my place in the doorway, with Artemis close behind, I could see the door I’d come through with Cali and Greyson the night before.

“Greyson?” I asked. This was supposed to be our meet-up point. Was he here?

After no one responded, Artemis brushed past me to inspect the fountain, then read the inscription about Seluna. “They’re pretty serious about this moon goddess, huh?”

“Yeah, I told you. Too bad we can’t summon her and ask her to get her acolytes under control.” I stepped forward and watched my wavering reflection in the fountain. It was strange to be here without the whole pomp and circumstance of the ceremony.

*Are those…?* I leaned forward, staring into the blue water. Yes, those were definitely the crystals from the ceremony sparkling up at me from beneath the water’s surface.

The fountain had looked so daunting and cult-y when I’d participated in the ceremony, but now it looked almost beautiful in the darkness, the only light in the room shining in through the windows and sparkling on the surface of the water.

Something tugged at me. Some kind of weird pull, almost as if the water itself was calling to me. I leaned even closer.

*On second thought, I don’t really like it here. We should have decided to meet somewhere else.*

I hadn’t liked it during the ceremony either. Clearly, I should have trusted my initial impressions.

Suddenly, a wave of dizziness passed over me, and I swayed on my feet. Artemis reached out and grabbed me. For a split second, she was the only thing keeping me from tumbling head first into the fountain.

“Xavier, are you okay?”

I shook myself. “I’m fine. We just need to keep moving. Greyson’s clearly not here, and I’m not waiting around for him,” I said. “Once I pick up Cali’s scent, we’ll be able to track her down and make our escape.”

I noticed the dagger that had been used in the ceremony, sitting on a pedestal on the far side of the room.

Artemis followed my gaze. “That’s very ornate. I wonder if it could be used as an actual dagger?” She strode forward to inspect it closer.

It was the one that Aysel had pointed at Cali during the ceremony. “Leave it.”

But it was too late. She lifted the dagger. Nothing happened. No sirens. No booby traps. I wasn’t sure what I’d been expecting, honestly.

Artemis spun the dagger in her hand and smiled. “I like it. Can I keep it?”

“No. We shouldn't take anything that could alert them that we’re here.”

“I’m pretty sure knocking out all those guards did that already.”

I scowled. “Just leave it!”

She rolled her eyes and put it back. “Fine.”

“Why do you want it so much? Are you drawn to it or something?”

She shrugged. “It’s possible, but I can’t say for sure.”

“She’s probably just some witch or Fae who lied,” I said.

Artemis shrugged. “You don’t believe in gods?”

“No. I believe in what I can see. And fight.”

“That’s fair. Of course, we have met one being with god-like powers before.”

I frowned. “Who?”

“Vander. They’re not a Fae, and they seem to know things in a way that makes absolutely no sense—*unless* they’re a god or some other higher being.”

I shook my head. “Vander might be some kind of supernatural being we’ve never heard of, but I doubt they’re an actual *god*.”

“Whatever you say.”

I huffed out a breath. Why were we even wasting our time on this? “We should get going.”

But as we turned to the door, I heard a whisper.

“*Alpha*…”

I turned, ready to fight. But there was nobody else in the room with us.

Then I heard it again.

“*Alpha*…”

I took one step forward, then another. The voice was coming from the fountain, somehow. I looked down into the water.

“*Seluna doesn’t take kindly to liars*.”

A flash of pain rocked my body, and I let out a shout. The clothes on my body felt like they were burning my skin. I tore open the guard jacket and watched my reflection in horror as the black veins spread across my chest.

**Episode 2094**

GREYSON

I waited, my heart pounding and my cuffed hands held up in front of me, while Andrei seemed to consider my offer. Well, *offer* wasn’t quite the right word. *Ruse* was probably a better fit. But he didn’t need to know that.

“How, exactly, are you going to help me get Aysel?” Andrei asked.

I shrugged, forcing my voice to stay casual. “I can convince her that the perfect man is right under her nose. Believe me, I can be persuasive when I want to be. Not that it’ll take much persuading,” I added quickly, when his eyes narrowed. “You’re her perfect match, and given how much she respects you already, I have complete faith that she’ll realize what’s in her best interests.”

Just a little more finessing and he’d be putty in my hands.

“And how do I know I can trust you? You’ve done nothing but defy Prince Lucian since we met.”

“Sure, but that’s Prince Lucian. What you and I are talking about now has nothing to do with him.”

“Fine. How do I know that if I let you go, you won’t go to Aysel and claim her for your own?”

It took every ounce of control I possessed to not outright laugh. Me? “Claim” Aysel? The spoiled, delusional “princess” who’d kidnapped and chained me to her bed?

*Yeah, I’m definitely in danger of falling in love with that whack job.*

I cleared my throat. “I have a mate already. A woman I love more than life itself. I would die for Cali, and Aysel is… lovely. But I have no interest in leaving my mate for her.”

“That’s how I feel about Aysel,” Andrei confessed. “I would do anything just to see her smile.”

“It must be so challenging to harbor such intense love for someone and not be able to tell her,” I mused.

He nodded. “It is. It really is.” He blew out a breath. “But it’s nice to have someone to talk to about it.”

I forced a smile. “Happy to help. So… Do you want me to talk to her for you?” I glanced down at my cuffs meaningfully.

“Wait here.” He strode over to the door. “I need to make sure the coast is clear if I’m going to let you free. If I get caught, I’ll get in trouble for bringing another Alpha onto the grounds without Lucian’s permission.”

I nodded. “Sure. I totally understand.” I’d have agreed to just about anything if it meant getting the fuck out of here.

I stood up and began to pace while Andrei was outside. Seriously, how long did it take to make sure the coast was clear?

*Okay, maybe it’s time to come up with a plan B. Just in case.*

Maybe if it would truly upset Lucian to find me here, I could make a lot of noise to draw the attention of any guards nearby. Then Lucian would be pissed at Andrei for dragging me here and I’d be set free.

But no, I couldn’t count on that. Lucian was unpredictable, and a terrible opportunist. There was no guarantee he’d let me go, even if Andrei had never had permission to imprison me in the first place.

What if I laid in wait and overpowered Andrei?

The silver cuffs burning my wrists answered that question. I wasn’t one hundred percent sure that I’d be able to overpower him in my current state, and if I did try to ambush Andrei, then all that effort I’d put into getting him to trust me would be for nothing.

No, this was the best plan. Now I just needed to see it play out, see if Andrei would agree to let me go.

After what felt like forever, Andrei finally returned.

“Is the coast clear?” I asked.

He hesitated. “Be honest with me: if I let you go, are you going to tell everyone what I did?”

“No, not at all. I promise I won’t say anything to Lucian about what happened in this cottage. That’s between you and me.”

“And you’re sure you don’t want Aysel for yourself?”

“I don’t, Andrei. I promise. Didn’t you hear about Cali’s and my *due destini* curse? Would I really be in this love triangle situation if I didn’t love Cali with all my heart and soul?”

His eyes widened in understanding, and he nodded quickly. “That’s right. *Due destini* curses are nasty things. I suppose that proves how much you love your mate.”

He pulled out a key and unlocked my cuffs.

Relief washed over me, and I rubbed away the burn from the silver. “Thank you. I’ll just be on my way, and we can pretend this never happened.”

I moved toward the door, but Andrei stepped in my way.

“We’re not done yet. You need to come with me to convince Aysel to be with me.”

“Oh.” I blinked. “Right now? I didn’t realize you meant right away.”

“Why wait?” He shrugged. “As you said, she and I are a perfect match. I don’t want to spend another day apart if we don’t have to. I can sneak you into Aysel’s rooms through the back of the palace.”

“Right. I did say that.”

*Fuck me.*

And then I realized that this unsettling turn of events was actually just what I needed. Andrei could sneak me into the main house, and from there I could find Cali and we could *both* make our escape.

I nodded. “That sounds great. Lead the way.”

We backtracked toward the house, and almost immediately, it was apparent that something was wrong. Tons of guards were running to and fro in a state of low-key chaos.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Andrei frowned. “I’m not sure. I’ve been at the cottage all this time, so I haven’t gotten any security briefings in the last couple of hours.

*This must be Xavier and Artemis’s work. Way to stay under the radar, guys.*

“Come on,” Andrei urged, continuing toward the palace. Apparently his need to get with Aysel was greater than his desire to protect the palace from potential threats.

He led me toward what looked like the door to a root cellar. It was set into the ground against the back wall of the palace. Andrei unlocked the door and heaved it open, revealing a dark cavern below.

I hesitated. It looked awfully dark and dungeon-like down there. Was if this was some kind of trick? What if Andrei was playing me just as well as I was playing him?

I glanced back at Andrei’s face.

“What’s the holdup?” he asked. “Aysel’s waiting.”

Uh huh. To his credit, Andrei looked completely committed to this genuinely insane plan of getting me to convince Aysel to fall in love with him.

*This guy might be a good fighter, but he’s no strategist.* I had a feeling I’d be able to read it plainly in his face if he were trying to lie to me.

I nodded. “Let’s not keep your lady waiting.”

I strode down the stairs and into what looked like a cold cellar. Stores of food and barrels of wine lined each wall and filled rows of shelves. Andrei led me to a narrow staircase that led up to a gigantic, state-of-the-art kitchen, which was thankfully empty.

*Guess it’s not time to prep dinner just yet.*

I followed Andrei through the house, trying to figure out when would be the best time to lose him. I didn’t want to cut and run too soon, or he’d sound the alarm before I could find Cali. But I sure as shit didn’t want to come face to face with Aysel ever again.

*Maybe I can get some intel in the meantime.*

“Is Cali okay?” I asked.

“She was fine the last time I saw her.”

“When was that?”

“Not since before lunch.”

I let out a ragged breath and put on my best “worried mate” face.

“I’m just so scared for her,” I said. “I wish I could just see where she’s being kept so I can make sure she’s okay. Not to talk to her, but just to reassure myself of her safety. I love her so much… I don’t know what I’d do if anything happened to her.” My voice broke, and I cast a glance over at Andrei. “You must know what that feels like, since you love Aysel so much.”

For a moment, I was worried I’d laid it on too thick. Then Andrei nodded and kindly said, “She’s in that same room she stayed in last night. She’s being treated like a treasured guest, not a prisoner. I promise.”

“Thank you. That means a lot to me.” I pretended to wipe my eyes. “Where’s Aysel’s—”

“Quiet,” Andrei whispered. “Someone’s coming.”

We ducked behind a row of columns as footsteps grew closer, along with two very familiar scents.

*Looks like those chuckleheads were able to make it in after all.*

As Xavier came into view, I rushed Andrei from behind and slammed him face-first into the column, knocking him out cold.

Xavier and Artemis raced up to me.

“What the hell, Greyson?” my brother snapped. “Where have you been?”

“We’ve been worried about you,” Artemis added.

I shook my head. “I’ll explain later.”

Artemis glanced down at Andrei with distaste. “Why’d you knock him out? We could have questioned him.”

“No need,” I said. “I know exactly where Cali is.”

**Episode 2095**

Aysel looked at me with raised brows. “Well? Answer my question, Caliana. Who do you choose between those two mates of yours? Xavier or Greyson?”

I clapped my hands over my mouth again and looked at Lucian, begging him wordlessly to call this whole thing off. I couldn’t bear to lose either of my mates, and that was exactly what would happen if I chose, right? Even if it was the “truth”—whatever that even meant—and I actually did want to be with one of them more than the other, I would still end up losing a huge piece of my heart. A piece I could never get back.

Words rested on the tip of my tongue, heavy and urgent. The part of me controlled by the serum wanted to spit those words out, regardless of the consequences. But even *I* didn’t know what I was going to say.

*This serum is crazy. It’s like it’s bypassing my brain. I have no hope of controlling what comes out of my mouth.*

It took every ounce of control I had left to grit out. “Please, you can’t m-make me answer that question.” My voice was barely above a whisper. “You kn-know what it will do to them. The *d-due destini*.” I covered my mouth with my hand again, digging my fingers into my jaw so hard I was sure I’d leave a mark.

Lucian sighed and placed a hand on Aysel’s shoulder. “Why do you even want her to answer this question? Why does it matter to us or the Vanguard pack who she picks?”

She pouted. “Because I want Greyson.”

Oh… I hated her so much. I wished I could tell that bitch she was wrong. That even if I ended up choosing Xavier as a result of the truth serum, she *wouldn’t* have Greyson for herself. He’d be dead, and then nobody could have him.

But maybe she’d be okay with that. She seemed the “if I can’t have him, then nobody will” type.

I couldn’t tell her any of that, of course. Because I was absolutely terrified that if I opened my mouth, the words that came out would ruin everything.

Lucian looked surprised by his sister’s admission. His brows rose and then knit together as he frowned. “Aysel, tell me the truth. All your claims last night—your assertion that Greyson and you joined beneath Seluna’s light… Were they true?”

She scowled. “Why are you asking me that? I thought Caliana was the one being questioned here. She took the serum.”

Behind my hands, I smiled. *Defensive much, Aysel?*

“Because I know you, sister,” Lucian continued, his nostrils flaring. “I know you’re prone to… Let’s call it exaggeration. Was all that drama last night simply because you want Greyson to be your mate?”

She sighed. “Fine. Maybe I did… exaggerate, just a little bit. But it was for a good cause. I want him. I *need* him to be my mate!”

If I hadn’t been holding my jaw shut, it would have dropped open. Aysel was talking like she was asking Lucian to buy her a new car instead of asking him to force someone to be her mate! Whether it was Greyson or not, whoever ended up with this demon princess deserved to be there of their own choice. Not because Lucian pressured them into it.

“Thank you for your honesty.” Lucian smiled. “If you truly want him, we’ll figure out a way for you to get him.”

My hands dropped to my sides, and fear, fury, and a primal possessiveness took over. “You can’t do that!”

Lucian snarled and closed some of the distance between us so that he was towering over me, staring down at me with cold eyes. “You do *not* tell me what I can and cannot do, Caliana.”

I flinched back, curling my arms around myself in sheer terror. In that moment when he’d been staring me dead in the eye, I’d seen the true Lucian for the first time, rather than the polished, cordial façade he put on for everyone in this palace.

He might’ve thought himself a prince, but the true Lucian was volatile. Entitled. And absolutely unhinged.

As quickly as he’d lashed out, he stepped back, all smiles again. Cordial and princely as ever. “Now, why don’t we take advantage of our little situation and have a chat? Just the three of us.”

I was still trembling from his earlier display of madness, but my heart hammered against my ribs even harder. The serum still had a hold on me. The pure terror Lucian had brought out in me had dampened it for a moment, but I knew the moment he started asking questions, I would bend to his will.

He didn’t waste a single moment before taking advantage. “Tell me, Caliana. Does the Redwood pack truly have two Alphas? Or was that a lie too?”

“I want there to be two Alphas,” I blurted out.

“But is it official? Has there been any kind of ceremony?”

My arms, still wrapped protectively around my middle, tightened against my ribs. *Don’t give in! Don’t do it, Cali!*

“No,” I answered. “Not yet.”

Lucian’s brows rose. “Interesting. So which one is the Alpha, then?”

“We don’t know.”

His eyes widened. “A pack without an official Alpha? That is very… unusual.”

I swallowed painfully. I’d told him too much. Oh god… Even if he didn’t ask a single additional question, which was unlikely, I’d already told him just how fragile the Redwood pack truly was.

“Do you know why wolf packs need Alphas?” he asked.

I frowned. Was this part of his interrogation, or was he just making conversation now? Either way, a small “No,” slipped through my lips.

“A pack without leadership, without a clear hierarchy, is weak. Like a worm with its head cut off, it might wriggle on the ground for a bit, but it is exposed, just waiting for a predator to come and pluck it up.”

I was going to be sick. Where was he going with this? Did Lucian want to take over the Redwood pack? I’d thought this whole party thing had just been a weird meet-and-greet. Had he really been trying to suss out all the packs so that he could find and exploit their weaknesses?

*No! He can’t get away with that.*

Aysel leaned forward, her arms crossed over her ample chest. “If Greyson isn’t a real Alpha, then he can change packs.”

“He *was* a real Alpha,” I insisted, honestly not sure whether the serum or my own protective instincts were running the show now. “He can be again.”

“Really? So… Does that mean you choose Greyson?” She grimaced. “Oh, poor Xavier.”

I shook my head. “No, I didn’t say that.”

“Come on, Caliana. Wouldn’t it make everything so much easier if you just let me have Greyson? This could be the solution you’ve been looking for! I promise, I’ll make him happy. So happy he won’t even miss you.”

I scoffed. “I don’t make his choices for him, and he’s not some object I can just hand over to you. But either way, I’m pretty sure he doesn’t want to be with you. Especially after the shit you pulled last night.”

Her face contorted with the same mad rage I’d seen on her brother’s face. “We’ll see about that!”

Lucian held up a hand to stop her before she could try to rip my face off, or whatever she was planning in that crazy bag of cats she called a brain.

Lucian offered me a tight smile. “Allow me to give you advice: it’s unwise to upset my sister while you’re a guest in our home.”

My shoulders slumped. Of course he wasn’t going to truly rein her in. Of course I was still completely at their mercy. Their prisoner and leverage and guinea pig and reluctant informant, all wrapped up in one.

Tears burned in my eyes, but I fought them back. “Why do you even want me here?” I asked. “You said you had information about the *due destini* curse. Was that a lie?”

“It was the truth,” Lucian said simply. “But that doesn’t mean I’m going to divulge that information right now. Not while you’re being so defiant.”

A wave of dizziness passed over me, and I had to grab onto the edge of the mattress to keep myself upright. If the serum had been starting to affect me earlier, now it was truly taking root. I wanted to lie down, to sleep this off and forget all of it. But that wasn’t an option. I had to keep my wits about me, had to keep what little control I had left over this situation. I’d learned my lesson about making myself vulnerable to these two. I wasn’t going to make that mistake twice.

I pulled in a deep breath and focused on the siblings standing in front of me. Lucian thought I was defiant? He hadn’t seen anything yet. Now he had a front row seat to me beating him and his sister in whatever game they were playing.

“I wouldn’t be defiant if you stopped playing games with me.”

Lucian smirked. “Oh, Caliana. I’ve only just begun to play.”

“You might think you can take advantage of Greyson and Xavier through me, but you’re not the first to think so. And my mates will rise to the challenge. They won’t be beaten.”

Lucian’s eye twitched, and his nostrils flared. That mad, uncontrolled rage was bubbling over again. He rushed toward me, violence written on his face, but then the door burst open, and Greyson, Xavier, and Artemis raced into the room.

My sister snarled at the wolf prince. “Get the fuck away from my sister, moon boy!”

**Episode 2096**

VIOLET

Charlie and I were waiting in the woods for Iris to arrive. I’d thought it a better option than to tell her where the new pack house was. She was, after all, still a hunter, and I’d convinced Charlie well enough that we shouldn’t just lead her to us. Just in case.

But standing out here, I felt like a sitting duck. Where the hell was she?

His phone buzzed, and he glanced down at the display. “She should be here any minute.”

“The airport’s not quite that close,” I murmured.

“It’s close enough. She’ll be here soon.”

I still couldn’t quite believe Charlie’s mom, of all people, was flying in to help us investigate the attempts on my life. It probably helped that Charlie was in harm’s way too. I couldn’t imagine Iris lifting a finger to help me in any other circumstances, but for her son, she’d make the leap.

My stomach clenched at the thought. I shouldn’t be so judgmental to Iris. At the end of the day, she was still dropping everything to fly out here and help me. It was hard to look past the rough beginning I’d had with her, or the distaste she had on her face whenever she looked at me, or, you know, the handful of veiled threats she’d thrown my way.

I wasn’t her favorite person in the world, and the feeling was mutual. Which was why I still felt the need to pinch myself, to assure myself that this really was happening—not only did someone want me dead for reasons I didn’t fully understand, but Charlie’s mom *didn’t* want me dead.

Or at least, I didn’t think so. She certainly had wanted me dead in the past, but it didn’t make any sense that she would be threatening me now. She would never threaten Charlie in the process too.

Charlie offered out a pack of gum for me to take a stick.

“Can we go back yet?” Torin asked, speaking up for the first time in a while. We’d brought him as extra insurance. I guess maybe I didn’t fully trust that Iris wouldn’t try to kill me and get Charlie to lie about it. “You haven’t even decorated your gingerbread house yet! You want to get everything on it so you can let it dry.”

I forced a smile. “We will later. Promise.”

I wasn’t in a holiday mood whatsoever though. All I really wanted to do was dive beneath my covers and hide until Iris showed up. Or maybe forever. The jury was still out on that.

I wondered what Iris would think about a big bad werewolf pack house, getting festive for the holidays. It would probably blow her mind.

“Hey.” Charlie caught my hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “I can only imagine what you must be feeling right now, but try not to worry. My mom will be supportive. She wouldn’t have come all the way out here if she wasn’t willing to help. We’re all on the same side here.”

I sighed and slipped my hand out of his grasp. “It just feels counterintuitive to call a hunter to help a werewolf when she’s being stalked, you know? Like, wouldn’t your mom *want* this to happen to me?”

His face hardened. “Not if she still wants me to call her ‘Mom.’”

My heart caught in my throat. On any other day, I’d have been over the moon at such a declaration of loyalty, but I didn’t want to be the cause of another rift between Charlie and his mom. I mean, I didn’t particularly *like* Iris, and I didn’t think I was ever going to forgive her for trying to kill us. But that didn’t mean I wanted to drive a wedge between them. I didn’t want that responsibility. I couldn’t handle it on my conscience.

A car pulled up in the clearing, and I went ramrod straight.

“I think I’m just now realizing what you brought me to,” Torin said. “Your mom’s a *hunter*, right?”

“Yeah, but don’t worry. She’s off duty today.”

I flashed Torin a sympathetic look as Charlie took my hand and we walked toward where Iris was parking.

“Hi, M—”

She’d barely opened the car door when she said, “Tell me everything you know about this murderous stalker.”

My eyes widened. *Okay, then. All business it is.*

Charlie sighed. “It’s nice to see you too, Mom.”

Iris frowned and put her intense energy on pause just long enough to give her son a hug. When she released him she gave me a nod. If I’d been asked to choose a word to describe Iris’s nod, I’d have called it *apathetic.*

“Don’t think I haven’t noticed that you haven’t given me an answer about spending Christmas with us,” she added when they broke apart.

My mate looked properly chastised. “Sorry, we’ve been kind of distracted lately. You know.” He gestured vaguely at me in what I could only assume was some kind of shorthand for “attempted murder victim.”

Iris nodded. “And that’s why I’m here. To help with those distractions.”

If possible, my body tensed up just a smidge more. There was nothing quite like your own attempted murder being written off as a “distraction” to really make you feel like the most important person in the conversation.

But the bright side, if there was one, was that Iris wasn’t actively working against me. Probably. And if that wasn’t progress, I didn’t know what was.

She turned back to me, her face tight. “Is there a reason we had to speak privately out in the woods?”

I nodded. “Pack safety,” I said. “You understand.”

*You know, just in case you were trying to stage an attack on the house.*

Guilt knotted tight in my stomach. That was uncharitable. Charlie was right—Iris was here to help me. I should be grateful, or at least a little less catty.

“And who’s this?”

“I’m Torin!”

“Torin, could you give us a moment?” I asked. He nodded and he started to step away, muttering something about planning a cheese spread.

Iris took a seat on the hood of the car, immediately positioning herself as the authority figure. Charlie and I had no choice but to come closer.

Iris folded her hands in front of her and looked at me intently. “Tell me everything, with as much detail as possible.”

So I did. Charlie held my hand through it, which helped, but I was proud of the calm way in which I recounted the harassment, the threats, and the eventual attempts on my life. And Charlie’s too. When I finished, Iris stared down at the ground in contemplation.

“Are there any hunter communities in this area?” she asked.

“Not that I know of. In fact, I didn’t even know about hunters until I met Charlie.”

Iris frowned. “That doesn’t mean there aren’t hunters nearby,” she said dismissively. “They’re very good at keeping themselves secret from supernaturals.”

I grimaced. I wasn’t thrilled by the idea of a secret hunter group tucked away in the wilds of Portland. And maybe hunters *were* great at sneaking around, but I was pretty sure if there were any nearby, I would have heard about them by now. Between the werewolf pack wars, the vampires, and the revenants, there was more than enough activity around here to lure a hunter out of hiding.

But I didn’t say any of that.

“We need to make a list of potential suspects,” Iris said.

Charlie hummed thoughtfully. “Well, the vampires in the area are probably at the top of that list; they don’t really love the werewolves. There’s one guy, Iñigo—he’s dead now, but maybe one of his minions took over his organization?”

Iris nodded and wrote that down.

Charlie turned to me. “What about Chad?”

Immediately, I shook my head. “No. Chad’s an asshole, but he wouldn’t try to kill me.”

He frowned. “Back at camp, that asshole initially wanted to hunt you down. Maybe he helped us near the end of the battle with the revenants, but he could’ve changed his mind.”

I shook my head again. “It’s not him. I don’t know how to explain it, but I saved his life, and now I think he’s… loyal to me? In any case, I’m certain he’d never try to kill me.”

“Was there anyone else at the camp who you clashed with?” Iris asked.

“Just Zachery.”

She frowned. “Zachery Stanislaski? It’s unfortunate what happened.”

“I know. Zachery was my friend,” Charlie added, “but by the end, he kind of hated both of us. After what he tried to do to Violet, I was ready to kill him.”

Iris shook her head. “I doubt Zachery would try to murder anyone—being ousted from the hunters has broken him. He’s an option, but the last I heard, he was with his parents, who were trying to pick up the pieces and make an appeal for him. We can double check that he’s still with them. Who else is there?”

I blew out a breath. We were cutting suspects from the list left and right, and we were still no closer to figuring out who had tried to kill me. I racked my brain for any other threats. “The only other possibility I can think of is this new wolf pack in town, the Vanguard pack.”

Iris’s eyes flashed with recognition. “The Vanguard pack?”

“You know them?”

“I’ve heard of the Vanguard pack—they’re a legend in hunter circles. We thought they’d disappeared.” Iris let out a low whistle. “If they’re truly back, we’re in trouble.”

**Episode 2097**

GREYSON

Lucian looked horrified and pissed off and scandalized all at once, and I’d never been happier. I reminded myself to take a mental snapshot to think back on the next time I had a bad day. Nothing would perk up my mood like seeing this little shit put on the defensive.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he snarled. With a snap there were guards coming in, their eyes on us.

I stepped forward. “We’re not here to fight. We just want Cali back.”

“You agreed to let her stay while I investigated.” He huffed. “Are you *incapable* of sticking to an agreement with me? Any agreement? As if it wasn’t bad enough that you two lied to me when you entered this house, you’ve been nothing but insubordinate ever since.”

“You’ve had enough time. Cali’s coming home with us.”

He shook his head. “I’ll be the one to say when I’ve had enough time. I’m royalty.”

God, I wanted to rip him a new one. To show him I was *nobody’s* subordinate. But attempting to kill him, as satisfying as it sounded, was a thread I couldn’t un-pull, and we really were just here to get Cali. It was probably for the best if we made our grand exit without smashing Lucian’s smug face in.

Artemis didn’t seem to have gotten the memo about that, because when she stepped forward, she looked ready to knock some teeth out. “There’s no way I’m leaving my sister here to be imprisoned or tortured.”

Lucian had the audacity to look offended. “There’s no torture here. Look around. Does this look like a prison cell to you, or a torture chamber?”

Artemis pointed at Cali, who was perched on the edge of the large mattress beneath the four-poster bed frame. “My sister looks sick. What have you been doing to her?”

I watched Cali’s face. She looked flushed and small and terrified, and fury burned hot inside my chest.

If that motherfucker had so much as laid a hand on my mate, I was gonna skin him alive.

Cali stumbled forward, swaying like she’d just challenged Lola to a drinking game. A game she would very quickly lose. Artemis caught her sister’s arm and steadied her. Cali didn’t seem to notice.

“You came for me!” Cali cried. “You’re my hero.”

She planted a big wet kiss on Artemis’s cheek. The Fae looked absolutely gobsmacked, and I was stunned into silence by the gesture. What the hell was going on here? Was Cali actually drunk? How the hell had she gotten this drunk while being held captive by the Vanguards? Then a chill went down my spine. Had she been *drugged*?

“Love, are you okay?” I asked slowly.

“I’m fine!” she sing-songed. “Better than fine! I feel like I could fly!” She held her arms out like she was a bird, accidently smacking Artemis’s shoulder in the process, and swayed in place.

What had Lucian done to her?

“Cali, you don’t have to be scared,” Xavier said. I threw him a frown. Cali was too far gone to feel fear.

But she nodded at him as if he’d just said something very wise. “I *was* very scared. These two are nuts!” She gestured at Lucian and Aysel. “But I also knew you guys would come save me—even though I told you not to! Because you never listen to me!” She grinned, which kind of undermined her message.

“I… I understand,” I said slowly, not really understanding at all. “That’s… fair.”

Cali looked surprised by my response. Maybe she’d misread the “what the fuck?”written across my face. “Well, I’m sorry!” she huffed. “But it’s the truth. It hurts, doesn’t it? It’s all I can say now.”

Pulling in a deep breath, I moved closer so I could get a better look at her. Cali’s pupils were so dilated that only the thinnest rings of her irises were visible. That wasn’t a side-effect of drinking alcohol. So what the hell was going on with her?

I rounded on Lucian with a growl. “What the hell did you do to her?”

To my unceasing shock, it was Aysel who stepped forward. She waved off my concern. “Oh, don’t you worry. We just gave her a little serum to help with her honesty.”

The puzzle pieces clicked together, and I exploded. “*Truth serum?* You drugged her like you drugged us last night? You said she’d be safe with you. You promised you’d treat her like a guest, and then you go ahead and *roofie* her?”

“Drugged?” Lucian blinked. “We didn’t do anything like that at the party. Whatever you indulged in was of your own accord.”

That couldn’t be true. There was no way that in my right mind I’d want to kiss Aysel. If I had… No, I stopped right there.

“And as for the serum…” He shrugged. “We had to test it on someone before giving it to my dear sister. Although, I suppose that’s not even necessary, now that I think about it.”

Aysel smiled. “Of course not. I always tell you the truth eventually, brother.”

I didn’t know where to look, what to think, or whether my time was better spent screaming in the royal siblings’ faces or scooping up my mate and getting the hell out of here.

Actually, that last one did sound pretty nice. If I had to spend any more time with these conniving sociopaths, I was gonna do something that’d kick off a whole new pack war.

“We’re leaving with Cali. Now.”

I reached for her hand, but she skittered back. “We can’t leave! Lucian needs to tell me!”

My god, I wished there was just one thing happening in this room that I actually understood. “What are you talking about? You’re not making any sense, love. It’s probably whatever they dosed you with.”

Xavier stepped forward and wrapped his arm around Cali. “You don’t have to worry. We’re here now, and we’re taking you back home, where you belong.”

“But Lucian knows how to end it!” Cali blurted out. “How to end all of it! He said so.”

“What’s she rambling about?” I demanded, turning to Lucian. “End *what*? And you’d better think hard about your answer, because if you did anything to hurt my mate I will kill you, prince or not.”

Lucian rolled his eyes. “Believe it or not, I bear no ill will toward the Alphas of the Redwood pack, or their mate. In fact, I’m fascinated by the lot of you. I want to know more about you. Maybe I went about it the wrong way, but you must forgive me for that. When you’ve done as many things as Aysel and I have, and when you have so much power at your disposal, sometimes you become so accustomed to getting whatever you want, whenever you ask for it, that you… forget about certain polite behavior. Please accept my apologies.” He offered me a salesman’s smile.

I blinked, mentally sifting through the word vomit. *Is this guy fucking kidding me? Does he actually believe any part of what he just said? Because it seems like he just uses fancy words to justify acting like a complete tyrant.*

“You don’t believe me.” Lucian sighed. “I was so hoping to make amends.”

I frowned. Okay, so he could read me better than most. I’d have to be more careful about showing my emotions around him.

“Why the sudden change of heart?” Xavier asked.

Lucian looked over at Cali and smiled softly. “Because now I know everything I need to know.”

“What the hell does that mean?” I asked.

“Unfortunately, I let my curiosity run away with me.” He winced apologetically. “But I do regret the pain I’ve caused you.”

Artemis scoffed, and I couldn’t have agreed more. I didn’t trust this guy as far as I could throw him.

Lucian smiled. “I’ve heard about what really happened between you and my sister.”

I spared a glance at Aysel. Her eyes had been on me throughout this entire fucked up meeting. I hated the hungry look in her eyes, how predatory she seemed.

“I’ll admit, my sister can be a bit much,” Lucian continued, “especially when it comes to things she desires. But can you blame her? It’s a compliment, after all, that she would choose one such as yourself as the object of her affection.”

*Why do I have the strange feeling that I’m being complimented and dragged at the same time?*

“I hope you can keep an open mind when it comes to my sister. After all, we’re all trying to be friends here, right?” He laughed, and it didn’t even sound fake. The guy was a better actor that I gave him credit for.

But there was no way in hell that I was doing anything with his sister. *Ever*.

“Your sister tried to lure me against my will,” I said tersely. “Why would I want to be friends with her after that?”

Lucian opened his hands in a gesture of peace, as if he were offering us an invisible olive branch. “Who among us hasn’t lied for love?”

I rolled my eyes. If that was what they called love, I didn’t even want to know what their version of hate looked like.

“We’ve leaving,” Xavier said.

Lucian nodded. “I’m fine with that. I won’t stand in your way.”

My brows lifted. I’d really thought there’d be more of a fight.

Lucian met my eyes. “I’m sure she will ensure that this won’t be the last we see of each other.”

As Xavier scooped Cali up in his arms and carried her out of the room, I couldn’t help but wonder: who was the “she” Lucian was talking about?

**Episode 2098**

LOLA

I tried to throw a punch at Echo as he yanked me out of the car, but it glanced off his shoulder.

“Get off me, you asshole!”

I threw another wild punch that missed its target and tried to twist out of his hold as Marta screamed from the other side of the car.

“Jay!” I called out. I couldn’t see him; everything was so chaotic, and I was still trying to get my bearings from the crash. “Jay, where are you?”

“Fight him, Lola!” Jay called out. “Don’t worry about me, just get the hell out of here!”

“Jay!” I looked around, frantic, but I still didn’t see him. All I saw was the vampire holding Lilac and Marta down so that they couldn’t get out of the car.

I lunged at Echo and tried to bury my fangs in his neck, but he was too fast for me and countered by slamming me onto the hood of the car. I groaned, trying my best to take the pain in stride. I turned toward the windshield, hoping to see Marta and Lilac breaking free of the vampire’s hold. I realized that I recognized the vampire holding them down. It was Echo’s friend, Tracer. I had a sudden flashback to how he and Echo and the rest had chased Jacs and me from the blood bank, trying to kill us just because they smelled the wolf on me.

“What do you want, fucker?” I screamed into Echo’s face. “Leave us alone! We didn’t do anything to you!”

“We figured out what you are… are!” Echo leered at me, his eyes gleaming.

“What do you mean?” I frowned up at him and took a deep breath as I tried to channel every ounce of my vampire strength, not to mention my werewolf power, hoping to use it to explode out of his hold, but it was no use. He was way stronger than me. He had me pinned to the hood of the car by the neck, and every time I thrashed against him, his hold tightened a little more. I looked at the others—if I shifted right now, it could mean one of them getting hurt, or worse.

“What about you, baby… baby?” Echo asked, addressing Jacqueline, who’d also been grabbed. “Want to ditch these losers and join some real men… men?”

Jacqueline appeared at the edge of my vision with her hands raised. “I don’t want any part of this.”

I growled, looking back to Echo.“I still don’t know what it is you want from me! Just let us go!”

Echo arched an eyebrow. My stomach dropped just before Echo thrust a finger into my face. “Cut the shit—we know that the wolf is you… you!”

I faked a laugh. “A *wolf*? Me? That’s ridiculous. Last night was just a huge misunderstanding.”

“Was it now… now?”

I nodded. “Yes! I’m a vampire. You saw my fangs a second ago, right? See, look, here they are again!” I flashed my fangs, hoping it would be enough to convince them. “See, how could I be a werewolf if I have fangs like all of you?”

Tracer laughed as Marta and Lilac continued to struggle against him, but he held them down with ease. I craned my head around, looking for Jay. I gasped when I spotted him on the ground, knocked out.

“*Jay!*” I turned to Echo, resisting the urge to spit in his face. “If you hurt him—”

Echo leaned in close. “It’s not him you need to be worried about. I see your fangs, all right, but that doesn’t mean we were wrong about you. I know that you’re somehow both a vampire and a werewolf, and we’re going to find out how that could be… be.”

“Yeah, we’re going to get to the bottom of it!” Tracer added with another sadistic laugh.

Just then, Jaqueline made her move. Catching her vampire captor off-guard, she pulled out of his grip.

“Jacqueline, help me!” I screamed, hoping that she’d help us out the way she had during the battle with Letifer. She’d come with us because secretly she cared about us, right? Not just for her own self-interests?!

Jacqueline looked between me and Echo, and just when it looked like she was about to edge forward, a huge vampire stepped in the way.

“We don’t have to have a problem, beautiful,” he said, cracking his knuckles.

She held up her hands. “This isn’t about me. I’m no werewolf.”

Tracer snorted. “Oh yeah? If you’re not a werewolf, then why are you hanging out with a bunch of them?”

Jacqueline tensed. “I do what I have to do to survive. So, let me go, and I’ll be on my way.”

Echo laughed. “I appreciate a survivor. Go, before I change my mind… mind.”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Jacqueline took off.

I blinked. Was she seriously… *leaving*?!I had no words.

“*Traitor!*” I shouted after her. She didn’t even look back.

How could I have been stupid enough to trust her? After the whole dust-up at the blood club, I’d fooled myself into thinking that Jacqueline and I had grown closer. I should have known better. Once a selfish jerk, always a selfish jerk.

I screamed as I struggled harder against Echo’s hold. “You’re wrong! You don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m a vampire, that’s it! That’s all!”

I hazarded another glance at Jay. I needed to get to him to see if he was all right.

“Lola! Lola!” Marta cried out.

“Marta, don’t worry, I’m going to get us out of this!” I didn’t know if that was true, but I had to say something. I felt so bad about all of this, getting Marta and Lilac involved with these asshole vampires who couldn’t just mind their own business. We were supposed to be helping Marta figure out what to do about her upcoming trial, but now all this vampire mess was interfering—and might actually get us killed. *Shit!* I had to do something.

Deciding that saving all of our lives was more important than the risk of revealing myself to Echo and his crew, I closed my eyes and started to shift. Before I could finish, Echo slammed my head against the hood, and everything went black.

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Gradually, I came to. I groaned at the sharp pain pulsing in my head. It felt like a migraine, but worse. I could hear someone calling my name. I slowly opened my eyes to see Marta and Lilac standing over me. They both looked like they’d been to hell and back.

“Thank god you’re awake,” Lilac said. “We were worried. We thought you had a concussion or something.”

I touched my forehead, and my fingers came away covered in blood. “I—I don’t think I have a concussion. Or if I did, maybe it’s healed by now.”

Lilac nodded, looking relieved.

“Where are we?” I took quick stock of our surroundings, and my dread increased tenfold. From what I could see, the walls were made of concrete and there were no windows. There was a cot in the corner with a thin, stained mattress, and the door looked to be solid steel, rusted, and bolted shut. A giant exhaust fan hummed loudly overhead, and it wasn’t doing my splitting headache any favors.

“I’m not sure what this place is. We were blindfolded on the way in. We walked down a bunch of stairs to get here. To me it looks like some kind of bomb shelter or something from the fifties,” Marta said.

“Where’s Jay?” I asked. I remembered the sight of him lying on the ground unconscious.

“We haven’t seen him since they brought us down here,” Lilac said.

Frantic, I stood up too quickly, and the room spun around me. I ignored a sudden wave of nausea and bolted for the door. I banged hard on the rusty metal.

“Jay! Jay!”

Not surprisingly, the door didn’t budge. It was locked tight. There was no way I could break it down—even if I shifted. At least not on my own. Still, I banged and kicked at the door, thinking that maybe the rust had gotten the better of the hinges or something and that I might be able to break right through it. After a few tense moments, I gave up and sat down on the ground—there was no way I was going near that disgusting cot.

The three of us turned at the click of the door unlocking. I got to my feet and braced myself, ready to attack. I had to get out of here, and I had to find Jay, by any means necessary. The door swung open to reveal three hulking vampires—too many for me to overpower alone. I scowled as Echo walked in from behind them.

“Where’s Jay, you bastard?” I wanted to lunge at him right then and there, but from the look of the vampires flanking him, I knew that wasn’t a good idea.

“Jay? Oh, you mean our leverage… leverage?” Echo and the other vampires cackled as he took out silver handcuffs and a blindfold. “It’s time for a chat, and you’d better be honest, or else your little werewolf boyfriend gets it… gets it.”

**Episode 2099**

The world was spinning, and I felt so… warm and fuzzy. It was so nice to have Xavier’s arm around me again as he led me out of the room. Lucian watched silently as I went, but I couldn’t read the look on his face. Part of me wanted to stay so that he could tell me everything he knew about the *due destini*, but an equal part of me wanted to leave and never come back. That part of me was winning, helped by the comfort and protection of having my mates so near to me. We hadn’t been separated for all that long, but I’d still missed them.

I let Xavier guide me down the hall. Greyson and Artemis flanked us and exchanged tense stares with the guards as we went. For a second, it felt like if there was one false move on either side, the whole place would erupt into an all-out brawl.

“Are you really okay?” Xavier whispered in my ear as he pulled me even tighter against him. We’d all started to pick up our pace as we headed through the ballroom, making a beeline for the foyer.

I smiled up at him. He was so damn handsome, and tall, and brave. And his hands, so big and warm and strong… “Xavier… I’m much better now that you’re here.”

He smiled down at me, clearly pleased.

“I knew that one or both of my mates would come for me,” I continued. “To be honest, I really thought you’d come separately—never in a million years did I think both of you would come at the same time! I mean, it’s still so hard to imagine you two working together so well! After all, you both really do hate each other! Or maybe *despise* each other is more accurate.”

Xavier’s face didn’t move from his stoic expression. He glanced over at Greyson, who had the same one. They’d never looked more like brothers.

“We don’t look alike,” Xavier said finally, his tone unreadable.

I slapped a hand over my mouth. Had I said that part about brothers out loud? On the inside, I knew that this was not something I’d ever actually want to say—out loud anyway—but I couldn’t stop myself. It was like the truth serum had opened my floodgates, and anything I was thinking or feeling was just spilling out of my mouth without any regard for how it might go over. I told myself that I was going to try harder to hold back, but I knew that I was in no position to make that promise to myself.

We left the palace without any further turmoil, which was a first, since that was all we’d dealt with from the moment we stepped onto the Vanguard property to attend the party from hell. Once we made it outside safely, Artemis pulled me into a big hug, and so did Greyson. I melted into him, relieved to finally be out of the palace—though I still couldn’t quite shake my longing to learn what Lucian knew about our curse.

Artemis breathed a loud sigh and gave me a playful swat on the shoulder. “Cali, you have to stop being such a magnet for trouble; my heart can’t handle it! I was just telling Rishika the other day about how much of a hassle it is to really care about people—especially when those people keep getting into dangerous situations.”

I laughed. “You sound like an old man sometimes!”

Although the words hadn’t come out exactly right, that was the perfect way to describe my sister. She was so wise and set in her ways, and sometimes she could be downright grumpy. *Like an old man!* I laughed a little to myself, proud of the comparison.

“Okay…” Artemis said, shooting an amused look at Xavier and Greyson. “I’ve been called a lot of things in my life, but that was definitely a first.”

Without wasting another second, we rushed away from the house and into the thick woods that bordered the Vanguard pack’s expansive property. Though the Vanguard estate wasn’t all that far from the Redwood pack house, it was like they were on an island by themselves, protected by a sea of trees.

“What happened to you, alone in that house?” Greyson asked, casting a cautious glance behind us as if he still wasn’t convinced that the Vanguards were just letting us walk out so easily. Thankfully, the coast was clear.

I tossed my hands into the air. “It was *so* dramatic! I mean seriously, that family is like a pack of rabid Kardashians. It’s like they’re so rich and so drunk on being royal or whatever that they’ve completely lost touch with reality. They *really* got on my last nerve. Be real, have you ever *seen* such an awful brother-sister duo? Aysel’s a pure bitch, and Lucian is an egomaniac! Horrible nightmares, the both of them. I mean, I don’t *think* I started a war or anything, but I definitely made some threats. But trust me! They deserved it!”

Greyson cocked an eyebrow at me. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I do feel a little woozy—thanks for asking—but as long as you big strong men are here to catch me if I fall, I think I’ll be okay.” I smiled and fluttered my eyelashes at Xavier, and then at Greyson. “Ow,” I said, opening and closing my jaw. “I must have been smiling way too hard because my cheeks are starting to cramp up. I’m just so damn happy to see you two dreamboats.”

Xavier and Greyson exchanged a concerned look, and then each of them took hold of one of my arms to support me while we walked.

Greyson looked at Artemis and Xavier. “Do we know anything about this truth serum that Lucian gave her?”

“Not really,” Xavier supplied.

“Maybe a witch will know something to combat its affects.”

I sighed. “You know, I feel fine. Lucian injected me with it because he wanted to make sure the new batch was safe for his sister. If I haven’t died yet, then I’m probably fine, right?”

“Don’t even joke,” Xavier said. “I’m going to kill him.”

Artemis came forward, joining us. “Cali, what are your symptoms? Do we look like we’re sprouting a bunch of eyeballs? Seeing spots?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know… I guess I just feel kind of warm and dizzy, like I might float away.” *And like I have so much to say and like I don’t want to hold anything in—even really bad or awkward or embarrassing stuff!*

Artemis leaned in close and stared directly into my eyes. “Her eyes are still really dilated. That serum stuff is probably still in her system. My hope is it wears off in a few hours or so.”

I nodded. “Hopefully. So that means all I have to do is avoid any questions until this stuff wears off.”

Easier said than done, especially since it seemed like I didn’t even need to be asked a question to go into overshare mode.

Greyson pulled me into another hug and squeezed me tight. “Cali, I’m so sorry we left you. We never should have done that.”

His skin felt warm against my cheek. “It’s okay. I told you to,” I said. Then I nuzzled into him. “This is nice. You have amazing abs; I can feel them through your shirt. And your butt’s not so bad either, but I won’t touch it right now since everyone’s looking at us.” Greyson laughed as he released me. My cheeks burned with embarrassment. “Ugh, I really hate this truth serum.”

“I’m not sure anymore, I kind of like it now,” Greyson joked.

Xavier rolled his eyes, but I could tell that he found it kind of funny, too.

I punched Greyson in the arm. “That’s unfair! You two should have to take the truth serum, too, to make it even. I hate blurting out all my feelings like this! It’s like I have no filter!”

“Did you before?” Artemis asked as we started walking again, picking up our pace a bit. “And what kind of questions did they want answered so badly that they’d give you a truth serum?”

“They mostly just asked about the *due destini*, and Aysel kept pressing me to tell her who I choose—you know, between Greyson and Xavier. I’m sure she wanted me to say Xavier, since she’s like in *love* with you, Greyson.”

That made everyone stop in their tracks.

“Fucking Lucian and Aysel are really playing with fire,” Xavier said, his expression turning into a scowl. He looked back in the direction we’d come from, as if contemplating racing back to the palace to pummel Lucian.

“No kidding, and it’s a sign that they truly don’t care about the safety of the Redwood pack if they’d ask Cali such a dangerous question. Lucian seems shrewd enough to know what the fallout would be if Cali were to answer that,” Greyson said.

“Yeah, and how would you even start to answer a question like that?” Artemis asked.

Before I could try to turn my truth serum filter off and fight it with everything I had, I opened my mouth.

**Episode 2100**

CHARLIE

It was shocking to hear my mother talk about the Vanguard pack. I’d never even considered reaching out to her about them. Her knowledge of pack history definitely made sense, though. She’d once told me that hunters kept records of supernaturals that went back a long time.

“Mom, what do you know about the Vanguard pack? No one here had even heard of them before, but they claim to be royalty who used to rule this area.”

“I know quite a bit about them, actually. Stories about the Vanguard pack used to be told to us hunter kids, as if they were bedtime fairytales. That’s how old they are.”

I was even more shocked. “A pack that old? Is that even a thing? The Redwood pack hasn’t been around that long, has it?”

Violet shook her head. “I don’t *think* so…”

My mother cocked her head in thought. “The Redwood pack was affected by the werewolf civil war, which was started by Silas. He wiped out a lot of the older werewolf packs in the area, trying to gain power by any means necessary. Any of the older werewolves who might have heard of the Vanguard pack are probably dead, or were driven away long ago.”

“How… How do you know all this?” Violet asked.

“I do my research,” Mom said bluntly.

Violet nodded, her mouth in a thin line as she took all of this in. “Silas really *did* wipe out a lot of the werewolf leadership in these parts—and the leaders were often the elders.”

“But where did the Vanguards go?” I asked.

“It’s hard to know,” Mom said. “The Vanguard was an old werewolf society that ruled with an iron fist. Back in those days, their word was law, and other Alphas would bow down to them and swear their fealty, the way a lord would swear allegiance to a king.”

“How long ago did they exist?” I asked. “When were they last actually *seen*?”

“I believe the last record of their existence is probably a hundred years old—from about the time when the hunters had a big battle with them in Europe. At that time, they were spreading their influence around the world—and the hunters couldn’t allow that to go unchecked,” Mom explained. “The Vanguard was making major headway in creating a united werewolf world that would be too powerful for the hunters to fight. Once the hunters realized how fast the Vanguard influence was spreading, they knew that the Vanguard had to be stopped. Hunters from all over the world trained and recruited more members, and then they all banded together and started a huge battle with the Vanguard and its followers. It was a hard war, lots of casualties, but in the end, the hunters were victorious and thought that they’d wiped out the entire Vanguard royal line.”

That sounded way more epic and terrifying than I ever would’ve imagined. It made me wonder if Xavier and Greyson really knew what we were up against.

“But if they’re back, then someone must have survived,” Violet said.

“Do you think this Vanguard pack is really the same group?” Violet asked. I could tell that she was starting to get worried, and I had to admit that I was feeling the same way. We’d only just gotten out from under Silas’s thumb—something I didn’t even know the full extent of—it would suck to have to turn around and go up against a pack of ancient werewolves from a royal bloodline. Who knew what kind of resources they had at their disposal?

My mother sat back on the car and shook her head. “If it’s not the same pack, then these werewolves are still using the name ‘Vanguard’ to strike fear into their enemies, and that’s not a good sign.” She got up and went to her car door. “This is big news. I need to let the rest of the hunters know what’s happening here.”

“Mom, no, you can’t go. You said you were going to help with Violet’s stalker! That’s the whole reason why you came here!”

The Vanguard pack sounded like a major threat, but Violet’s problem was more urgent in my eyes. There had already been two attempts on her life, and as far as I knew, the Vanguards hadn’t even positioned themselves as our enemies—yet.

My mother paused at the car door and turned to face us. I could see the turmoil churning on her face. I knew that look well. Her allegiance to me and her allegiance to her hunter roots would probably always be a struggle for her. “Honey, I know you two are scared, but the Vanguards are nothing to play around with—and they’re not to be underestimated. The stalker can wait.”

I shook my head. “No, Mom, you said you’d help, and we *need* your help with *this*. We have no idea when or where this person is going to strike again. What if they succeed next time and Violet gets hurt? I’m always at Violet’s side, and I’ll do anything to protect her, so that means I’m in danger, too. Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

“Charlie—”

“Don’t ‘*Charlie*’ me,” I snapped. “Besides, Xavier and Greyson are the Alphas here, and they’re already taking care of the Vanguard pack. We’ll know more about the situation once they get back.”

After what my mother had told us about the Vanguard, I had a feeling that whatever Xavier and Greyson would have to tell us about their time with the Vanguard pack wouldn’t be good. But I couldn’t worry about that right now.

Mom shook her head. “Fine. I understand how important this is to you, and I would never forgive myself if something happened to you.”

I couldn’t help but notice that she didn’t mention anything about her worries for Violet’s safety, but I knew she was still coming to terms with our relationship.

She let go of the car door handle and leaned against the door instead. “So, this stalker, they must have some kind of motivation. What might you have done recently to earn an enemy so laser focused on you?” She gave Violet a pointed look.

Violet hesitated, then shook her head. “I haven’t done *anything* to deserve this. All I care about is keeping Charlie and my family safe.”

“We need more to go on. We can’t fight an enemy we don’t know. We need to figure out this stalker’s identity before we can do anything. As I’ve told you countless times, Charlie, in order to defeat someone, you have to know them, know their weaknesses.”

I could already see the wheels turning my mother’s head, and knowing that she was on our side was a real comfort. I couldn’t help but hope she would begin to accept Violet more if she spent more time with her, and her being here would be a good start for that.

Violet sighed and paced the clearing. “It’s been so hard to figure out who it might be, because they’re so good at staying hidden. It’s been really frustrating. What if someone else had been out there on the ice with me? What if someone else had gotten hurt because of me?”

I took Violet’s hand, hating to see her so anguished. I just wanted to wrap her in my arms and keep her safe from anything that might try to harm her. “You can’t think like that, Violet. None of this is your fault, not even a little. I’m sure of it. The sicko who’s terrorizing you is to blame.”

Violet nodded at me. I could see that she was trying to put up a strong front, but she looked close to tears. I pulled her into a hug and stroked her hair, rocking her back and forth ever so slightly. A few moments passed, and I finally felt her heartbeat calming against my chest.

Mom cleared her throat, and Violet and I broke apart, exchanging sheepish looks.

“We have to figure out how to lure this person out in the open, catch them unawares and unmask them,” my mom continued.

Violet nodded. “I’ve been thinking about how we could do that. I think I have an idea, but I’ll need to be the bait for it to work.”

“Violet, no!” I said immediately, floored that she would even suggest such a thing. Putting herself out there as bait would literally be the most dangerous thing we could do. Didn’t Violet get that? “I’m sorry, but that’s not going to happen. You almost died out there on that ice.”

“I know, Charlie, and I know you’ll be worried about me, but I need to do this to make sure that no one else gets hurt, especially you. If you got hurt—or *killed*—trying to protect me… I don’t know what I would do.” Her eyes were glittering again, as if she might cry any second. “What other options do we have? This weirdo wants to get me, and it doesn’t seem like they’ll give up until they do. We have to do whatever we can stop them, even if it’s risky.”

“Violet, no. There has to be another way. Who’s to say that they won’t do something unexpected and get the drop on you?” I turned to my mother. “Mom, help us. Surely you can think of another plan. One that doesn’t involve putting Violet right in harm’s way.”

My mother paused for a moment, as if thinking it over. Then she said, “I agree with Violet.”

**Episode 2101**

ARTEMIS

Horrified, I realized that because of the truth serum Lucian had given Cali, she was about to answer my completely rhetorical question! How could I have been so careless? I leapt forward, trying to cover her mouth before she did the unthinkable, but I wasn’t fast enough.

“… I actually don’t know.” Cali answered. I froze, confused—and relieved. “I love them both, and I don’t know if I even love one more than the other.”

Greyson and Xavier both looked uncomfortable. *I* felt uncomfortable.

“Stop talking, Cali!” I hissed. “Now.”

If she kept going, she might accidentally say something that would have Xavier’s and Greyson’s egos in shambles by the time we made it back to the pack house, and from what I’d seen while spending so much time with werewolves, Alphas needed their egos intact.

“Don’t you think I’m trying to? This stupid serum is making me word vomit!” Cali pressed her fingers to her temples and gave us all a hopeless look.

I grabbed Cali’s arm. “Let’s just hurry up and get back to the pack house. Greyson and Xavier, why don’t you two go find Rishika and the other wolves on patrol and update them on what’s happening with the Vanguard pack?”

*Why don’t you two get out of here before Cali implodes?*

“That sounds like a great idea!” Cali chimed in. “Especially since I really need to get away from my mates before I talk about something that’ll embarrass me.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I’ve got you,” I said.

“You two be careful. Luckily, I haven’t caught a scent from any of the Vanguards, so I don’t think they’re following us, but be sure to stay sharp,” Greyson said.

Xavier gave his brother a mock salute.

Then both men took turns giving Cali a reassuring squeeze before they headed off to find the patrols.

“Xavier, Greyson. I’ll miss you both. Equally!” Cali called over her shoulder as we went our own way.

As soon as we set foot in the pack house back yard, Orla came bounding out of the house and wrapped Cali in her arms. She must have been watching for us.

“Wow, am I glad to see you two! I was so worried. I’m so glad you’re both back!” Orla slid between us and linked an arm around each of our waists as we made our way to Cali’s room. “Okay, you two sit tight—I’m going to go make us some tea.”

I turned to Cali. “Any more truth bombs you want to drop while we’re waiting for her to get back? If so, get them out of your system now.”

Cali shook her head as we sat down on the bed. “No, I’m not feeling particularly talkative at the moment, which I’ll take as a good thing under the circumstances.” She gave me a tired smile.

Orla whizzed back into the room with three steaming cups of tea. She joined us on the bed, and Cali and I took our mugs, blowing into them to cool them down and enjoying the comfortable silence for a bit. Orla didn’t even touch her tea and couldn’t seem to stop running her hands over Cali’s hair.

“I was just so afraid for my daughters.” She turned to me and took my hand.

An awkward smile was all I could manage in reply. It was still so weird to have an actual family like this. I was so used to decompressing alone after a mission. It took some getting used to, having someone worry about me and wait for me while I was away.

“Thank you, Artemis, for risking your safety to bring Cali back.” Orla’s eyes were glistening, as if she were on the verge of tears.

“It was no problem. I’ll do whatever I can to make sure my family’s safe.” I gave Orla’s hand a reassuring squeeze before I pulled mine away.

Cali had already finished her tea and had shifted to lean back against the headboard. She was blinking a lot, and I could tell she was seconds away from falling asleep.

“We should go, let her get some rest,” Orla whispered.

I nodded in agreement, wondering if fatigue was a side effect of the truth serum—though after the day and night she’d had, it made sense that Cali was barely able to keep her eyes open.

Orla and I got up to leave.

“Let me know as soon as Xavier and Greyson get back,” Cali said, just before she finally drifted off.

I followed Orla down to the kitchen, where Tom was in the process of yanking a laptop out of Torin’s hands. “Torin, I hate to be like this, but you have a serious shopping problem.”

“What do you mean?” Torin wailed, relinquishing the laptop. “Christmas is the season for shopping, is it not? I’m just following human tradition!”

“No, Torin, it’s the season of *giving*.”

“Exactly, *giving* the things you went shopping for!” Torin threw up his hands and stomped his foot.

“I’m sorry, but your online shopping privileges have officially been revoked for now. If you had it your way, we’d go bankrupt over Christmas gifts! Whose credit card is this anyway?”

Orla put a gentle hand on Tom’s shoulder. “Maybe you two can move this argument somewhere else?”

The doorbell rang, and Torin jumped up. “Ooh! That must be my deliveries for today!” He raced to the front door, Tom trailing right behind him.

I sat down, suddenly overcome with exhaustion.

“Are you okay, Artemis?” Orla asked.

I was wondering the same thing myself. I hadn’t realized how tired I was until we were back and all the adrenaline had started to wear off. I’d started to answer Orla when I heard the front door open, followed by footsteps and voices speaking in hushed tones. Xavier and Rishika appeared in the kitchen a few moments later.

“Where’s Greyson?” I asked.

“He’s doing another few runs around the perimeter of the house before he comes back in,” Rishika said. She came over and greeted me with a peck on the lips. “I heard you got Cali back, so I had to come see my girl.”

I smiled, feeling warm all over from her words, but also like I might pass out right there at the table. It was like my entire body was tired, head to toe. I wondered if I’d even be able to get up from the table.

“Artemis, what’s wrong?” Rishika asked, dropping down so that she was at eye level with me. She looked concerned, and I couldn’t help but think back to all the times I’d seen that look during all that Letifer-Silas bullshit.

I put a hand on her shoulder and gave her the most reassuring smile I could manage. “Nothing. I’m just tired from today, don’t worry.” Then a little quieter I said, “I was actually hoping to talk to my mom about something…”

I didn’t quite know how to tell Rishika that I wanted to talk to Orla alone, but as usual, my girlfriend was perceptive as hell. She stood up and gave me a knowing nod.

“I’m going to go upstairs and grab a shower, wash the woods off,” Rishika said. She looked at Xavier and gave him a pointed look. “Maybe you should wash up, too?”

Xavier frowned but exited the room without a word.

As soon as they were gone, Orla turned to me and asked, “What’s the problem? Is everything okay? Why did you want to talk to me?”

She was already brimming with worry, and that was the last thing I wanted.

I sighed, trying to figure out the least alarming way to tell her what I had to say. “Back at the Vanguard house, I was able to use my magic against the guards, and it was so much more difficult than it used to be. At first, it didn’t work at all, and then when I *did* get it to work, it shot out in an uncontrolled burst. I have to admit, it scared me a little. I was lucky that I even hit the intended target.”

Orla mulled this over. “Well, first of all, I’m glad that your magic seems to be returning after the… Fae promise,” she said slowly.

I pressed my lips together. “Yeah, but it doesn’t feel exactly the same as before,” I started. “After I broke the Fae promise, I thought that my magic was gone forever. I was happy to possibly have it back, but after how things went at the Vanguard estate, I’m wondering if it’ll ever be the same as it was before—powerful and precise and all that. Remember, all of this started because I learned about my father possibly being alive…”

A flurry of thoughts swirled in my mind. I didn’t know what the connection was, if any, but I needed to get to the bottom of things—for my own peace of mind. My magic was a big part of me, after all.

“Well, I’m sure we’ll figure it out.” Orla leaned forward and patted my shoulder. “And I’ll be by your side to help you, every step of the way.”

I nodded and paused, trying to figure out the best way to tell her what else was on my mind. In the end, I decided to just come out with it. “I think it’s finally time for us to talk about Kadmos.”

**Episode 2102**

XAVIER

I stepped out of the shower, dried off, and wrapped a towel around my waist. It had felt really good to wash the grime of that Vanguard encounter off of my skin, but I hadn’t appreciated the comment Rishika had made earlier. Sure, I might have been a little sweaty, but to say that I should shower? And even if I hadn’t exactly smelled like roses, maybe that was because I’d been helping rescue Cali. Who gave a fuck what I smelled like?

I wiped the steam from the mirror and examined my reflection, leaning close to take in the sight of the ugly black veins on my chest. The veins had reacted to Ava back at the Vanguard palace, and they’d ached as I looked into the fountain in the courtyard where they’d performed their *underwhelming* little moon ceremony.

I sighed and tore my gaze away from the veins. I’d had them so long now that it was hard to remember what I’d looked like without them. Even though they faded from time to time, their presence and the *due destini* that controlled them was always in the back of my mind. But now that they were flaring up like this, they were all I could think about.

And that wasn’t the only thing I needed to tell Cali.

I winced at the thought of telling her about the kiss with Ava. A part of me thought that it wouldn’t do any good to hurt Cali by telling her about it, but I’d made a promise to always be honest with her, and I had to stick to that. A month ago, I might very well have kept it a secret, but I knew better now. It sucked that being secretive was so much easier than being a stand-up guy and telling the truth.

It pissed me off that Ava could potentially come between Cali and me. Again. I still felt more than a little uncomfortable with how my body had reacted to her. No matter how much I wanted to deny it, the mate bond between us was definitely coming back.

“Shit!” I slammed my fist on the sink. “This shouldn’t be happening!”

I’d gone through all the trouble of reciting that spell to break our mate bond completely, and apparently it had all been for nothing. It hadn’t worked, and there was no guarantee it would again. *How* could I still be mated to her? Even now, thinking about her made my body temperature rise a few degrees.

I got dressed and went downstairs, looking for Cali or Greyson. I ran into Sage in the living room. “Hey, have you seen Greyson?”

“Yeah, he’s still out on patrol. You need him?” Sage asked.

“No, that’s fine.”

It was actually a good thing that Greyson was out, since it would probably be better for me to talk to Cali first. I didn’t want to keep her in the dark for any longer than I had to.

I ran back upstairs and walked into Cali’s room to find her lying under a giant pile of plush blankets. She was sleeping. I didn’t blame her—not after everything she’d gone through with Lucian and his house of horrors. Not wanting to disturb her, I turned to go, but then she let out a little sigh of pleasure.

“This is what I imagine heaven feels like,” she said. “Whoever invented down comforters was truly an angel.”

I laughed. “That sounds like the truth serum talking.”

I walked back toward the bed, happy that I’d be able to talk with her after all. Just hearing her voice made me feel a little better about everything.

Cali sighed. “I think it’s starting to wear off, but I can still feel its influence, so be careful about asking me anything.”

I let out an evil laugh. “Or maybe I should take advantage.”

Cali shot upright. “You wouldn’t!”

“I’m just teasing, relax. You know I’d never purposefully do something like that—no matter how much I’d love to know every deep dark secret you have.”

Cali swatted me on the arm. “I bet you would! But really, thank you for being cool about this. It really is inconvenient not to have a filter.”

“I can only imagine. If it were me, I think I’d be even worse.” Under the effects of a truth serum, I’d probably leave every relationship I had in shambles. I shuddered at the thought.

A mischievous grin spread across Cali’s beautiful face. “You’d better watch out then; I might just find a way to get my hands on some more serum and punish you with it if you’re ever mean to me.”

That was a sobering thought. “Cali, I hope you know that how I acted in the past—I never would again. I love you too much. I could barely handle it when we were forced to leave you at that house. Greyson and I were idiots to agree to something like that. Please, don’t ever ask me to do anything like that again.”

“Oh, I don’t plan on it—not if I can help it.” Cali settled back into her nest of blankets. She had a faraway look in her eyes, as if she was remembering how bad it had been there.

I sat beside her on the bed. “I know that it wasn’t what you wanted, either. Our backs were up against the wall.”

Being close to her made my temperature rise more than it ever would for Ava, or anyone else, and I couldn’t stop myself from leaning in to kiss her. It felt like it had been an eternity since I’d felt her soft lips on mine. She moaned as she wrapped her arms around my neck and pulled me even closer.

“Your skin feels nice,” she said, pulling away and looking into my eyes. She leaned forward and nuzzled her face into my neck. “Mmm. I could live in your neck.”

I laughed. I didn’t know if it was the serum or her sleepiness, but it was still nice to hear. It felt good to know that she was telling the truth—that she really enjoyed being near me as much as I enjoyed being near her.

She smiled up at me. “It’s really convenient that my mate shifts into a wolf and is so often naked because of it.”

Surprised, I burst out laughing.

Cali’s eyes widened, and her cheeks colored with embarrassment. She slapped a hand over her mouth. “Xavier! I’m so sorry, this dumb truth serum! It’s so embarrassing!”

“Don’t apologize, and don’t be embarrassed,” I said. “Just get some more rest. If you get a little more sleep, maybe by the time you wake up, the serum will have worn off completely. I need to go check in with the rest of the pack, anyway.”

I got up, already missing the pliant warmth of her lips.

Cali nodded lazily and yawned. “You probably want to go find Ava.”

I whipped around to look her in the eye. “Why would you say that?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know, it just came out. I thought I saw her lurking that way she does when we came in.” She looked away, but not before I caught the concerned look in her eyes.

“Well, if that’s the truth serum talking, then it must be something that’s been on your mind.” I felt weirdly guilty all of a sudden. I had to tell her about the kiss. Even though I knew it was the right thing to do, that didn’t make any of this easier.

“It’s true that it’s been on my mind. You know that I don’t love how Ava sticks around you, always trying to get your attention, always trying to win you back. She doesn’t make it a secret, how much she still wants you, and it’s never been a secret how I feel about how persistent she is when it comes to you. But then…” Cali bit her lip, stopping herself.

I gently pried her hands away. “Cali, you don’t have to stop yourself. You can ask me anything. I might not be under the influence of truth serum, but I’ll be honest with you anyway. I promise.”

Cali nodded and looked down at where her hands sat intertwined in her lap. I could tell that she was still unsure about saying what was on her mind, and I waited, hoping that she felt comfortable enough with me by now to express herself. Finally, she spoke.

“I thought I might have seen something, the night of the Vanguard party, but I know that you’d never do anything to hurt me, so I was probably mistaken.”

My stomach tightened as my mind flashed back to the room with all the naked masked guests hooking up, and no matter how much I wanted to push away the memory of it, I relived the kiss that Ava and I shared. “What do you think you saw, Cali?”

“I don’t know—there just seemed to be a weird vibe between you and Ava. I don’t want to sound like a paranoid girlfriend or anything, but it’s still bothering me. Obviously.” She took a deep breath, as if gathering every ounce of courage she possessed. “Did something happen between you and Ava at the party?”

**Episode 2103**

I’d asked the question, but I was majorly nervous about the answer. I hadn’t lied; I trusted Xavier, but I also just didn’t like hearing about him and Ava. With their history, who could blame me for being a bit suspicious of what they might have gotten into at that strange party where none of us had quite felt like ourselves? Still, I had to know the answer, even if it might hurt me to hear it.

Xavier nodded slowly and broke eye contact. “I want to tell you the truth. It’s important that I do.” He took a deep breath and let it out with a shudder. “Ava and I, at the party… We kissed.”

My heart dropped into my stomach, and I felt lightheaded for a few seconds. *It was exactly what I thought. Fucking Ava!* Despite the heat of my internal monologue, I was calm when I responded.

“Thank you for being honest,” I whispered, not knowing what else to say to an admission like that. I wasn’t mad at him, just a little caught off-guard, even though I’d had a feeling something had gone down between them.

“Cali, I’m so, so sorry. I didn’t want to kiss her, but I also didn’t stop it. I understand if you don’t want to see me right now. I can go.” Xavier moved to get up and leave, but I put my hand on his arm and stopped him.

“Maybe it wasn’t your fault, Xavier. That wine had something in it—maybe it lowered your inhibitions, made you do things you wouldn’t normally do.” And Ava had been right there, ready and willing to take advantage, as usual. I wondered if she ever got tired of being a snake.

Xavier nodded slowly. “Maybe so, but I don’t want to use that as an excuse. I want to be truthful with you and take responsibility for what I did.”

I’d never felt so torn. A part of me knew that the old Xavier would never have taken responsibility for this—or would have kept it a secret from me—so I was happy that he’d told me the truth. Still, it hurt to think of Xavier kissing Ava, especially after everything she’d done to me. To *him*.

“Do you think you still have feelings for her?” I asked, bracing myself. It wasn’t that I thought he was going to admit that he did, but it was still a hard question to ask.

Xavier shook his head without a hint of hesitation. “No, I don’t care for Ava, I’m sure of that. But…”

“But what?”

“I’m worried that the unmating spell is wearing off, somehow.”

I was shocked. “What does that mean? That you and Ava are still mates?”

“I don’t know. I just know what a mate bond feels like, and this feels eerily similar.” Xavier sighed and dropped his face into his hands.

“Can you do the unmating spell again? Maybe there’s a time limit on this sort of thing and you just have to recast it every once in a while? I mean, that would suck, but if it’s the only option…”

“I can try, but it doesn’t seem to work for very long, and I don’t want to be forced to cast it every few months or something. I want—I *need*—to find a more permanent solution.” Xavier paused, as if thinking something over. “And there’s more.”

*Ugh, what more could there be?* “What? Was it more than a kiss?”

I didn’t know what I’d do if he said that things had gone further. Would I be able to forgive him?

“No, nothing like that. The black veins on my chest? They reacted strangely to Ava.”

I felt relieved, but that was short-lived. “What do you mean, the veins reacted strangely? Are you okay?”

“I think I’m okay, but I don’t really know. They just started to hurt really badly, like they were angry at me for kissing Ava. I’m wondering if that’s a sign that even if the mate bond with Ava is lingering, she isn’t my true mate like you are.”

I loved hearing that and wanted to latch onto it, but I was reluctant to find any solace in those ugly black veins—the physical manifestation of our curse. I hated them, and I hated that they hurt my mates, but it still seemed like important information to have in light of everything that was going on.

“We need to talk to Big Mac as soon as possible,” I said. “We need to tell her all of this so she can tell us what it might mean. I’m not sure if she’ll have a solution, though. I once overheard her telling Maya that there was no real way to unmate from someone. I just don’t like that the veins are getting worse. It scares me that they hurt you so badly—and it’s even scarier that we don’t know exactly why. I thought that we at least had time, as long as I refused to choose, but if it’s progressing on its own, we have to do something more about it.”

“Agreed.” Xavier hesitated for a moment, and I watched him closely, wondering what he was thinking. “We should probably fill Greyson in. He has a right to know about all of this, especially since it involves the veins and the *due destini*.”

I smiled. “I know you probably don’t want to hear it, but I’m so grateful to see how you both work together. You two might not be super close—”

“Yeah, I definitely wouldn’t go that far.”

“—but I can tell that you really do trust each other, somewhere deep down. It was all I wanted when I suggested that you become co-Alphas.”

When I’d proposed the idea of them teaming up to lead the Redwood pack, I’d never thought they’d actually agree to it, let alone that it would strengthen their bond as brothers. Though I doubted that they would ever be best friends, anything was better than the awful way they’d treated each other before all this.

Xavier chuckled and shook his head. “Yeah, we’ve come a long way, for sure. I’m just as surprised as you are. I no longer want to kill him on sight, so there’s that.”

“Yup,” I said. “Major progress.”

We fell into a comfortable silence until Xavier spoke again.

“Cali, I just want to apologize again, about the whole Ava thing. I hate that I hurt you.”

I shook my head at him, feeling very calm about everything. Very myself again. I picked up my phone and looked in the camera mode—my eyes weren’t dilated anymore. Maybe it was a sign that the truth serum’s effects had finally worn off completely—*finally*. “You know, I’m fine, actually. I know there’s a lot of history between you and Ava. I’d be stupid to ignore that. Plus, I trust you, Xavier,” I said with a small smile. “So no matter what Ava does, I know you’ll always be true to me.”

I reached out and took his hand, sandwiching it between mine. I loved how rough and warm it felt, and I couldn’t help but think about how amazing his hands felt when he ran them up and down my body. Goosebumps popped up all over my skin at the thought.

“That’s true,” Xavier said with a relieved smile. “My heart belongs to you completely, Cali.”

He kissed me, and my heart rate quickened. I wrapped my arms around his neck and deepened the kiss, needing more, wanting more from him. I breathed him in and ran my hands over his hair, damp from a shower, I guessed. He smelled good, like soap and like himself, and I slid my tongue into his mouth, gently inviting him to take things further.

Getting the message loud and clear, he laid me back onto the pillowy comforters, and I spread my legs so that he could move between them. I peppered a line of kisses down to his neck and then back up to his lips. His tongue dueled with mine, and he thrust it deeper and deeper as he ran his hands through my hair, giving it gentle tugs that sent shivers racing up my spine.

“Cali, I love you so much,” he whispered against my lips. His hand dropped to the top button of my shirt, and he popped it open, and then the next, before sliding a hand inside to palm my breast.

“I love you, too, Xavier.”

We broke apart so that he could pull my shirt the rest of the way off, and I laid back as he slowly pulled off my pants, his gaze riveted to mine. He ran a finger along the frilly border of my panties before pulling them down my legs.

“You’re the only woman in the world that I want,” Xavier whispered, parting my legs and slowly lowering his head between my thighs…

**Episode 2104**

GREYSON

I shifted and stopped in the back yard for a moment to catch my breath. I stretched my arms toward the sky and breathed in the crisp, fresh air. It had been a long day, but I didn’t mind how it had turned out. Patrolling the perimeter of the pack house had been great exercise, and after the day I’d had, it had helped me blow off a little steam—well, a lot of steam, actually.

I jogged up the stairs to the back porch and took a quick glance out at the tree line and a little beyond, doing one final scan. I felt confident that we were in good shape. I’d made sure that the place was as secure as it could get. As I’d suspected, none of the Vanguard pack had followed us back, and the guards I’d posted were on full alert. I thought it might be smart to double the patrols, but I figured I should talk to Xavier first to see what he thought. It was still strange to run decisions like that by him, but it remained unclear who was the real Alpha of the pack.

After the battle with Letifer, we’d never truly picked a new Alpha, and then we’d been unable to agree on who should take the reins—which was all too typical of Xavier and me. The two of us didn’t agree on much of anything, except our love for Cali—even though who loved her more often turned into a competition between us. It was too bad we hadn’t been able to come to an agreement on who should be Alpha, especially since the pack couldn’t do without clear leadership right now. I supposed it was good that the pack seemed content to follow us both for the time being. I was sure that Xavier would agree that we needed to prioritize assessing the Vanguard threat before we got into any more fights over who was going to lead the pack.

I suddenly thought back to my weird dreams, the ones that showed me becoming Alpha and putting Cali at risk in the process. I couldn’t quite figure out how my being Alpha would affect Cali’s destiny in such an awful way, and it was driving me crazy even thinking about how a choice I might make for the good of the pack could hurt her. I shook my head, pushing those thoughts away as my frustration over the entire situation began to build.

I couldn’t think about that right now, and besides, they were just dreams—dreams brought about by that damn creepy witch trio, but dreams all the same. Still, I couldn’t get their warnings out of my head, and I knew it was dangerous not to heed their words. They hadn’t shown their faces in a hot minute, but that didn’t mean that they weren’t still out there, ready to pounce and take advantage of my distracted mind. All I could think was that getting knocked out by those dreams was the last thing I needed at the moment—especially with the Vanguard wolves lurking around.

I bounded up to my room and went into my bathroom. I turned on the shower, making sure the water was as hot as I could stand before climbing in. I sighed, letting the water run over me, finally feeling relaxed. Cali was safe. That was all that mattered now. I felt confident that we would figure everything else out, even though I didn’t have the slightest idea how.

I got out of the shower and pulled on a pair of sweats, realizing how exhausted I was. A few moments later, there was a knock on the door.

“Come in,” I said, hoping that whoever it was wasn’t coming to drop another problem in my lap.

Sabine poked her head in before coming inside and shutting the door behind her. “I’m glad to see you back safe.”

“Thanks. I might go out again soon, just to check in with the guards.”

“Oh Greyson, surely that can wait, or someone else can do it? You need to get your rest. You deserve it.”

“I’ll rest when I’m sure that the pack is safe.”

It was almost funny to say such a thing when it was starting to seem like total safety was something the pack might never have. There always seemed to be some danger lurking around the corner trying to take us out, but nothing and no one had succeeded yet, and they wouldn’t if I had any control over it.

Sabine sighed. “I know that you lived a hard life before I came back to the pack. I can only imagine what it was like to be all alone out there and have to be on your guard at all times.” Her voice choked up. She was getting emotional, and I felt a pang in my chest.

I walked over and patted her on the shoulder. “My life wasn’t all that difficult.”

“I just feel so guilty that you didn’t have the support of a pack while you were growing up, that you had to become so tough so young.” She swiped away a tear before it could reach her cheek.

“I don’t regret it, so you shouldn’t feel guilty. Living that life and growing up the way I did? It helped prepare me to be the leader that the pack needs right now.”

She smiled. “I’m so proud of you, and of how great an Alpha you’ve been to the pack.”

I nodded. “Well, whether I’m the official Alpha now or not, I’m going to make sure the Vanguard pack stays far away from the Redwoods.”

“I know you will, honey. If anyone can do that, it’s you. What do you think of them, anyway?”

I shrugged. “I don’t really know. I can’t figure out if they’re really powerful, or really insane.”

“Perhaps they’re both.”

“True. I don’t plan to let my guard down any time soon, that’s for sure.”

I thought again about mobilizing the second patrol to give us an extra layer of protection. The Vanguards might be crazy, but they still had a lot of manpower, and we needed to be ready to handle that.

“Well, you let me know if you need anything at all.” Sabine smiled. “I didn’t just come here to check on you, actually. I wanted to let you know that we have a guest.”

“Oh yeah? Who?”

“Charlie’s mom, Iris. They just pulled up.”

“Iris? *Hunter* Iris?” I was already heading for the door. “Where is she?”

“I think they’re in the small study now.”

I left Sabine and went downstairs, feeling on edge at the thought of having a hunter of all people under our roof. In my travels as a Rogue, I’d had my share of close encounters with hunters, but that had been far, far away from Oregon. My policy had always been to avoid them whenever necessary; they were typically stone-cold killers.

I opened the door to the study and was surprised to see a pretty woman seated behind the desk with her hands folded. She looked more like a business executive than a hunter, and she trained her shrewd gaze right on me as soon as I walked in.

Charlie turned to me as I came through the door, and his eyes went wide. “Greyson! Oh, hi… This is my mom. I mean… I just…” Charlie trailed off, clearly nervous.

I watched Iris watch me, and I couldn’t quite read the look on her face. It wasn’t entirely friendly, but it wasn’t quite unpleasant, either.

“Is this the Alpha?” she asked.

“Yes, that’s me,” I said, before Violet or Charlie could reveal the weird co-Alpha situation we had going on right now. Iris didn’t need to know that. It was pack business, after all. I turned to Charlie. “Are you going to tell me why the hell you didn’t notify me immediately when you brought a hunter into our house?”

“But you knew she was coming. She’s here to help us, to help Violet,” Charlie said. To the kid’s credit, he didn’t sound nervous anymore. “We wouldn’t have brought her here if we thought she was a threat to anyone.”

I eyed Iris. Suddenly, agreeing to letting a hunter in here seemed like a horrible idea. “You sure about that?”

“Well, she’s my mother,” Charlie countered. “She’s here to help.”

“So, can you help? If not, you should leave,” I said.

If keeping Violet safe wasn’t in her plan, then she needed to go as soon as possible—and I was sure that Xavier would feel exactly the same way.

Iris stood up and walked out from behind the desk. We were both sizing each other up, and I knew that it didn’t matter that she was the mother of Violet’s mate—if she was a threat, I would deal with it.

“I think we have a plan,” Iris began. “But for it to work, I’ll have to borrow a few of your wolves. Do you trust me with your pack?”

**Episode 2105**

MARTA

“Don’t touch her!” Lilac yelled. He dove forward and thrust himself between Lola and the advancing vampires, trying to stop them from dragging her away. One of the vampires shoved him away like he was nothing and then socked him hard in the stomach.

“Lilac!” I rushed to his side as he doubled over in pain, only just managing to catch him before he crumpled to the ground. I pulled him away from the scuffle and watched in horror as the burly vampires dragged a kicking and screaming Lola out of the room before locking the door behind them. My whole body was shaking as I held on to Lilac for dear life. “Are you okay?” I asked him.

“I think so,” Lilac said. After a few moments and a little coughing, he straightened and gently pulled out of my hold. He leaned against the wall. “I just need to catch my breath.” He pressed his fingers to his stomach, gingerly checking his ribs. “I don’t think anything’s broken. The bastard definitely caught me right in the ribs.”

“Thank god you’re okay.” I shot a terrified glance at the door, scared that it would open again any minute, and that they might take me or Lilac next. “What do you think is going to happen to Lola? To Jay? What do these vampires want with them, anyway?”

Vampires and werewolves had a strained history, so there was no telling what they had in store for Lola and Jay—or us, for that matter.

“Hell if I know,” Lilac said. He pushed away from the wall and started pacing the room. “I really tried to stop them from taking her—but I wasn’t strong enough. I don’t have Plum with me.”

“Don’t beat yourself up about it, Lilac. Those guys were dangerous, and we were outnumbered—there was nothing more you could have done. Right now, we need to focus on figuring out a way to escape this place before they come back.”

“Agreed. If we do manage to get out, we have to go find Jay and Lola, too. We should probably figure out some sort of plan—we don’t know how many of these assholes are lurking around out there.”

I nodded in agreement. If this place was anything like a pack house, there was no telling how many vamps might be outside. Lilac and I had already taken a look around the cell when we were first thrown in to see if we could find a weapon or a vent or anything that might help us escape, but there was nothing but that musty smell and the dingy cot in the corner. I looked up at the whirring exhaust fan, but I couldn’t tell whether it led to a duct or not, and even if it did, there was no way for us to get up there.

“We have to get out of here before you get called up for your trial,” Lilac said.

“Shit! I didn’t even think about that.” What would happen if I missed the trial? “Wait, that’s it!”

“What’s it?”

“If it’s time for my trial, won’t they be looking for me? Won’t they try to locate me with magic? If they do that and they find me, they’ll realize that I’m a prisoner, and then they’ll come for me, right?” I pictured an army of magical beings busting the rusty door off the hinges and snatching me away, hell-bent on holding me accountable by any means necessary, and not letting any vampires keep them from their duties.

Lilac frowned. “I’m not sure. They might just think that you ran away.”

Ugh. I hadn’t thought of that.

“Also, your trial isn’t for another week. What if something happens to Lola, or Jay—or us—before then?”

Lilac was right. I slumped down onto the filthy ground, feeling dejected. Helpless. I hated being trapped like this. It reminded me of being imprisoned in that house for all those years at Bert’s beck and call, never knowing if I’d ever be free. I couldn’t go through that again. Scratch that—I *wouldn’t* go through that again. My breath quickened, and I started to hyperventilate as the anxiety and fear began to take hold. Lilac kneeled beside me and took my hand.

“It’s okay, Marta. Calm down. I’m here. Take a deep breath.”

He smoothed my hair out of my face, and I leaned into his touch as I closed my eyes and took some deep breaths.

After a while, I opened my eyes and looked at Lilac. “That really helped. I feel a little better. Thank you.” I was still shaking, but at least I was feeling a little less panicky and could think straight again. “I’m sorry for falling apart like that. We haven’t even been down here that long and I’m already freaking out.”

“Don’t you dare apologize. I know you went through a lot, being trapped in that house with that asshole. But don’t worry. We’ll get out of here, and I’ll always be here for you, just like you’ve always been here for me—even when I wasn’t even technically alive.”

I perked up. “That’s it! Magic could be the answer, but maybe not the council’s magic.”

Lilac gave me a confused look. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about *my* magic! I can use my medium powers to try and get us out of this.”

The wheels were already turning in my head as I dreamed up a plan that I thought could really work.

“What do you mean?” Lilac held up my hands and pointed to the bracelets the council had locked onto my wrists. “You can’t even use your magic, remember?”

I yanked my wrists away and shushed Lilac at the sound of the door unlocking.

“Play along,” I whispered as I got to my feet, dragging Lilac up with me.

Tracer came in and dropped a plate holding two pieces of moldy bread and a slice of greyish deli meat in front of us. I could tell that they didn’t know much about what a non-vampire would want to eat, because there was no way in hell Lilac or I would touch that garbage. Or maybe giving us rotten food was part of their torture.

Tracer threw a bottle of water at Lilac, who just managed catch it before it smacked him in the face.

“Eat,” Tracer said with scowl. “We don’t want you wasting away before we can have our fun with you.”

I felt Lilac tense as if he wanted to attack, but I put a hand on his arm to hold him back. Another one of the vampires from the car attack was standing right outside the door. It was obvious that he was on guard duty. He was tall, broad, and brooding, and hadn’t said a word. Tracer turned to leave, and I knew that I had to act fast. I leaned forward and put my hands on either side of my head as I swayed back and forth, pretending to be dizzy.

“Oh no,” I said. “I feel them—they’re everywhere.”

Tracer stopped and looked at me with an eyebrow cocked. “Feel what? What’s everywhere?”

“The dark spirits. They’re haunting you. They’re all around you, closing in!”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Tracer snarled.

“I’m a medium. I can commune with the dead, and I can tell that there’s something plaguing you, something dark and evil and very, very dangerous.”

A worried look spread across Tracer’s face, and I felt emboldened. *Good, it’s working.*

“I can help you,” I said, “but I’ll need to gather some supplies, which I can’t do from in here.”

“What kind of evil spirit is it?”

I flashed an exaggerated frown, trying to look deep in thought. “It could be a poltergeist, and those are nasty, nasty things. They take hold of you and can even give you a terrible sickness—boils and rotting flesh.”

“Boils? Rotting flesh?” Tracer stuttered. He looked down at his arms as if he was expecting it to start happening immediately.

I stepped forward. “I just want to help. I don’t want to be locked up in here and abandoned if you… you know… die.”

“*Die?*” Tracer was frantic now, and I was feeling like this might really work.

The silent vampire left his post at the door and came inside, his eyes on Tracer. “Calm down, man.” His voice was deep and thoughtful and didn’t quite fit him. His gaze flitted to the bracelets on my wrists. “You’re lying.”

“What, n-no I’m not!” I stammered, looking back and forth between him and Tracer and taking a cautious step backward. “I’m a medium. Ask Lola or Jay—they’ll tell you. Or Lilac here—”

Lilac piped up. “Yeah. Actually, she brought me back—”

The silent vampire held up his hand and shook his head, cutting Lilac off and giving him a look that promised very bad things if he didn’t shut up. “Medium or no, you can’t use magic. Not while you’re wearing those.” He thrust a beefy finger at my bracelets. “We don’t tolerate liars here.”

**Episode 2106**

Xavier’s head moved slowly up and down between my legs, and I let my head fall back on the bed. The feel of his tongue lapping at my warm, quivering center had nearly sent me over the edge already.

“Open wider,” Xavier said.

I happily complied, then gasped as Xavier slid a finger deep inside me while his tongue danced over my clit. I reached down and ran my fingers through his hair, closing my eyes and picturing his naked body—namely his wide, chiseled chest, his washboard abs, and the way his abdomen tapered down to the rigid heft of his cock.

Xavier lifted my legs and slid his fingers out of me, then put his tongue in their place, moaning as he plunged it deep inside me only to drag it back out ever so slowly. “Cali, you taste so good.”

I was overcome with pleasure, and my thoughts melted into a complete blur for a split second as Xavier placed wet kisses up my thigh before diving back between my legs. When my head cleared again, the only thing I could think about was getting him inside me, now. I pushed him away and yanked his shirt off while he wriggled out of his pants. He reached for me, but I swatted his hand away.

“On your back,” I commanded.

“As you command,” he grunted as he spread out on top of the plush blankets.

I straddled him and flipped my hair to one side while I arched my back, wanting to feel his mouth on my breasts. He rose up halfway and took one of my nipples into his mouth, flicking his tongue against it while his other hand reached down and parted my folds with a sensual gentleness that sent a wave of pleasure rocketing through me.

He dipped his middle finger inside me quickly to moisten the tip, then slid it back and forth over my clit while he continued suckling my breasts, first one, then the other. I reached behind me and took his cock in my hand. He was hard as a rock, and I slid my hand low to massage the base of his shaft, eliciting a groan of pleasure from his parted lips. I began to stroke my hand up and down on his shaft, taking it slow, just the way he liked it. He bucked his hips in time with my strokes, and then, unable to wait any longer, I lifted my hips and plunged down on his cock.

“Cali, fuck,” he rasped. His hands went slack on the bed, and he dropped his head back onto the pillows.

“That good?” I asked as I braced my hands on the headboard, adjusting to the sensation of having every single inch of him buried deep inside me, filling me up. I rocked back and forth while he moaned, his eyes closed as he let me take control. I picked up his hands and placed them on my breasts as I increased my speed.

I closed my eyes as I lifted up on his shaft until only the tip remained inside me, then I slammed back down, taking all of him inside me again. I lost myself in how amazing he felt as I slid up and down on his cock, moving so hard and fast now that the headboard started banging against the wall, so loudly that I started worrying that someone was going to come knocking at any moment.

“Don’t stop,” Xavier moaned, bucking his hips to match my rhythm. He sat up and pulled me close so that my breasts flattened against the hard, sweat-slicked planes of his chest. I spread my legs wide as he flipped me onto my back and pumped in and out of me until I came without warning.

I moaned as my orgasm ricocheted through my body. I clung to him, my fingernails raking down his back as I did everything in my power to hold back from screaming his name loud enough for everyone in the pack house to hear.

His smooth thrusts turned jerky as he came seconds after I did. He collapsed on top of me, his breath coming in sharp bursts against my neck.

“That was amazing,” I whispered in his ear.

“You can say that again,” he said as he slid off me and rolled onto his back.

Once the last jolts of my climax had left my body, I snuggled into the crook of his arm and threw my leg over his waist. I closed my eyes, feeling happy and content just to be with him. We were all safe again, which was all I wanted. I tried my best to ignore the feeling that this peace was temporary. I didn’t want to think about that right now, not when everything felt so perfect.

As if reading my mind, Xavier sat up. “As much as I want to lie here and fall asleep with you in my arms, Cali, I think we should get dressed and talk to the rest of the pack about everything that’s happened.”

I sighed. “Are you sure we can’t just stay here?”

“Unfortunately not.”

“*Ugh*, you’re right.”

I could’ve stayed up here with Xavier forever. There was nothing like being in his arms and being close to him like this. Regrettably, we got up and dressed. As we headed downstairs, we ran into Sage and Zainab.

“Hey guys, is Greyson back yet?” I asked the two of them.

“He’s in the study, talking to some lady,” Sage replied.

“Last we overheard, it’s kind of tense. I don’t know that I love having a hunter here either,” Zainab said.

That got Xavier’s attention. “A *hunter*? Here in this house?”

I looked at Xavier, confused. “Who is it?”

“Charlie’s mom came,” Zainab said. “To help out with Violet’s stalker.”

“Violet’s *what*?” I gasped.

“Someone’s stalking Violet, trying to kill her,” Sage said somberly. “Charlie thought his mom might be able to help figure out who it is.”

Thank goodness for gossipy werewolves.

But I didn’t like the sound of any of this. Not someone targeting Violet, and I especially didn’t know if I liked the idea of Greyson being in the same room with someone whose whole job was to hunt people like him. But then I reminded myself that Greyson was more than capable of taking care of himself.

“Ah, that’s right. I *did* agree to that,” Xavier said slowly. “I’ll go to Greyson and talk with them,” he said, turning toward the study. I made to follow him, but he stopped me. “Cali, you hang back. You should get something to eat and rest.” I opened my mouth to protest, and Xavier added, “Please.”

I zipped my mouth shut. “You sure?” I asked after a moment.

“Yes, we’ll be fine.”

Sigh. Once he was gone, I considered going to the kitchen and finding something to nibble on, but I wasn’t very hungry. My stomach still felt a little unsettled from the truth serum. I considered going back to my room and burying myself under the covers again, but I felt too anxious to lie down right now. I needed something to do with myself, or it felt like there was a chance I’d explode. I decided to go find Big Mac.

I went back upstairs to her bedroom. The door was open, so I knocked on the door jamb. She looked up at me, and a flicker of annoyance passed across her face. “Let me guess, you’ve come to me so that I can solve all your problems. Again.”

I flushed, feeling guilty, since that *was* kind of what I’d come to her for. I hated how much we put onto Big Mac, always coming to her for help with every little thing that went wrong, but I didn’t know who else to ask.

My distress must have been written all over my face because Big Mac seemed to soften a little. “Come on in, Cali.”

“Thank you. I wouldn’t bother you right now, but it’s just… I’m worried about Xavier.”

“Oh? What’s happened to make you more worried than usual?”

I hesitated, wondering if I should be telling Big Mac what had happened between Xavier and Ava. The whole thing seemed like something personal and private that we should keep between us.

Rather than give Big Mac all the gory details, I said, “Xavier thinks that maybe his mate bond with Ava wasn’t cut completely by the unmating spell that he used, and he’s worried that the bond has returned.”

Big Mac nodded, waiting for the rest of it.

“What’s more concerning is that Ava seemed to make the veins on his chest worse. What could that mean?”

Big Mac frowned. “It’s possible that the *due destini* is able to feel the pull of a mate bond, regardless of whether it’s with you or someone else. The veins might have been reacting to that.”

“Do you think Xavier could just try the unmating spell again?”

Big Mac shook her head. “The unmating spell is like putting a Band-Aid on a crack in a dam. It always fails eventually. Sooner rather than later, typically. Mating magic is just too strong. And it’s not witch magic, so I can’t help.”

“So what is there to do about it, then?” I asked, hearing the desperation in my own voice.

“I think there’s something that can be done,” Big Mac said tentatively, “but I don’t think you’re going to like it.”

“Really? What is it? I’ll do anything to make sure that Xavier’s safe.”

“The only way to deal with the mate bond is to explore it.”

I frowned. “Explore it? What do you mean?”

“I mean, Xavier has to *connect* with Ava.”

**Episode 2107**

GREYSON

Iris’s request to use our pack to help solve Violet’s stalker problem had caught me off-guard. Given who Iris was, and what she represented, I wasn’t at all sure that she could be trusted. I didn’t know her at all—and what I *did* know of her wasn’t very good—which was why I was extremely reluctant to allow her to put members of the Redwood pack at risk.

If she were any other hunter, I would have said no immediately. I knew how cunning hunters could be. They didn’t exactly have a reputation for being honest amongst the werewolves I’d talked to in the past.

I looked at Charlie, who was watching me with wide, sincere eyes, and then I turned to Violet. “Do you trust her?”

Violet hesitated for a moment before taking Charlie’s hand. “She’s my mate’s mother.”

It wasn’t a “yes,” but it wasn’t “no” either.

She and Charlie locked eyes and smiled at each other, the very picture of young love.

“Then that’s enough for me—for now.” I looked at Iris. “You’re a guest in my home, for now, but if you do anything—and I mean anything at all—to put any of the members of this pack at unnecessary risk, you’ll have to answer to me.”

Iris nodded, but her mouth tightened into a straight line. It was obvious that she was none too pleased by my warning.

*Good*, I thought. *Let her stew on that so she knows I mean business.*

I left the study and ran right into Xavier.

“Hey. You need something?” I asked him.

“Were you going to notify me that the hunter had arrived?” he asked.

“No need. I took care of it.”

Xavier frowned. “What do you mean? Without me?” He crossed his arms, and I could tell that he was agitated.

*This again.*

I lifted my eyebrows in surprise. “You were nowhere to be found, Xavier.”

“I was with Cali,” he said. There was a certain expression on his face and a quick upturn of the corner of his mouth. What was he implying? Had he just slept with her?

Anger coursed through me. “I don’t need your permission to be in charge of this pack, Xavier,” I growled out. “It was simple enough—someone’s out to get Violet, and since we have our hands full right now, Charlie’s mother is going to help them track down the stalker. Isn’t that what we want?”

Xavier gritted his teeth. “Of course I want Violet to have all the help she needs. That’s not the point. The point is, if we’re going to make an alliance with a *hunter*, I should’ve been there, even if the hunter in question is Charlie’s mom.”

“What? So you doubt my judgement? I’ve made no alliance with anyone.”

Xavier pressed his lips together and didn’t reply, which was answer enough.

I laughed. “I should have known that our little truce would be short-lived.”

I clenched and unclenched my fists, feeling the urge to settle this right now in a less than civil way. Xavier knew just how to press my buttons, and he was pushing every single one of them right now. I looked away from him and tried to take a few deep breaths to calm the surge of anger rising inside me, threatening to spill right out at Xavier.

“Maybe our truce would’ve lasted longer if you’d shown me respect and hadn’t gone behind my back the first chance you got to make decisions that could affect our pack,” Xavier spat, stepping close, his chest puffed out. “Or don’t you understand the meaning of ‘co-Alpha’?”

I held my ground. “Give me a break, Xavier. I’ve shown time and time again that I’m equipped to lead this pack, and I’d never make a decision that would put anyone in this house at risk. You should know that.”

“I’d like to believe you, brother, but it’s kind of hard to do that when you just got in bed with a hunter without even consulting me first.”

“After you were just in bed with our mate?” I spat back.

Rishika came strolling over and stopped short. She eyed us both, obviously feeling the tension radiating between us. “Um… I need to borrow Xavier for a moment. Some of the guards at the perimeter have a question.”

I started to ask her why they hadn’t come to me for the answer, but before I could say a word, Xavier jumped in.

“Happy to help, Rishika,” he said.

“You’ll be more useful there than here,” I said.

Rishika gave me a slight nod, and I watched them go, my anger intensifying despite my best attempts to calm down and be rational. But when it came to dealing with Xavier, it was difficult for me to keep a cool head. I knew what I was doing, and it pissed me off to have someone second guessing me—especially him.

I should have known that this whole co-Alpha thing was a horrible idea. I’d let the last forty-eight hours lull me into a sense of complacency, since we’d both been so intent on the same thing: protecting Cali. But now that she was safe, it was clear that things were back to normal, and Xavier and I weren’t going to see eye to eye on anything else. It had been stupid of me to think that he and I would be able to work together and make the best of the unique situation we’d found ourselves in.

“Some things never change,” I muttered to myself, still fuming inside.

Things had been so much easier and had gone so much smoother when I’d been the lone Alpha. I’d been able to make the right decisions for the pack without being questioned at every turn.

“*Shit!*” I hissed.

I should just claim Alpha again—things would be so much better that way. Without Xavier on my back, I’d feel much less stressed, and the pack would know exactly who to go to if they needed something. This had to be confusing for them, even though they were taking it in stride, and there was no question that I was what the pack needed right now—especially since we were facing new threats. Just as quickly as that thought bloomed, I hesitated, unable to resist thinking about the dream once again. I’d thought about that dream every single day since I’d had it, and it was very clear that Cali would get hurt if I took over as Alpha again. I didn’t know exactly *how* it would hurt her, but that outcome had been clear enough.

I’d tried so many times to tell myself that it was just a dream that had probably been brought on by stress. At least I *hoped* that was the reason. I wanted to let it go so badly, but I was afraid to—especially since I couldn’t help but remember all the other dreams I’d had that had turned out to be eerily prophetic. I couldn’t be sure that this dream would be any different, and I wasn’t willing to test it if there was even a sliver of a chance that it would put Cali’s life in danger. Not to mention those damn witches, who always found the worst times to come and taunt me about the dreams and confuse me even more in the process.

I sighed as I walked up to my room, suddenly feeling the weight of the world on my shoulders. I was beyond tired and ready to call it a day.

After I got ready for bed, I went over to the locked drawer where I’d stored the witches’ card—the card that just might be the key to the destiny I wanted to have with Cali. I unlocked the drawer, picked up the business card, and examined it closely as a million thoughts raced through my head. Most of those thoughts centered on how there had to be a catch to any offer the witches presented to me. That was how it worked when it came to witches. They rarely did anything for anyone without asking for something in return, and I couldn’t imagine what they’d ask for in payment for what they’d offered me this time round—even if they owed me.

As much as I wanted to avoid getting mixed up with the witches in any way, I had to know if the dream they’d shown me was a true vision of the future, and they were the only ones who could tell me. Xavier had just been with Cali—*my* mate. I couldn’t stand this back-and-forth any longer. I needed something to be done. I needed control back, and I couldn’t make any decisions about my Alpha-hood until I knew more.

Decision made, I closed my eyes, spoke the sisters’ names out loud, then waited. A few seconds passed, and I opened my eyes. Nothing.

I whirled around at the sound of laughter coming from behind me. There they were: Chloe, Posie, and Lauren, standing shoulder to shoulder and looking like they’d just shown up to have a little fun—or cause a lot of trouble.

Chloe stepped forward, her hands linked demurely behind her back.

“I’m so pleased that you finally called us!” she said in a sing-song voice. “Are you finally ready to accept our offer?”

**Episode 2108**

I stared at Big Mac with wide eyes. Xavier and Ava had to *connect*? What the hell was that supposed to mean? Were they supposed to have… *sex* in order to understand how to sever the mate bond between them for good?!

Big Mac glared at me as if she could hear my thoughts. She probably could—I was super easy to read. “Pull your mind out of the gutter, Cali. I didn’t say anything about Xavier and Ava having sex.”

Hearing that being spoken out loud made my stomach churn.

“Then what are you talking about?” I asked. “How are they supposed to connect otherwise?”

Big Mac remained serious. “Xavier and Ava have a lot of unresolved issues, and they need to *talk*.”

I scowled. “Are you seriously suggesting that my mate and the girl who probably wants me dead should go to couples therapy?”

Big Mac snorted at that. “I don’t think it has to be that extreme. It’s just that there’s a lot of baggage between them. And I’m sure you know better than anyone that the ties that bind mates are not so easily broken.”

Why did I need to be CONSTANTLY reminded that Xavier had had another mate before me? Especially someone like Ava, who couldn’t be trusted? Who had done everything in her power to take Xavier from me?

She was cunning and deceitful and a horrible person most of the time. Yeah, she had some flashes of humanity here and there, but that didn’t mean she didn’t want to steal my man. She was acting as if Xavier were a wallet instead of a person!

“What about the unmating spell?” I asked Big Mac impatiently. “Or the potion you gave to Maya? For god’s sake, there has to be *some* magic that can put an end to this stupid lingering bond!”

Big Mac let out a long-suffering sigh. “If there were a way, I would have found it, bottled it, and I’d be rich. I *wish* something like that existed—I’m sick and tired of all this werewolf drama.”

Oh, wow. I kind of felt bad for the witch now. I knew I’d be annoyed if the roles were reversed and she was the one who came to me for advice all the time. Like, I liked to help people, but not when everything felt hopeless. But was this whole situation with Xavier and Ava and the *due destini* curse really hopeless?

All signs pointed to *yes*.

“Bottom line,” Big Mac went on, “for now, the best thing would be to have them work it out between themselves. Spend time together, or whatever.”

I groaned. “No matter how much they talk, I doubt that Ava will be willing to ever let Xavier go. She’s creepy that way.”

Big Mac’s tone was wry. “And Xavier has been indulging her. Objectively speaking, he’s to blame too.”

“Ava wants to see me thrown in a ditch somewhere, so I tend to be biased against her,” I replied sarcastically.

“You know, nobody’s forcing you to keep Ava here,” Big Mac said, raising an eyebrow. “The fact that she’s around Xavier not only bothers you, but it also seems to have an effect on their mate bond.”

“That’s true…” I trailed off.

“Distance can make the heart grow fonder, but it can also make the heart forget,” she said. “I can’t believe I need to tell you guys the obvious, but here goes: things would be much simpler if you just threw Ava out and stopped enabling her.”

I fidgeted. “It’s not like she has anywhere else to go, though.”

Big Mac stared. “She’s not a stray dog, Cali. She’s a powerful werewolf. Don’t forget that she doesn’t care whether *you* live or die.”

That was actually a great point. Ava had helped the Alphas escape from Lucian’s estate, yes, but I doubted that she’d cared about what happened to me.

Big Mac yawned. “Anyway, it’s late. I’m going to bed, and you should do the same. Your problems can wait until morning.”

“Okay,” I said, turning to leave. “Thanks, Big Mac. Night.” I pulled the door closed behind me.

And then I was alone to stew.

Would sending Ava away really solve anything? What if that made her even more obsessed with Xavier? And the truth was, even though she and I were always on the rocks, I had to admit that she’d been helping the pack in general ever since the trouble with Letifer had begun.

Was it possible that she’d turned over a new leaf?

*Oh my god, stop being so naïve, Cali!* I told myself as the image of her locking lips with Xavier bombarded my mind.

She was after him, plain and simple, but how could Big Mac’s advice work? How could forcing her to have a conversation with Xavier or me solve any of this?

The time for talk had long passed.

Ava might have fooled me before, for whatever reason, but actions spoke louder than words. And kissing my mate said it all. Xavier was mine, and Ava wouldn’t rest until she took him away. She didn’t care about the way he felt. She didn’t care that he preferred me.

Still…

It wasn’t like Xavier didn’t share part of the blame here.

He’d actually told me that he didn’t blame kissing Ava on any external factor—not on the wine at the Vanguard’s estate, not on the moon, not on some weird goddess. He still felt some kind of way about her. I believed Xavier when he told me that the kiss didn’t mean anything real to him, though. But that was today.

What about tomorrow?

He was obviously struggling to keep those mate-related emotions and urges in check.

*Ugh! I’ve already let this go on for too long!*

It was time for me to step the fuck up.

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I found Ava nursing a white chocolate mocha in the kitchen. The moment she looked up at me, her face twisted into a grimace. Charming.

“Xavier told me you kissed him,” I said, cutting to the chase. “And I want to make it clear that you might think he’s your mate, that he’s into you, but he’s not.”

Ava set her cup down and smiled. “You’re wrong on both counts. Xavier kissed me, and he did it because he wants me.”

It was obvious that she was taking pleasure in this, twisting the knife.

“The fact that there might be a lingering mate bond between you two doesn’t mean that he *wants* to want you,” I said. “It’s something that his mind doesn’t desire. You killed his mother, he killed you, he’s turned you down a million times, and I have to wonder…” I shook my head. “Do you have any pride left?”

She barely flinched. “Pride is a luxury, Cali. Anyway, don’t fret,” she said mildly, standing up. “I’m not planning on sticking around much longer.”

She started to walk away without any further explanation, acting as if she owned the place.

I spluttered, indignant. “You’ll be leaving the pack house, all right! But *without* Xavier. He’s my mate.”

Ava snorted. Glancing over her shoulder, she said, “Sure. He’s your mate. For now.”

She gave me one last smug smile before sauntering away.

*No. No, did she just—did she just say that? Seriously?*

It took all my self-control not to attack. I could actually feel energy coursing through me, vibrating through my fingers, like electricity that wanted to fry someone. To death. Why had I ever thought—why did I *always* *think*—that I could reason with that woman?

The idea of letting Ava work things out with Xavier was obviously a waste of time. And there was no way I was going to let her near Xavier again. Not after that kiss. I was determined to go with Plan B.

Ava had to go. She was going to pack up and get out of here.

*Her reign of terror has now ended*, I thought, ready to go find Xavier and announce my decision.

I passed by Sage. “Hey, have you seen where Xavier went?”

“Yeah! He just went out on a patrol,” she said, then winked.

*Patrolling?* I frowned. At least out in the woods, though, Ava wouldn’t have the chance to corner him and remind him of… whatever it was that they shared.

I felt like gagging.

“I’ve been looking for you,” I heard my sister’s voice say, and I looked up at the kitchen doorway. Artemis had just arrived. When she took in my expression, she frowned. “Are you okay?”

I huffed. “No. Ava is a problem, always.”

Artemis shrugged. “I don’t know why everybody makes such a big fuss over her. She’s just one moderately strong werewolf. We should just capture her and banish her to the Fae world. Let her find someone else to bond with.”

I snorted bitterly. This wasn’t just Ava’s fault. I hated to blame Xavier for something that he couldn’t control—especially something like a mate bond, that was supernatural—but still.

*Is this how he feels about my bond with Greyson?* I wondered.

And then I decided that I was done talking about this for the night.

“Anyway,” I said, changing the subject. “How are you?”

Artemis gave me a faint smile. “I was able to use my magic to help Xavier at the Vanguard palace, actually.”

I gasped. “Finally some good news!”

But my sister seemed troubled. “It was really hard to do, actually. And then I felt exhausted. I had trouble getting it to work again.” She gave me a look full of hope. “I need to overcome this, but I can’t do it alone. I can’t believe I’m asking you this, but will you help me get my magic back?”

**Episode 2109**

XAVIER

I was doing rounds of the property, trying to pick up any scents or sounds that could be cause for alarm. At the same time, I was boiling with rage over my asshole brother and his attitude problem.

The power sharing agreement had been interesting for a moment there, while we’d fought with Lucian, but all that had been temporary. Since we were no longer dealing with a creepy fucking moon prince, the situation had changed. There was no need to split things down the middle.

There was a reason why packs had only one Alpha—it presented clear leadership. Maybe there would be no harm in working with Charlie’s mother, but I should have been there to okay the plan. We both knew that hunters and werewolves were a dangerous mix, and Greyson should have consulted me first. Disrespecting me like that had basically declared war between us again. And it wasn’t like I didn’t like war—it was the only outcome that made sense when it came to me and him—but I hadn’t expected him to get into it so soon.

Whatever.

Charlie was a nice enough guy, but his mother was an unknown entity. It was like bringing a hornet into a bee nest. I hoped Iris’s son had warned her sufficiently about messing with us, and that she wouldn’t cause any problems.

My thoughts were interrupted when I heard footsteps behind me.

I turned to see Rishika approaching me, her wolf sniffing the air.

*I haven’t noticed anything unusual tonight*, she mind linked.

*Good*, I replied. *You can head back to the house if you want.*

She lingered, though, looking around, her nostrils flaring. She seemed a little uncomfortable.

*Is there something else on your mind?* I asked.

Her wolf inhaled sharply. *Are things going to go back to the way they were before?*

I stared at her, confused. *What do you mean?*

Rishika looked me dead in the eye. *When Greyson was Alpha.*

I clenched my teeth. *Are you suggesting that I should just step aside and let it go?*

She kept looking at me, her voice even inside my head. *You did a great job filling in for Greyson. But now that Letifer is defeated, it would be best for the pack if there was one leader. And in my opinion, that’s Greyson.*

It sucked to hear her say that. She was a formidable fighter, a very strong pack member, and someone whose opinion carried a lot of weight.

*I’m sorry*, she added awkwardly. *I’m not trying to play favorites here. It’s just that I think it’s in the pack’s best interest. It feels like Greyson can usually keep a level head, whereas you’re more aggressive. I prefer his approach.*

The fact that Rishika had chosen Greyson was a pretty strong hit to my ego. But at the same time, I couldn’t exactly demand explanations from her. Even if I was angry, I couldn’t get into a fight with her and prove her right in the same breath.

*I respect your honesty*, I told her. At least that much was true. *Greyson and I are still talking about this.*

Rishika eyed me carefully. *Don’t take too long. The pack needs an Alpha.*

Without another word, she headed off, trotting toward the pack house. I waited until she was completely gone to let my frustration out. To accept that even though I respected Rishika, it didn’t mean that I fucking liked anything she’d just said.

She was *wrong*.

Growling, I used my wolf teeth to grab a thick branch from one of the trees, tearing it out before throwing it away. I’d always known that Rishika favored Greyson, and it had taken a lot of courage for her to say that to me. It had taken guts, but knowing that didn’t make me feel any better.

How much more did I have to do to prove that I was the superior leader?

What the fuck was it about Greyson that had people trusting him more than me?

I paced around, snapping my teeth. There had to be somewhere to start with all this, and the answer was clear at the moment.

Iris.

Charlie’s mother.

This hunter alliance made me uneasy, and I could imagine that I wasn’t the only pack member who felt that way. Logic said that things would probably work fine with Iris, but that didn’t change the fact that she was a hunter. Sure, I had said she could come help out with Violet if she was monitored at all times, but I wasn’t there for the conversation with her, for the actual ironing out of logistics—or the part where she’d be *staying* here for who knew how long.

Had Greyson even taken a fucking moment to consider the way the rest of the Redwoods felt about him giving Iris an in with our pack?

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When I got back to the house, Ravi was coming out to take over patrol. I paused, taking him in. I knew that he and Ava had hooked up—she’d told me. And I remembered how unbothered I’d been when I’d learned the truth at first, but when Ava had brought it up again at the Vanguards’… Something else had come out in me. Yet another fucking clue that things between Ava and me weren’t as cut and dried as I had hoped.

Still, I wasn’t just irritated at the idea of them kissing. I also felt kinda bad for Ravi. He was a good guy. For the most part. He’d been pretty solid lately, especially during the Letifer battle. Either way, he had a lot of potential, whereas Ava was…

Fucking annoying.

Ravi and I shared a nod, and then he ran off into the woods. I shifted back to human and walked up the porch. There was a strange woman sitting in the cold, talking on the phone. When she saw me, though, she ended her call swiftly and stood up.

“Hello. Xavier, right?”

Iris had this whole *Matrix* outfit going on. And she probably wanted to kill us all.

“I heard you were here,” I said evenly. “Pretty risky for you to stay in a house full of werewolves.”

I hoped that my words sounded a smidge threatening. There was no reason she should feel comfortable here.

Her expression remained neutral. “I spoke with Greyson about my plan to catch the stalker who nearly killed my son.”

“You mean Violet too,” I said sharply. “You should have come to me first.”

Iris raised her eyebrows. “Apologies. I was under the impression that Greyson was the Alpha.”

I didn’t think before saying, “Doesn’t matter what you think.”

For the first time, Iris’s face betrayed a clear expression—surprise, plain and simple. “I know my presence here makes everyone uncomfortable, but I’m only looking out for my son. I promise.”

I gestured at the house. “And I’m only looking out for my pack. And from what I understand, Violet was the one targeted by the stalker, not Charlie. Violet is like a little sister to me, so that makes this my problem too.”

Iris stared at me. “So. I care about Charlie. You care about Violet. These are unusual circumstances.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“It sounds like we have to work together,” she said. “It would be smart. Can we agree on that?”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “It depends. What do you have in mind?”

Iris laid out her plan, but our little truce didn’t last long. When she told me that she was planning to use Violet to lure in the stalker, I shook my head. “We’re not doing that. It’s too dangerous for Violet.”

“That’s why I’ve asked for two pack members to come along as backup,” Iris said. “We’ll only have one chance at this, and I want to make sure we get it right.”

I paused, thinking this over. Having two seasoned pack members there, along with a hunter, would make it tough for any predator to escape.

“Give me a moment to think about it,” I told her.

She nodded. “That’s all I’m asking.” She paused. “Does this mean that I’ll be discussing this with you from now on? Or your brother?”

“With me,” I said without any hesitation. “Violet is closest to me. Anything Greyson needs to know, I’ll fill him in.”

Before Iris could say another word, I marched inside, letting the door slam behind me. Having Iris here was complicated, and made it clearer than ever that I had to take charge of the pack. My brother had disrespected me when he’d agreed to the hunter’s plan without taking the risks of it into account—the risk to the pack, and to someone I cared about a lot.

Had he even fucking *bothered* to question Iris’s intentions?

Still fuming, I stomped upstairs to my room.

When I opened the door, though, my anger was overwhelmed by shock. Ava was there. She looked like she’d just stepped out of the shower, her hair still wet.

When our eyes met, my stomach clenched.

I stood by the doorway. “What are you doing here?”

She came up to me, a seductive smile playing across her lips. “We have unfinished business, Xavier.”

I scoffed. “I doubt that. We were finished long ago.”

Ava narrowed her eyes at me. “You know that we started something at the Vanguard house. Don’t you want to see where it takes us?”

**Episode 2110**

“Of course I’m here for you, always,” I said to Artemis. “But what can *I* do to help you get your magic back?”

It seemed like if this was what Artemis was trying to do, I wasn’t the best one to help her. Hell, she had been the one teaching *me* how to use magic.

“My powers are like muscles,” she said. “They need to be trained and strengthened, and I figure that since our powers are so similar, we could work together—the same way I trained you with your magic before.”

I stared at her dubiously. “I’m probably too clumsy to be an instructor, but I’m willing to try if you are. Are you sure there’s nothing more to your magic block, though?”

I avoided bringing up the Fae promise that Artemis had made to our mother, but that whole thing had been pretty huge.

“What more could there be?” Artemis asked, avoiding eye contact.

I squeezed her shoulder, my voice lower. “Have you talked to Mom about this?”

Artemis sighed. “Not in so much detail. But I told her that it’s time we actually talked about Kadmos, out in the open, but then kind of backed out from doing it then and there. At least I said something—I don’t want him to be a secret anymore.”

I paused, processing. “Is there a chance that knowing about him is why your magic hasn’t totally come back? Could it be psychological?”

Artemis blinked at me. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“A psychological thing,” I said. “You know, maybe it has to do with your feelings and stuff. Like all your inner thoughts that you may not even know about.”

I was feeling really proud of myself right now.

*That psych class I took in college is totally paying off!*

Unfortunately, my sister didn’t look so impressed. She gave me a flat look. “I don’t think about my feelings. At least not frequently. Definitely not since Letifer left me alone.”

*I bet there’s a bunch of trauma there that Artemis has totally suppressed*, I thought ruefully before shaking the idea off. One problem at a time.

“Maybe that’s the thing,” I said evenly. “Maybe you need to acknowledge your feelings in general. I mean, we know you actually want to figure things out concerning your father.” I remembered what Big Mac had said about Xavier and Ava, and the need for closure between them.

Artemis arched an eyebrow. “Are you sure about that?”

“I’m just saying—your magic might be blocked because you, perhaps, have a suppressed need to resolve your feelings about Kadmos in order to overcome the broken Fae promise that made you keep him a secret in the first place.”

“Look at you.” Artemis smirked. “Since when are you a doctor?”

“We call them therapists here,” I told her. “Or psychologists.”

Artemis sighed, shrugging. “I get that you have your little therapist hat on right now, but I’m not sure about your ideas concerning my father and… closure. If there’s a real chance for me to reclaim my magic, though, I’m open to practically anything.”

*Poor Artemis*, I thought. Sniffling, I pulled her in for a hug, and she scoffed.

“Why are you getting all mushy right now?” she demanded. “Stop it!”

How could I? These past few weeks had been so hard for my sister. Especially what had happened with Letifer. She’d had such a hard time since she’d left the Fae world, and I was pretty sure nothing had been perfect back there for her, either.

“You know what?” I said, facing her. “If you think that exercising your magic will help you, then I am all in. I will be the best instructor ever. Or at least as good as I can be.”

Artemis grinned. “Thank you.”

“But…” I raised my eyebrows. “I think that you do need to have the conversation with Mom about Kadmos. He was a powerful Dark Fae. It feels like not knowing the answer to that question could make it harder for you to regain your magic.”

Artemis pressed her lips together. “You really think so?”

“I do. Not because I really know anything about psychology, but because it kind of makes sense.”

Artemis crossed her arms over her chest, looking down at the ground. When she spoke, her voice was lower. “Sometimes I have dreams about my father. Dreams that feel so real. But I know that they can’t be. I’ve never met him.” She glanced up at me, scratching her cheek. “I’ve thought about returning to the Fae world to try to find out more about him…”

I nodded. “I could go with you! If that’s what you want to do, I could—”

Artemis let out a breathless laugh. “I hate the idea of leaving Rishika behind. I’d miss her like crazy, and she’d freak out the entire time I was away.”

That sounded much like Greyson and Xavier.

“Besides,” Artemis continued, “I have mixed feelings about seeing our grandmother. And about going back to the Fae world at all.”

I frowned, confused. “Why?”

“When I first left, I wanted to go back. It was my home, and I had no real reason to stay here,” she said. “But now, I have you, Orla, Tom—a family. And I’m starting to feel like I’m part of the pack.” She blushed a little. “And of course, there’s… like I just said… *Rishika*.”

I felt so many warm and fuzzy feelings at Artemis’s admission. This was huge. I was so glad she felt like she belonged. I’d always felt connected to my family, and I couldn’t imagine not having that in my life.

The same went for Xavier and Greyson. I couldn’t imagine my life without them. Ever.

“We love you, Artemis,” I told her softly. Taking her hand, I added, “We should talk to Mom about this, I think. As awkward as it is to discuss someone who’s both her ex and your long-lost father, I know that Kadmos was my mom’s first true love. And you need to learn more about him, since he’s literally a blood relative.”

Artemis sighed. “I guess…”

“If he is still alive, you deserve to know,” I said firmly.

She nodded. “But I’m not sure if the truth, whatever it may be, will have any impact on my magic. I’m not all that certain that this thing is psychological, as you called it. I still want to practice with you.”

I smiled. “Of course. I hope I don’t accidentally set stuff on fire, though.”

Artemis laughed, pulling me into a hug.

“Oh, hey,” Rishika said. I turned and saw her walking up to us. “Am I interrupting something?”

“Just bonding with my sister,” Artemis said.

I grinned. “I’ll help you in the morning, but not too early—I need my beauty sleep.”

Neither Artemis nor Rishika seemed surprised by my statement. I’d always refused to train with them early in the mornings.

*And I’m not ashamed to admit that!* I thought proudly, strutting off to my bedroom.

As I passed Greyson’s bedroom, I thought about saying good night, but the light was off. He was probably exhausted after the day we’d had.

I decided to let him rest and headed to my room. I brushed my teeth and washed my face, changed into some fluffy PJs, and fell into bed. When I closed my eyes, I was ready to fall asleep. The thought of my rendezvous with Xavier popped into my head, but then images of him kissing Ava at the palace ruined it.

I frowned, pressing my eyes shut and tossing on the bed. I thought about Greyson and how soft his lips were and how tomorrow, when he was rested, he would pick me up and twirl me around after we made a snowman together. That was a nice thought.

I was drifting off, my lips stretched into a smile, when I heard my name.

“*Cali…*”

I knew that voice. It was Lucian’s voice. Lucian was calling for me, and suddenly, I recalled what he’d told me at the palace.

*I might be able to do something about the* due destini*...*

My brows furrowed as confusion set in.

“*Talk to Seluna*,” Lucian’s voice said in my head. “*She can show you the way.*”

As if hypnotized, I got up and walked to the window.

I was surprised to see the Moon Favor fountain. Only, this time, the statue of Seluna was alive, and stunningly beautiful.

*What is happening right now? Am I awake? Am I sleeping? Both?*

Seluna stepped out from the cascading water, her skin glistening in the moonlight, her long hair draped over her perfect shoulders. She stared at me with a smile. “Welcome, Caliana. Why don’t you join me?”

A hot babe goddess was asking me to go somewhere with her. I was definitely dreaming.

“Yeah, I don’t think—” I turned away, only to feel a sudden cold breeze. I swallowed roughly, my heart pounding. I was no longer in my bedroom. I was in the Vanguard palace, in the courtyard, talking to a moon goddess.

*… WHAT?*

What was going on here? I had to be sleeping. *Right?*

Seluna smiled at me. “Go talk to him.”

I chuckled awkwardly. “Oh. Um. Talk to who?”

Seluna leaned in. I could feel the warmth of her scented skin as she breathed, “Talk to Lucian. He is the key.”

**Episode 2111**

GREYSON

Lauren gave me a speculative look. “Your condition has worsened.”

Posie’s smile faded. “No wonder you have summoned us.”

Chloe frowned, wincing. “Do those hurt?”

I looked down at myself and realized that they were talking about my bare chest. They were talking about the veins, dark and spreading and menacing. I suddenly felt self-conscious, which was pretty unlike me, but I wasn’t about to have an identity crisis right now. I didn’t have time for it. I covered my chest with my robe, clearing my throat.

“Why are you here?” I asked without thinking.

Chloe squinted at me. “Didn’t you call for us? Or was that a mistake?”

“We assumed you were ready to ask for our help,” Lauren said.

“Maybe it was one of those things that humans do,” Posie said. “A butt dials?”

Before the conversation could derail even further, I cleared the air. “I did call you. As you can see, the veins have gotten worse. And I want to know more about what you’re offering.” I waved a hand, looking at them one by one. “No more ambiguous taunts. I think I deserve a clear answer after saving your lives.”

Lauren rolled her eyes, very obviously not happy that I’d brought that up.

But Chloe laughed. “Is that all you want? To rid yourself of the veins?”

My patience was running very fucking thin. “I want to rid myself of the uncertainty, of the curse, of everything that’s wrong. And above all, I want to protect Cali, my mate, because she is the one who’s suffering the most from the *due destini*—not me, and not my brother. I want to free *her*, to let her choose without causing harm to anyone.”

Lauren smiled at me enigmatically. “That’s very noble of you, but I suspect you’re not being entirely truthful.”

Exasperated, I asked, “What are you talking about? When have I ever lied to you about anything?”

Lauren tilted her head to the side. “You’re lying to *yourself*, wolf. What is it you *truly* want? All the details you just gave us only made your cause murky. What is it that you truly, undeniably, deeply want?”

When she phrased it that way, my answer could only be one thing. One person.

“Caliana,” I said. “I want Cali.”

The three witches looked at one another and smiled. Like that wasn’t worrisome.

“Well,” Chloe said, “we can help you get whatever you truly want, if—”

I laughed bitterly. “I knew it. There’s always an *if*. What kind of favor do you want in return? Witches are always after something extra.”

Chloe shook her head. “You’re wrong. Whether you succeed or not depends entirely upon your performance. On how you do things.”

I blinked. “How I do *what*?”

“How does one do anything?” Posie said with a dreamy sigh, making me feel even more confused and annoyed.

I stared at Chloe. “What on earth is happening right now?”

Chloe glanced over at her sisters. “Do you think he’s capable?” she asked them.

Lauren, ever the sharp-eyed one, stared at me, snorting. “I doubt it.”

“You doubt what? And what’s this talk about me being ‘capable’?” I snapped. “You’ve been harassing me to go through with this deal ever since I saved you, and now you’re questioning whether I’m able to pull off whatever it is you have in mind. How am I lacking in anything?”

Chloe made an appeasing gesture with her hands. “We just want to make sure that you know what you’re asking for. Once you start down this path, there is no turning back.”

I stared at all three of them, my head boiling. They just wouldn’t stop speaking in riddles, and it made me want to pull my hair out. This was the most frustrating thing I’d been through in the past few hours, and that was saying a whole lot, considering I’d been trapped inside an outrageous self-proclaimed monarch’s house not too long ago.

“This was a mistake,” I told them sharply. “You can’t help me. You never give me any clear answers. You just enjoy taunting me. I don’t know why, but that’s all there is to it.”

Posie gasped, clearly offended. “We would *never* taunt you.”

Lauren rolled her eyes. “We love taunting everybody, anyway. Don’t take it personally.”

Chloe frowned. “Why do you feel that way?”

“I literally just told you—you’ve never explained what would happen to me if I made this deal. You have not once told me what’s going on with those dreams, or visions, or whatever they are. What’s the point of them?”

Lauren gave me an insincere look of concern. “Didn’t you enjoy them?”

She obviously wanted to rile me up for her entertainment, and I wasn’t about to fall into her trap. Forcing myself to keep my voice even, I said, “In one of those visions, you warned me that if I became Alpha, Cali would die. Is that true? Is that the future you’re promising me? Because if so, then forget about it. I won’t be doing anything with you guys.”

“He still doesn’t get it, does he?” Lauren asked Chloe.

Posie looked sad. “He’s not getting it.”

“*What* is it that I’m not getting?” I demanded.

“Don’t you see?” Chloe said. “We don’t control the future. Any future is possible.”

“And what we have shown you is only a glimpse of all the possibilities,” Posie said.

Lauren piped up. “The possibilities are affected by your choices. It is your choices, always, that lead the way.”

I scowled. Even though they were trying to explain something to me, they’d just ended up rattling off more riddles. I didn’t have time for this. I didn’t have the mental stamina for this. I was exhausted and irritated. *And* I was still furious at Lucian, so this whole interaction was just the cherry on top of a *wonderful* day.

“This isn’t working,” I told them, my voice sharp. “You should leave.” I shook my head bitterly. “I can’t believe I was actually falling for your nonsense.”

“Don’t fool yourself, Greyson,” Chloe told me, her eyes suddenly intense. “You were the one who called us, and you did it because you’re tired of all this. You think your mate is suffering, and you are suffering along with her. We can help you. Even if we speak in riddles, we can help you. We can help Cali.”

I fell silent. The thought of my mate suffering was unbearable. I had hoped that things would somehow work out at some point between me and her and Xavier. But the increased appearance of the veins, their violent comeback, was a not-so-subtle reminder that things were only getting worse.

How much longer before the veins spread on either me or my brother, and Cali was consumed by guilt?

“Are you ever going to answer any of my questions clearly?” I asked the witches.

Lauren’s tone was teasing. “What questions?”

I felt like jumping out the window, just to end the madness.

“You can trust us, I promise,” Posie reassured me. “You saved us, after all.”

I had saved them, it was true. But could I really trust them?

I didn’t know. And the alternative was doing nothing and keeping Cali stuck in this situation with me and my brother. I felt so antsy, so stressed out by the unknown—but the unknown was exactly what these three were offering me.

But could it really be that much worse than what I already had?

I had saved them, after all. That had to count for something, didn’t it? Big Mac had said something about witches disliking being in debt, so logically speaking, they would want me to emerge satisfied from this deal.

“I need to talk with my mate about this,” I started, but Chloe shook her head.

“No discussion. This deal is for you, only.”

*Fuck it.*

Just, fuck it.

“Whatever,” I said. I would probably regret this, but at this point, I just couldn’t ignore the pull of making a decision. Of taking my fate into my hands. Of trying to save Cali from a predicament she could never escape without drastic intervention.

“Go ahead,” I told them. “Do it. Do whatever you have to do. But keep Cali safe. You know you owe me at least that for saving your life.”

The three witches looked at each other. And then Posie stared at me. “It is true, we do owe you. But why do you think *we* are supposed to do something?”

“I assume you’re going to use a spell or have me drink a potion or whatever,” I said, impatient. “Just give it to me and let’s get this over with, how about that?”

Lauren stepped forward. Out of thin air, a satchel appeared in her hands. I squinted at it.

“Is there a potion in there?” I asked.

Lauren gave me the satchel. “Why don’t you find out for yourself?”

Still unbelievably annoyed, I reached inside and pulled out…

An ornate antique pocket watch.

“What the hell is this?” I asked, glaring at the three of them.

“It’s the Watch of Fates,” Chloe told me calmly. “When you are ready to take a step forward, when you no longer have doubts, all you need to do is turn back the hands until they align at midnight.”

Posie raised an index finger. “But don’t forget—you must go counterclockwise to reset your fate.”

Lauren gave me a serious look. “It is just past midnight right now. You have until the stroke of midnight tomorrow to decide. One second past that time, and your chance, like the time in your hands, will slip away. Forever.”

**Episode 2112**

LOLA

“I’m not going to tell you anything,” I declared. “Not until I know that Jay is safe.”

The vampires snarled at me, taking a step closer as if to attack me. I was more furious than ever at Jacqueline for not helping us. It was my fault for letting her stay at the pack house—it was my fucking fault for trusting her in the first place!

“You are in no position to bargain… bargain,” Echo snapped at me.

He apparently had no idea who he was messing with. I was the most stubborn person I knew, probably second only to Cali. “No Jay, no cooperation.”

Tracer rolled his eyes. “Your boyfriend is fine.”

I couldn’t believe these assholes!

“Jay is not just my boyfriend. He’s my *mate*. Or do you not know the difference?”

Tracer shrugged. “I don’t really care.”

If I hadn’t had the silver handcuffs on, I would’ve shifted and torn these two dickheads to shreds. Then I would’ve gathered up the shreds, thrown them into the ocean, and then watched as the sharks ate them. While also laughing maniacally.

If only they could hear my thoughts right now.

“How did you become a…” Echo wrinkled his nose. “A vamp-wolf… wolf?”

I kept glaring at him. “None of your business. I already told you—I’m not going to answer any questions until I know for sure that Jay is okay.”

Echo let out a long-suffering sigh, glancing at Tracer, who huffed.

“Fine,” he snapped. Then he grabbed me by the crook of the elbow and pulled me to a nearby door with a small sliding window. He pulled the window back and pointed inside.

“See?” Tracer said. “There he is, doing just fine.”

I gasped, terrified. My mate was chained to a cot, looking like he’d been through hell.

*My beautiful Jay!*

I was fucking incensed.

“What the hell did you do to him?” I demanded, fighting to escape Tracer’s grip.

“Can you stop being so dramatic?” Tracer said. “It’s nothing. We just had to beat some sense into him—it seems like he really cares about you.”

“Yeah, it would be kind of cute if he weren’t a werewolf… werewolf,” Echo said, snorting.

I was growling under my breath, staring at my mate. I knew that Jay would heal, but I hated seeing him like this. I hated knowing that he’d gotten hurt because of me.

*Don’t worry, baby*, I mind linked. *I’m going to rescue you. I love you so much.*

Jay didn’t stir, which made my worry double and my anger sizzle up. Was he hurt? Was he *dying*?

*These assholes don’t know who they’re messing with!*

Raging, I stomped on Echo’s foot with all my strength. The weakling screamed in pain, jumping away and hopping around. “Why the hell did you do that? You bitch… bitch!”

I smiled at him, showing all my teeth. “Fuck. You.”

Tracer slammed the window shut. “Viewing time is over. Time to get down to business.”

He jerked me back to the chair, and Echo flashed his fangs at me. “I’m going to kill you… kill you.”

I groaned. “Can you stop repeating everything? It’s really annoying!”

Echo growled and lunged toward me, but I didn’t even flinch. Pushing him back, Tracer said, “Can you chill? I promise you can do whatever you want with her, but not until we’re done with our questions.”

I glared daggers at them. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Tracer’s eyes narrowed. “I’m the one asking the questions. And the biggest question is *you*.” He came closer, examining me as if I were a specimen under the microscope. “How can you be both vampire and werewolf?”

“Is that all you have to ask?” I said. “Why are you so obsessed with that question?”

Tracer huffed. “It’s kind of mind-blowing. Vampires hate werewolves. Werewolves hate vampires. You must hate yourself.”

I laughed before pretending to make my lower lip wobble. “It’s true… I do… I *do* hate myself.” And then I pretended to cry, just to see them both flinch and look at me like I was a bomb.

“Stop it!” Tracer said, clearly not emotionally intelligent enough to realize I was faking it. “Stop making so much noise—if you want to see your boy toy or that medium again, then you need to show some respect!”

I rolled my eyes, cutting the act. “Okay, fine. You want to know why I am the way I am?”

“*Yes!*” both of them said, clearly aggravated with me. I hadn’t asked them to kidnap me, so this sounded like a problem that they had to deal with themselves.

Meanwhile, I would tell them the truth about who I was and get this over with.

“I was born a hybrid werewolf, half human,” I started. “I never even told my BFF, and our relationship really took a hit because of that secret. Now we’re better than ever, though, so that’s fine, but back then it was really a problem. You know how friendships can be.”

Tracer glanced at Echo. “Even the best of them have problems.”

Echo nodded seriously. “Yes… yes.”

“Right? Anyway, I really liked shifting, but being part human made it kind of dangerous, so I got a witch to help, and then—”

“Wait!” Tracer exclaimed after exchanging a look with Echo. “You asked a *witch* for help? Are you crazy?”

These two idiot men seemed to be very invested in my story. Maybe I could try to gain their trust and then escape?

Now *that* was an idea.

“I know, you’re right,” I said indignantly. “Because guess what happened next?”

Echo gasped. “What… what?”

“The witch took Jay’s eye as payment for a spell to help me!”

“*Shut up!*” Tracer was stunned. He grabbed Echo’s shoulder. “That’s why that guy’s a pirate!”

“Exactly,” I said. “He did it all for me.”

“That was nice of him. Good thing we didn’t kill him… kill him,” Echo commented.

Ignoring Echo’s bullshit, I continued. “But in the end, the whole thing was pointless, because while we were waiting for the spell to work, I was bitten by a bloodsucker, and I lost my wolf entirely. Can you believe it?”

“This is a really good story… story,” Echo murmured to Tracer.

Tracer shushed him. “Let her finish!”

“That’s when the real trouble began,” I continued dramatically. “I went to Tottenville, where one of the professors tried to help me, and—”

Echo’s eyes widened. “Wait, you got into Tottenville? They rejected me… me.”

“Aw, that’s sad. I wonder why?” I said. “Did you try to kidnap someone there, too?”

“Maybe… maybe,” Echo said, looking sheepish.

“Stop interrupting her!” Tracer said, swatting him on the arm.

“Anyway, then, after I became a vampire, the witch’s spell worked and I got my wolf back,” I said. “So I became both a vampire and a werewolf. And now here I am, just a freak of nature trying to survive. The end.”

There was a long pause after that.

Echo squinted. Tracer stared at me. They had seemed invested in the story, but now they had this whole vibe of dubiousness that I did not appreciate.

“Did I mention that my parents abandoned me when I was a baby?” I said, raising my cuffed hands to wipe a fake tear from my eyes.

“Really… really?” Echo asked, clearly intrigued.

“I swear it’s the truth!” I looked between them. “So now that you know everything, you’re going to let me go, right?”

The vampires exchanged a look.

“Yeah, no,” Tracer set. “Good story, though.”

I gaped.

“You’re far too valuable, don’t you see?” Tracer said. “I can’t even begin to imagine what you’d be worth on the black market. Your sob story would only make that value rise.”

Echo nodded. “It was such a good story… story. I’m going to text our associates and tell them we finally have something worthwhile for them to check out… out.”

“Yeah, they need to see her in person,” Tracer agreed.

I was really trying to wrap my head around what was happening here. These fucking monsters were going to sell me on the black market? What kind of sick, twisted game were they playing?

“That’s not going to work,” I said sharply. “I’m not even a virgin, so forget that angle.”

Tracer waved me off. “Nobody cares. Besides, you’ll be whatever we say you are.”

“They’re already on their way… way,” Echo said with a grin.

Fear coursed through me. “I’m not a piece of property,” I spat, feeling my cheeks go warm. “And if you dare do anything to me, you will have an entire pack of werewolves coming after you. In fact, you’ll be in danger very soon if you don’t let me go right this instant.”

“You’re full of shit,” Tracer said casually. He turned to Echo. “The only thing we have to figure out right now is her starting price.”

Echo looked thoughtful. “How can we do that if we don’t know how she tastes… tastes?”

My stomach convulsed with disgust. “You’re fucking *cannibals*?”

I struggled against the handcuffs, but Tracer pushed me back in the chair, flashing his fangs. “We’re vampires. We drink blood.”

Echo gave a slow, menacing smile. “What do you think her blood is going to do to us… us?”

Tracer’s face looked suddenly nightmarish. “There’s only one way to find out.”

“*NO!*” I screamed, but it was cut short.

Grabbing me by the hair with immense force, Tracer pulled my head to the side and bit down on my neck.

**Episode 2113**

XAVIER

I laughed at Ava. “The only place this is going to take you is out of this room.” I jerked my thumb at the door. “Get out.”

Not surprisingly, Ava didn’t move a muscle. I was wasting my breath here, wasn’t I?

“I’ll go,” she said. “But on one condition.”

I groaned, rubbing my face. “Look, it’s been a long day. I don’t have time for your games.”

“This is not a game to me,” Ava said, her eyes flashing with indignation. “Why are you so afraid of me?”

I blinked at her in mild shock before chuckling. “*Afraid?* I’m not afraid of you. Where the hell did you get that idea?”

She took a step closer, arching her eyebrows. Even though I wasn’t scared—of course not—my brain screamed at me to take a step back and not let her touch me.

I didn’t know what would happen if she did.

“If that’s true, if you’re not afraid of your emotions for me, then why are you refusing to acknowledge what happened at the Vanguard palace?” she asked.

Shoving down the memory of Ava’s mouth on mine, her scent, her taste, how warm she was, I shook my head. “I already told Cali what happened, Ava. You need to let this go—right *now*.”

“Did you tell her how much you liked kissing me, though?” There was an obvious challenge in Ava’s face, in her words, and my heart was fucking pounding.

This was a confrontation.

This was yet another one of Ava’s traps.

“What the fuck are you getting at? What do you want?” I demanded.

“I’m only saying that I know you, Xavier.” Her voice was soft. Taunting. “I know you, and I’m certain that you were just as into the kiss as I was. Maybe even more.”

There was a bitter taste in my mouth. Why couldn’t Ava realize that the way my body reacted to her had nothing to do with the reality between us?

Before I could deny her bullshit, she continued. “If you don’t admit that, you’re a liar.”

I snapped my teeth at her, aggravated. “Then call me a liar, and get out.”

I wasn’t about to admit to her that she had a point. When given an inch, she would take a mile, and neither Cali nor I wanted that.

Ava pursed her full lips, tilting her head to the side. “Do you ever wonder why you’re always asking me to leave?”

I scoffed. “Because you always show up where you’re not welcome?”

She smiled ruefully. “I think it’s because you’re afraid. Afraid to accept the truth. That despite all the horrible things that have happened between us, no matter what, you still want me…” Her eyes trailed from my face down to my body, and she smiled. “Or at least some sick part of you does.”

I was done here.

“Get the fuck out of my room, Ava,” I snapped. “I’m not going to say it again.”

Ava shrugged. My anger didn’t matter to her. As she walked past me, she paused long enough to add, “Sooner or later, you will overcome your fear.” She glanced at my mouth, looking at me through her eyelashes. “And I’ll be ready for you.”

My stomach clenched so hard that I felt fucking furious, at both her and myself.

When she walked out, I slammed the door shut, leaning back against it. My chest was heaving. Why did she have to make everything so complicated? I wished I could take back that damn kiss—things had been much clearer before that.

It was as if being at the Vanguard palace had muddled my brain. Lucian had denied that he’d drugged us, but something had definitely affected me. I had no idea what, but it was a real thing. I could feel my wolf pacing inside me, unearthing long buried feelings. But they needed to remain buried, and that was the end of it.

Cali was my mate, not Ava.

Why the hell couldn’t my wolf accept that and move on?

I slammed my fist into the wall, frustration overcoming me. I recalled Ava wondering whether we might have some *due destini* thing going on, and honestly, if that hadn’t been so outlandish, I might have accepted it. It didn’t seem likely. But how else could I explain all these strange feelings that I had for a woman I didn’t love? Maybe they were born out of the anger I felt toward her—anger that manifested as fucking uncontrollable lust.

And the fact that she wasn’t supposed to be here anymore.

I could never forgive Ava for what she’d done to my mother. *Never*. But even though my mind was sick of her, my body had other ideas. Terrible, twisted, greedy ideas that made the urge to kiss her buzz through my senses.

Fuck, *no*.

I could control myself. I’d already done it before, when I’d stopped that kiss. I would never allow her lips to touch mine again.

I paced inside the room, clenching my jaw when I realized that her scent was lingering. My mouth watered, and the guilt accompanying the physical reaction overwhelmed me.

*Cali* was my mate.

I lived for Cali. I’d die for Cali.

End of story.

Clenching my jaw hard enough to hurt, I opened the windows, letting in a blast of cold air. It took away all traces of Ava.

When I sat back down on the bed, the only thing I could smell was Cali’s and my shampoo. That made my wolf settle down a little, thankfully.

I needed to sleep—tomorrow was going to be a pretty rough day. I would have to deal with Greyson, and settle this whole Iris thing.

The icy breeze roamed around the room, and even though I’d thought Ava’s scent was gone, somehow, it came back.

It was fucking haunting me.

I tossed and turned, pulling the pillow over my face. I could still smell Cali’s shampoo, but then it was gone. I had no idea how long I stayed like that, how long I fought with urges that I had thought were long gone.

Suddenly, I heard the door creak.

A moment later, I felt a body slip into the bed beside me. I felt relief, a sense of calm at the knowledge that Cali was here. She was with *me*, not Greyson. She loved me.

Her fingers stroked my bare chest, but when I removed the pillow from my face so I could look at her, my breath caught.

It was Ava. Not Cali.

Before I could say a word, she pressed her naked body against me, her voice a hushed, hot whimper. “You don’t have to be afraid of me anymore…”

I growled, reaching out to push her away, but the moment I touched her skin, my wolf roared. She was real, trembling under my touch, her eyes wide and lips parted. My wolf wanted her.

My wolf *needed* her.

“We have to finish what we started,” she whispered. “We both know this is right. We’re meant to be.”

When she snaked a hand around my neck and pulled me down into a hard kiss, I was set on fire. I could only give in to the deep, dark need that ran through me. It was animalistic, as enraged as I was about all the horrible things Ava had done to me. Anger and lust were one and the same—all-consuming and harsh, like the way she grabbed me, the way I held her, the way we kissed. Our mouths and teeth clashed before we bit at each other, clinging close as if ready to devour.

This wasn’t pleasure.

This was a sickness, and I couldn’t get enough of it.

*Until…*

The veins throbbed, sending searing pain through me.

*Cali!*

I opened my eyes, panting as my mate’s name echoed through my head.

Ava was gone.

And I was staring at a crow.

I jerked back, and the crow squawked before jumping off the bed and flying out of the window. I looked around, disoriented. It was morning, and the room was freezing. I’d been dreaming.

Well, more like having a nightmare.

“Shit,” I muttered, getting out of bed and closing the windows. I noticed the crow sitting on a tree and cawing, watching me. I ran my hand over my bare chest. The veins were still prominent, but not worse. For now. But what the hell happened next?

I shook my head, fueled by determination. I put on my clothes and hurried out of the room. The nightmare, like the crow, was a sign. I needed Ava to go. She was already fucking haunting me while I was awake, and now she was doing it while I slept. I’d had *enough*.

Maybe I could give her a one-way ticket to Florida, keep her stuck there.

My head throbbing, pulse racing, I barreled into the kitchen, only to be faced with Charlie. He said good morning and then followed it with, “Do you want to go over what you have of the plan?”

I just wanted a cup of coffee and for this horrible headache to go away. I needed a moment to think, but Charlie didn’t give it to me. He started rambling.

“I talked to my mother,” he said. “She thinks she can do this with two wolves, but I want at least three of us for backup. I can’t risk Violet’s safety.”

“I’m still thinking things over,” I said. “But if we settle on this plan, I’ll be there for Violet.”

“That’s great!” Charlie looked hopeful. “I’ll go too, of course. But who will be the third person?”

Before I could answer, I heard a familiar female voice behind me.

“Count me in,” she said.

My body tensing up, I turned around.

Smiling, Ava added, “I’d love to join you guys.”

**Episode 2114**

GREYSON

I was fucking exhausted.

I hadn’t been able to go to sleep after the witches had left me with nothing more than a pocket watch.

What had they called it? The Watch of Fates?

I’d have thought that the whole thing had been a dream, but the watch was still on my dresser. Right where I’d left it before I’d gone to bed. I’d tried to sleep, but the conversation with them had just kept playing in my head, over and over.

Scowling, I picked up the watch and brought it to my ear. The little fucker wasn’t even working. Had they just given me a broken watch? Should I even take them seriously? Grunting, I rolled over on the bed. It was early in the morning, and I had until midnight to decide.

Deep down, though, I felt like I’d already decided.

Why else would I have called them?

If what they’d said was true—and that was a big *if*—then I had a chance to help Cali, to save her from the curse. The thought warmed me. Getting up, I stepped in front of the mirror. The black veins were still there, making their case that everything was getting worse.

If I did what the witches wanted, would the veins go away?

I had a fucking endless stream of questions that they refused to answer clearly.

Groaning, I went to the bathroom to take a quick shower. I had to make sure the house was in order before I made my final decision. I didn’t trust the witches—I’d be a fool to—and if this was some kind of dark magic, I wanted to go into it knowing that the Redwoods were in good hands.

Which meant I needed to talk to Xavier.

Which was not the ideal way to start my morning.

My life was actually really hard, if you thought about it.

Grumbling under my breath about cryptic witches and annoying little brothers, I got dressed and slipped the watch into my pocket before heading downstairs.

Xavier was talking to Charlie in the kitchen, looking like he was hungover. Same. I mumbled a good morning and grabbed a cup of coffee before telling Xavier, “We need to talk.”

Xavier stared at me. “If it’s about getting Violet’s stalker, I’ve already got it under control.”

Charlie nodded vividly. “Yes! We decided that—”

I raised a hand to stop him and turned to my brother. “Follow me.”

I led Xavier outside, and he narrowed his eyes at me.

“What’s going on?” he asked. He sounded genuinely curious.

I paused, looking out over the property. I was hit by a sudden sadness, like I was about to leave my home. How strange was it that I now felt like I had a home after all those years of roaming alone?

“I’m waiting,” Xavier drawled.

Well, then. My brother was in a bad mood. I wondered if it was because he was talking to me. What a grumpy little bastard.

I took a sip of my coffee, letting him wait just a second longer.

“Is there a reason why you’re smiling?” Xavier asked me, crossing his arms over his chest.

I pressed my lips together. “Nothing. Just, if you’re done with that, then I guess there’s nothing else to discuss. You’re up-to-date about the Iris situation, but now you’ve taken over anyway, so it’s all good.”

Xavier gave me a funny look. “We could’ve talked about this in the kitchen. Why did you drag me outside?”

“Just wanted some fresh air.”

“Whatever. Are we good?”

I paused. I could ask for the details, but Xavier did better when he didn’t feel like he was on a leash. I cared about Violet, too, but I was happy to let Xavier do this. I knew Violet was important to him on a deeper level.

“We’re good,” I said.

“Good,” Xavier said.

He made a move to leave, and I said, “Good luck, baby brother.”

“Don’t fucking need it,” Xavier snarled.

He slammed the door behind him like a moody thirteen-year-old, and I had to laugh.

“Nice talking to you too,” I said under my breath.

I finished the coffee and headed inside. Cali had to be sleeping still, and I needed to talk to her. Later, though. Right now, I had to find Sabine.

My mother was sitting in the living room, sipping a mocha and warming herself by the fire. She lit up when she saw me, and I decided I could get used to that. “Greyson! Good morning. How are you feeling?”

I shrugged, rubbing the nape of my neck. “Been better.”

Looking worried, Sabine said, “Are you still recovering from the Vanguard adventure? Or are you worried about Violet? Or the fact that we now have two hunters staying in the pack house?”

I snorted. “Such a large selection of issues to choose from.”

“Tell me about it,” she said, her expression rueful.

“I hope this is the biggest thing the pack has to face for now,” I said, taking a seat on the couch next to her. “Charlie’s mother is… intense.”

Sabine nodded. “I haven’t gotten a clear read on her. But she’s a hunter, so I know it’s hard to trust her.”

“I’d feel a whole lot better if the only hunter I ever had to talk to again was Charlie,” I commented. “He seems like a good guy.”

“Iris is his mother, though. They’re kind of a package deal…” Sabine trailed off. “In a way at least.”

“Right,” I said. “If things turn ugly, we know where their allegiance will take them. Charlie’s still not officially part of the pack. He has no reason other than Violet to be on our side if it came down to it.”

Sabine paused. “The mate bond *is* strong. But there’s nothing like a bond between a mother and son.”

Her comment was followed by a pained look that she tried to conceal. I—awkwardly but hopefully affectionately—patted her hand.

“Give me some, uh, time,” I muttered. “I’m still getting used to the idea of having a mother.”

She nodded. “I get it. And I hope that moving forward, we’ll be able to settle down and focus on our family, instead of… saving the world, for example.”

I chuckled. “Family, huh? Does that mean you and Big Mac have decided there’s going to be an actual wedding?”

She smiled a little. “More than a wedding, the pack needs an Alpha.” She stared at me. “I know you have a love-hate relationship with the role, but you’re good at it. You’re such a natural, and I can tell the position gives you real purpose.”

I sighed. “It’s a duty. A huge responsibility. But that doesn’t mean I won’t fight for it.”

She squeezed my shoulder. “I know. It’s good you and your brother have been getting along more lately, though.”

I squinted, recalling our conversation from earlier. “Have we?”

She snorted. “You did deal with the Vanguard pack through teamwork. You and Xavier and Cali were a solid unit, and that helped you.”

“For the most part, yeah,” I said. “Xavier and I never disagree when it comes to Cali’s safety.”

“That’s what love does,” Sabine said. “As much as I appreciate Xavier, though, I can’t help but feel he’s a little… immature to become the sole Alpha.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Go on.”

She snorted. “You bring people together, Greyson. You might be groaning internally about babysitting the pack—”

I was alarmed. Could this woman hear my thoughts? Was that how having a mom worked?

“—but you’ve always pushed through. You bring people together,” she said again. “And I’d like to see it stay that way. But, of course, if you felt that Xavier could take over right now, I wouldn’t pressure you to step up.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You did vote for him when Letifer was around the corner.”

She huffed. “Are you ever going to let that go?”

I shrugged. “Not sure.”

She nudged me. “You were injured! That was different. And besides, we both know that Xavier would be a great number two. He’s just too young for a full-time role.”

I nodded, processing her words. Her encouragement really made me feel better about everything. “Thank you for the chat,” I murmured.

She smiled. “My pleasure.” Then her smile faltered a little.

“What?” I asked.

“I actually had something to ask you,” she said. “I’ve been thinking…”

“About?” I asked.

“It’s a pretty important question,” she said, clearing her throat. “One could call it life-defining.”

And now I was worried. “What? Is it something serious? Is everything okay? Are you okay? Did Big Mac do something? Are you two doing well? How’s the engagement?”

Sabine waved me off, chuckling. Her cheeks were flushed. “Yes, everything’s great between us.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Then what’s up?”

“Speaking of the engagement, and the wedding…” Sabine gave me a hopeful look, her eyes huge and vulnerable. “I just wanted to ask… Would you be interested in walking me down the aisle?”

**Episode 2115**

CHARLIE

Violet was antsy, and I wasn’t sure what was going on.

“Hey,” I said, rubbing her back. “Do you have a problem with our plan? Just let me know and we’ll call the whole thing off. I would hate for you to be freaking out or afraid.”

Violet shook her head, taking in a breath. “It’s not that. The plan is good.”

“What’s up, then?” I asked.

She pressed her lips together. “I’m worried about Lilac. He never checked in with me about arriving at the library, which is weird. Before they left he promised me he’d check in practically mile by mile.”

I frowned. She had a point. “He probably just got caught up in the excitement. There’s a lot going on at the moment.”

“Maybe,” she said. “But I’ve texted him a few times and tried to call him, but it keeps going straight to voicemail.”

“Maybe he’s out of battery,” I said.

Violet rubbed her forehead, sighing. “Marta isn’t responding either. And they’re together, so…”

I squeezed her shoulder before trailing my hand up to her face. Brushing my fingers over her chin, I said, “I get that you’re worried about your brother, but someone tried to kill you. Twice. We can’t just wait around until Lilac remembers to check his phone.”

“But—”

“I get that you’re protective of him—”

“He did literally come back from the dead, so I’d prefer not to have to see him go again,” she said wryly. Her voice was tight with concern.

I smiled, kissing her cheek. “I know. But we need to focus on the plan right now. Okay?”

Violet nodded, swallowing audibly. “I know. I did offer to act as bait, so I’m kinda forced to take this seriously.”

I winced at the sound of the word “bait.” Her expression was deadpan now, and I was the one who felt antsy at the moment. “Are you sure you’re not having any second thoughts? I hate to hear you describe yourself as bait.”

“But I am the bait,” she said mildly. “The bad guy is gonna try to attack me, and we will capture him. I’m like cheese in a trap, waiting for a massive, rabies-infested rat to get to me before the trap snaps its neck.”

I shuddered. “Oh, god. I didn’t need to picture that.”

She snorted, shaking her head. “It’s okay. I’m on board, Charlie. One hundred percent.”

I knelt down on the floor by her feet, reaching out to hold her hand. “If you’re having any second thoughts—”

“No,” she insisted. “Not only did this creep try to turn me into a wolfsicle, he also nearly burned you alive. I will never forget that. I want this guy caught worse than anybody, and I’ll do whatever it takes to nail him.”

I blinked at her. “Wow. You’re so intense sometimes.”

She looked serious. “I know.”

“It’s kinda hot, not gonna lie.”

She smirked. “Thank you.”

I felt like kissing her, but I told myself to settle the hell down. We needed to focus here.

“Okay, this is the plan,” I said. “You will call the stalker on the number he used to call you the other day, and tell him to meet you at the lake. What the stalker won’t know is that my mother, Xavier, Ava, and I will already be there. As soon as he appears, we’ll grab him and—”

Violet let out a squeak. “Wait a second!”

“What?”

“Did you say *Ava*?” Violet asked, shocked. “As in Xavier’s ex?”

I cringed. “I mean, it *is* kind of strange that she offered. But she’s a good fighter. Very crafty.”

“I’ll say,” Violet said, snorting incredulously.

“Xavier seemed okay with it,” I said.

Violet remained weirded out. “That’s super strange.” She raised an eyebrow. “I wonder what Cali thinks of that plan.”

That was a question to ponder, but I wasn’t gonna, because I had Violet to worry about. Xavier would have to deal with his love issues after Violet was fine. I was being practical here.

“Xavier wouldn’t accept Ava working with us if he didn’t trust her,” Violet said. “So at least there’s that.”

“I agree,” I said.

“The plan sounds good. It could work,” she continued. “Besides, at the first sign of trouble, I can shift and fend for myself.”

I rose up from the floor and sat back down next to her on the bed. “I will never allow that to happen.” I brushed my lips over hers, and she leaned into the kiss with a pleased sigh.

“I’m not having any second thoughts about the plan,” she told me. “But I do wish we could hold off.”

I frowned. “But you said—”

“It’s Lilac I’m worried about,” Violet clarified.

And we were back full circle.

“If Marta isn’t replying either, they might not have phone service,” I assumed. “From what I understand, this library is like, underground or something, right?”

Violet fiddled with my hand before linking our fingers together. “Yeah, maybe…”

“In that case, I’m pretty sure that he and the others will check in as soon as they can,” I said. Violet still looked worried, so I added, “If we don’t get this guy now, Violet, he could go after someone else.”

She sighed. “True. I would hate that.”

“We need to take care of this right now,” I said. “This guy needs to pay for what he tried to do to you.”

Violet pressed her lips together, trailing her hand over my cheekbone, my jawline. “I know, Charlie. But what if…”

“What?”

She picked up her phone. “What if he doesn't answer? Or what if he refuses to meet?”

“That’s a chance we’ll have to take,” I said, squeezing her hand. I could see how nervous she was—not to mention vulnerable and stressed out.

“Okay, here goes nothing,” Violet said. She tapped on the phone and brought it to her ear.

It was ringing.

Again.

And again.

And again.

But after the sixth ring, she shook her head. “He’s not answering, and the voicemail isn’t picking up.” She hung up. “What now?”

I felt so deflated. I’d been so sure the plan would work.

“Could we trace the number somehow?” she asked. “I’ve heard about how police can do that. Or, like, hackers.”

I nodded. “I could ask around. Maybe somebody in the pack house has connections.” I stood up. “I’m gonna start with Tom. He’s a really wholesome dude, but it feels like he might know a hacker or two.”

Violet grinned, about to reply when her phone vibrated.

She yelped, startled enough to drop the phone.

We both stared at the screen. Private caller.

“Answer it!” I picked up the phone, giving it to her.

Violet squirmed, shaking her head. “You answer it!”

I gently placed the phone in her hand. “Violet, talk to him. You have to do this—you can do this. Remember the plan.”

She seemed to refocus. “Right. I can do this.” Taking a deep breath, she pressed the answer button, holding up the phone so I could hear.

A creepily altered voice said, “Hello, Violet. Have you thawed out already?”

I had to swallow down a growl. I wanted to grab that fucking phone and scream at this bastard. All in good time…

“What it is that you want?” Violet asked. She was trembling, but her voice was surprisingly even.

“It’s simple—I want you,” he said.

My fists clenched. Violet squeezed my arm to settle me down. I was so proud of her for holding it together.

“Then we should meet,” she said. “Let’s hash this out between us. Just a conversation. No weapons. Just you and me.”

There was a long pause.

Violet and I shared a tense look.

The voice finally responded, “Where?”

I nodded sharply, and Violet went on.

“The lake over by the north east edge. I know you know exactly where I’m talking about, don’t you? There’s a damaged house there. We can talk alone.”

“Meet me there in an hour,” the voice said.

She was about to hang up when the voice added, “And don’t be stupid like before. Come alone, or there will be consequences.”

The line went dead.

“This asshole has a lot of nerve,” Violet choked out, her hands trembling. She looked both furious and scared, and I hated this. I wanted to tear this person a new one for threatening my mate and frightening her. He had no right.

I would unmask this asshole and make him cower in fear.

“You did so well,” I told her. “I’m really proud of you.”

She swallowed roughly. “That didn’t stop him from calling me stupid, though. As if I would have survived the movie theater encounter if you hadn’t been there! And what consequences was he talking about? I hate this guy!”

I did too.

“Come here,” I said, pulling her into my arms.

She settled her face in the crook of my neck, and I felt her breathe in. She looked up at me, sighing. “I guess we can’t turn back now, can we?”

**Episode 2116**

The next morning, I found a bunch of cans and bottles in the kitchen that hadn’t been recycled yet. Leave it to a pack of werewolves to keep things messy.

Anyway, their untidiness was going to help me right now.

I was in the front yard, setting all the bottles in a line, when Artemis joined me.

“Good morning. What are you doing?” She sounded amused, and when I looked at her, she had this fond look on her face. I was glad that she was giving off “Aw, Cali’s out here being weird again!”vibes instead of “WTF is it this time, Cali?” vibes.

“This is a display for our target practice,” I explained. “The other house had a lake, and you made me make waves. We don’t have a lake around here, so this might be a good way for you to test what you’re capable of at the moment.”

That was what I told Artemis out loud, but internally I still thought that Artemis really digging into Kadmos with our mom was probably our best bet. I could just *feel* that this magic block thing was a psychological issue. Artemis was confused, so she had performance anxiety.

I kinda did too, only my performance anxiety was about teaching anyone anything.

“Still not sure what we need the bottles for,” Artemis said. She looked suspicious now, which was basically the norm.

“You used to have such good control over your magic, so we should start with that. You should try to practice and knock all these bottles down, or shatter them.” I gestured around. “And I made sure that nobody will be around, just in case a blast goes astray.”

Artemis raised an eyebrow. “You’ve thought about this extensively.”

“Am I a good teacher, or am I a good teacher?” I asked, chuckling awkwardly.

Answer: I was a bad teacher.

Artemis looked equally skeptical, but in the end, she shrugged and took her position.

When she raised her hands and tried to blast the bottles, though…

Nothing happened.

*Oh, no. This is bad*, I thought, internally biting my nails. *I hope she doesn’t get frustrated and give up.*

Artemis grimaced and made a bunch of faces before groaning. “Ugh, it’s not working!”

I cringed. “Are you really trying, though?”

Artemis glared at me. “Of course I am!”

I frowned. “I know you’re upset, but there’s no reason to take a tone with me.”

“I don’t have a tone—*you* had a tone when you questioned whether I was trying!”

“I told you I’m a bad teacher, Artemis!”

“But you just said you were a good one!”

“I lied!”

Artemis huffed, burying her face in her hands. I took a deep breath. I needed to be supportive here.

Patting her shoulder, I said, “Okay. Let’s start again. Focus on the magic—isn’t that what you and Mom told me, way back when? Focus on the magic and it being part of you, then try to direct it at the bottles.”

Artemis raised an eyebrow. “Not at you?”

I rolled my eyes, waving her off. “Just try again, smartass.”

Artemis closed her eyes. She refocused, her brow furrowed.

When she opened her eyes again, one of the bottles wobbled.

“Woo!” I cheered. “You did it!”

Artemis gave me a dry look. “Seriously? It barely moved.”

Artemis’s confidence was clearly really low right now. I channeled my best cheerleading skills—which were nonexistent—and said, “It’s the effort that counts! Besides, you’re just getting started, those bottles had better watch out!”

Artemis looked down, sniffling. I felt so bad for her. *Ugh!*

“My magic used to be so amazing,” she muttered. “I used to catch supernatural creatures with it. I was so good at it that I managed to maintain an alliance with the Kollector…”

“Yeah, you used to be really problematic, but we have excused that because you had a really sad childhood,” I noted absentmindedly. “The point is, I’m sure everything will be fine in the long run. You’ll totally get your powers back.”

I had no idea if that was true, but I was cheerleading here.

Artemis glanced over at me. Her voice was small. “You think so?”

I cleared my throat, patting her back again. “It’s like an injury—you need physical therapy. You’ve got a long way to go, but it’ll be worth it in the end. Just don’t beat yourself up. That’d be the worst thing to do.”

Artemis pouted, crossing her arms. She literally didn’t say anything else.

*Oh, god. We’ve barely started and this is already going downhill!*

I was internally freaking out when I caught sight of my mom walking down from the porch. She looked well-rested, which I definitely couldn’t relate to.

She stopped in front of us, clearly curious and a little worried. “Good morning, girls. What are you doing out here?”

Artemis hadn’t pressed our mother hard enough last time they spoke, but now that she was here, my sister couldn’t avoid her. I jumped at the opportunity and quickly explained the gist of what we were doing.

I finished with, “Maybe you can offer Artemis some pointers?” I looked over at a still frowning Artemis. “Poor thing is feeling kind of down—could definitely use some help.”

“Of course,” Mom said, caressing Artemis’s shoulder. “I’d love to help you train, Artemis.”

Artemis stared at me intensely, like, *PLEASE stay here.* But I remained firm on my opinion about them talking things out, and I was also a horrid teacher, so I noped straight out of there.

“Call me if you need me!” I called over my shoulder, heading back into the house.

Before I closed the door, I saw that Mom and Artemis were talking. Artemis was making eye contact with Mom, at least. I really hoped that if they opened up to each other, Artemis would find closure and her magic would come back. Even though that train of thought made sense to me, though, magic and grief weren’t always logical.

Either way, Artemis had made that bottle shake, and I saw that as progress.

*We’ll figure it out together*, I thought. *After she’s done talking with our mom. Mom’s actually a great teacher! Unlike me! And now, imagine that, I don’t have to teach anyone anything! Muahahaha—*

A pair of strong arms wrapping themselves around my waist interrupted my thoughts. I felt Greyson press his lips to my ear. “What are you scheming about today?”

I scoffed, playfully whacking his arm before caressing that same spot. “I’m not scheming. I would never!”

“Hmm.” He nuzzled my neck, and I shivered, biting my lip as he whispered, “That’s not what the look on your face said…”

*Damn him. He can read me so well!*

I turned around in his arms and locked my hands around his neck, gazing up at him. It looked like he was in a pretty good mood, radiating beauty and sex appeal. Sometimes I had to stop for a moment and just *stare* at him.

“What?” he asked, smiling.

“Nothing. You’re just so dreamy it’s ridiculous,” I teased.

He laughed, leaning down just as I reached up on my tiptoes to kiss him. It was so sweet and good, it made me feel all warm and fuzzy inside. I nuzzled the crook of his neck, taking in his body heat as I locked my arms tighter around his torso.

“You’re in much higher spirits today. I like that,” I murmured.

He shrugged. “Why shouldn’t I be? My mate is safe, and barring Violet’s stalker, there’s really no danger to be had. Also…” He paused. “Sabine asked me to walk her down the aisle.”

I broke the embrace only to grab him by the arms and shake him a little—I just couldn’t deal with all my excitement!

“Oh my god! Greyson! REALLY? What did you say? Did you say yes?” I gasped some more, clutching at my chest. “Does this mean that I get to be a sort of bridesmaid? Or like a *maid of honor*? Oh my god! Can I at least help pick out the flowers?!”

Greyson laughed some more, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “Yes, I will be walking her down the aisle. It’ll be good for our relationship, and I know that it’ll mean a lot to Sabine.”

I beamed at him. “I’m so proud of you. You two are really are coming along as mom and son.”

He cringed a little. “I mean, we’re still figuring things out. *Trying* to.”

“Trying is so important!” I said, and kissed him again—his lips, his cheek, his jawline.

He smiled, caressing my sides.

“I’m sure Mrs. Smith was ecstatic to hear that you’ll be walking her down the aisle,” I said.

Greyson brushed his nose over mine, his chest flush against mine as he held me in his arms. In a playful murmur, he said, “I’m sure she’d be even more thrilled if I didn’t come to the wedding alone.” Tucking my hair behind my ear, he stared into my eyes. “Will you be my wedding date, love?”

**Episode 2117**

MARTA

When I woke up, Lilac was wrapped around me like a blanket. I took a deep breath, relishing the feeling of warmth and safety, the sweetness of his scent.

But then that moment was over, and I extricated myself.

My body felt stiff, and the seriousness of our situation came crashing back down on me. My pulse started to race—it was a miracle that I’d gotten any sleep at all.

“Lilac?” I whispered, shaking him awake.

He whined like a sleepy puppy. “What time is it?”

“It’s time to find a way out of here. We’re trapped, remember?”

That woke him up all right. “Shit, right!” He rubbed his eyes, sitting up in an instant, looking around. He eyed me carefully. “Do you have a plan?”

I pressed my lips together. “I wish I did. But I don’t know how much longer I can stay in here without…”

“Without what?” Lilac asked.

“I don’t know,” I said, my head feeling heavy. “Everything about this place is making me claustrophobic.”

Lilac caressed my shoulder. “Marta…”

I sniffled, my throat dry. “We’re being held prisoner by vampires. I hate it. I—” I looked around, a sudden wave of panic washing over me. “I’d rather die than face another minute in here.”

Lilac winced. “Please don’t say that. I’ve been dead before, and it’s really not that great.”

I wished I could laugh Lilac’s joke. But all I felt like doing was crying. Or screaming my head off and banging my forehead against the wall until I couldn’t think anymore.

“I’m sorry. This is just…” I shivered, wrapping my arms around myself. “This just feels like being trapped in Bert’s house all over again.”

I started to shake, and Lilac wrapped his arms around me. He touched my chin, made me face him. His voice was even, soothing. “Hey, listen to me. Are you listening?”

I nodded, my breath coming out tight.

“This isn’t the same, because I’m here with you. I’ll find a way out of this. I promise. Okay?”

“Okay,” I whispered.

Lilac traced his lips softly over mine. It felt so amazing that for a moment, I closed my eyes and imagined that we were back in the pack house—that we were safe, and Lilac was naked and warm next to me, telling me that he’d never let go while we held each other tight, the two of us together, alive and real.

The fantasy fell apart when I heard footsteps approaching.

Lilac jumped up from the bed and went to the door, pressing his ear to it.

“Which vampire do you think it is?” I whispered.

“No idea. I wish I had Plum with me,” Lilac said, his breath coming out sharp. “My wolf would never allow this to happen without a fight.”

“Lilac, what if they kill us?”

He shook his head, facing me. “If they wanted to kill us, why would they wait until now? They would’ve done it right away.”

His words settled me down a little. It was a small sliver of hope, but I would take it. My eyes fell on my bracelets—how did the vampires know about them? They had to be familiar with witches.

I pulled Lilac away from the door. “Do you think that vampire knows something about the witch council? Maybe he has some experience with it?”

Lilac looked confused. “What are you talking about?”

I gestured at the bracelets. “He knew all about these. That means he could have been at a witch trial, right? Maybe we could get some info from him.”

Lilac’s eyebrows shot up his forehead. “Right. So even though we’ve been waylaid on our way to the library, the vampire who’s kidnapped us might be able to help us build our case?” He paused. “Wait, that’s actually a great idea.”

Before I could reply, the door swung open. The tall vampire was back.

Lilac was in front of me in the blink of an eye, his whole body tense. “I got this,” he whispered to me before turning to the vampire, who looked just as unfriendly as before.

“Hey, vampire dude, what’s your name?” he asked. “You have one, right? Not just, like, ‘Scary Dude’?”

The scary dude vampire stood in the corner and stared at us blankly. “Frank.”

“All right, Frank,” Lilac said casually, acting like he was totally cool. *Wow*. “You know about my girl Marta’s bracelets, right?”

Frank’s expression remained blank but somehow also murderous at the same time.

“Anyway, do you know anything about the witch council?” Lilac asked.

Frank remained stone-faced. “I don’t talk to liars.”

Lilac rolled his eyes. “Dude, we didn’t lie. It’s not like you asked whether her medium magic works right NOW.”

I gathered enough courage to pipe up and say, “For the record, I *am* a medium.”

Frank grunted. “You’re making things worse for yourself, little lady. Telling lies on top of lies isn’t going to help you.”

“Stop calling us liars,” Lilac snapped.

Frank glanced at him. “You ain’t a liar, just her.”

Through my fear and terror and anxiety, something else emerged. Pure irritation. Why couldn’t I catch a break? Why couldn’t I just hang out with Lilac and eat delicious food and have sex and make up dumb jokes and watch movies? Why couldn’t I just get one nice thing, *goddammit*?

“Look,” I said sharply, holding out my hands. “Look at the bracelets! Why do you think I have these?”

“Fashion,” Frank deadpanned. “Also, because you’re a liar.”

“Oh my god, he’s *not* listening!” Lilac rubbed his face, clearly fed up.

“Witches don’t hand these out to just anyone!” I exclaimed. “I got these because I’ve been falsely accused of necromancy.”

Lilac blinked at me. “Okay, but I wouldn’t gloat about it.”

Frank looked intrigued now, though. He stepped closer, and I wasn’t sure if this was a good or bad thing. Knowing my luck, it was probably bad.

His eyes narrowed. “So now you’re a lying *witch*?”

“What?” I sputtered. “No, just, look at these!”

Stretching my bracelets toward Frank, I stepped away from Lilac’s protective shield, and he instantly pulled me back.

“Marta, no!” he hissed.

“I have no choice,” I said. “I have to show him.”

Lilac glared at Frank, coming to stand right next to me as Frank closed the distance.

“Look at the bracelets,” I repeated.

Frank, still stone-faced, examined them. His fingertip brushed over my wrist, and my stomach convulsed, but I didn’t flinch away. He stared at me skeptically. “Necromancy?”

Lilac spoke up. “I was dead. Now I’m not.”

“I brought him back,” I clarified.

Frank’s bushy brows furrowed. He looked between us. “This is either a fantastic lie or an intriguing story.” He crossed his arms, nodding at me. “Can you talk to dead people?”

Well, shit. Now Frank looked *really* interested. I suddenly wished I hadn’t said anything.

Lilac’s expression was dark. He pulled me back behind him once more, just as Frank said, “I asked a question. If you don’t answer, things will only get worse for both of you.”

“How about you leave her the fuck alone?” Lilac growled.

Frank shoved him away, and my heart pounded with fear. I so wished for Plum to be here, even more so when Frank snarled at me, “Can you communicate with the dead, or not?”

I swallowed. “I could, until…” I gestured at the bracelets. “Courtesy of the witch council. Have you heard of them?”

“I hate witches,” Frank said, as if that was a tell-all answer. “But I could use a necromancer—how do those bracelets come off?”

I shuddered. I didn’t want to bring anyone else back from the dead just because freaking *Frank* wanted me to. I’d already done it once, accidentally, and now I was in major trouble!

“The bracelets don’t come off,” I said. “That’s the point. I’m being punished and facing a trial and—”

Frank grabbed one of the bracelets with a grunt, shaking me up. I gasped as Lilac shoved him. “Hey! Don’t be rough on her!”

“They won’t come the fuck off,” Frank growled, trying to pull them off my hands. “They’re too small!”

Lilac shoved him even harder, away from me. Frank took a few steps back.

“Are you even listening?” Lilac snapped. “They don’t come off—that’s what she’s been telling you.”

Frank huffed, glaring at my hands. Lilac and I exchanged a look. Would this vampire help us if he thought I could use my powers to bring someone back from the dead?

“Hold on,” Frank said gruffly. “I have an idea.”

He stepped out of the room.

“I don’t like this, Lilac,” I whispered. My bad feeling got even worse when we started hearing things being thrown about, making horrible crashing sounds.

“It could be fine,” Lilac said doubtfully. “Maybe Frank has some kind of bracelet pick?”

The door opened again, and Frank stepped in again, holding a hatchet.

“What are you doing?” Lilac asked, wide-eyed.

“If we can’t remove the bracelets,” Frank said slowly, “then why don’t we remove the hands?”

**Episode 2118**

I grinned up at Greyson, excitement coursing through me. I hadn’t been to a wedding in ages—the last one had been for a co-worker of my dad’s, and it had ended in a drunken fight between the groom and the bride’s uncle, so I didn’t remember it fondly. This was going to be different. I was already so excited to see Big Mac and Mrs. Smith exchange vows.

“Well?” Greyson asked, smiling, waiting for my answer. “What do you say?”

I opened my mouth to say “of course!” but then stopped myself. Was this a choice? Did it count as a decision? If I said yes, would the curse punish me for accepting? Would it punish Xavier? Would he… *die*?

Watching me, Greyson’s expression grew concerned. “Cali? Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

I looked up. “Maybe I’m being a bit paranoid, but… does this feel like a *choice*?”

Greyson shook his head. “This isn’t that kind of a choice. It’s no different than going on a date—you’ve done that before, and no one got hurt, did they?”

I thought about that. Greyson was right, of course. I’d gone on solo dates with both Greyson and Xavier. And we’d all survived Torin’s crazy *Bachelorette* game, so we could probably get though almost anything.

“And I know it would mean a lot to my mom if you came with me,” he added, giving me a teasing smile.

I returned his smile. “Then I can’t see any reason not to. Yes, I’d love to be your date, Greyson.”

His face brightened, and he leaned down to press his lips to mine. “It’s going to be fun, I promise.”

When he leaned down to kiss me again, I let myself open up to him, loving the happy smile on his face. I had no idea what was making him look so carefree, but I wasn’t going to question it. I was just glad to see it. And the thought of going to such a happy wedding on the arm of my mate made me really excited. What could be better than that?

Well, maybe my own wedding—but that was just a fantasy. For now.

Greyson’s arm slipped around me and pulled me closer, deepening our kiss, and heat throbbed through me as our bodies made contact.

But the sound someone clearing their throat made me pull back in surprise. I turned to see Xavier standing in the doorway of the kitchen, staring daggers at us.

Greyson’s arm tightened around me, but it wasn’t with affection—it was tension.

So much for his happy mood.

A wave of guilt washed over me, and my face heated as I stepped away from Greyson’s embrace. When Greyson had asked about the wedding, I’d been worried about Xavier’s safety, but I hadn’t even considered his feelings, or how he’d react if I accepted. Of course, Mrs. Smith was Greyson’s mother, not Xavier’s. And Greyson was my mate, too…

“Is this ever going to stop?” I muttered as a headache climbed up the back of my spine.

“No,” Xavier snapped, almost before I’d finished getting the words out of my mouth.

I shook my head. “I don’t understand. You both seemed to be doing so well as co-Alphas,” I said, looking between them. “Why can’t you keep it up?”

They both grimaced, like they’d swallowed something bitter.

I felt a stab of frustration. “You know, it’s *because* you worked together that we were able to escape from the cult of the moon people, or whatever they were. And, if I’m being honest”—which I was, because I always tried to be honest—“I think I made a pretty good Luna.”

I mean, sure, things had been complicated at the Vanguard palace—what with all the fighting and the accusations and the kidnapping—but there had been times when I’d felt like a real Luna. Not that I knew *exactly* what it felt like to be a Luna, but I’d liked it. The power I’d radiated when I’d worn the Luna marks, and the attention they’d brought me. It had made me feel special—like I’d been chosen. It had given me a sense of direction and had clarified all the decisions I’d had to make. I’d been working for the protection of the pack. I already missed the way those faux marks had felt. If I ever became a real Luna, I knew that was how I’d feel, and I knew that it would establish my credibility with the Redwood pack. It would give me a clear sense of purpose.

*A clear sense of purpose*. The exact phrase my dad had always used when he’d talked to me about why college was so damn important. And here I was, finding my purpose in my own way.

Greyson shot a look at Xavier, and a muscle in his jaw twitched. He looked back at me. “I wouldn’t go jumping to any conclusions just yet, Cali. I don’t think Xavier’s quite ready to give up his claim to being sole Alpha of this pack—”

Xavier scoffed, his blue eyes flashing dangerously. “I could say the exact same thing about you, Greyson—”

“Why don’t you just—” Greyson snarled.

“Stop arguing!” I shouted, putting my hands up to stop them. “Stop. Please.” I looked between them. “Why can’t you get along, like you did back at the palace?”

Xavier shook his head. “We did that because we had to.”

“What does that mean?” I asked. “What do you mean you *had* to?”

“Because of you,” he clarified. “We were working toward a common goal. It made sense at the time.”

I stared at him, exasperated. “And it doesn’t make sense now?”

Xavier rolled his eyes and looked away. “You don’t get it.”

“It was for the good of the pack, wasn’t it?” I asked. “Well? Wasn’t it?”

“Why don’t we put all this on hold for the time being?” Greyson said, stepping forward. He glanced at Xavier. “It’s obvious my little brother and I have some things to work out.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I blurted out, frustration coursing through me. “You *always* have things to work out.”

“Cali,” Greyson started. “You—”

“No, listen to me,” I said, planting my feet and staring at both of them. “If you really want to be Alphas, shouldn’t you *always* do what’s best for the pack?”  
 “I *only* do what’s best for the pack,” Xavier growled. He glared at Greyson, his eyes cold as ice.

Greyson glared back, and I felt his hackles rise. I could sense another argument brewing—the tension between them was making the air almost electric.

I sighed, suddenly exhausted. Why couldn’t they just let things be?

“Xavier,” I said, turning toward him, but he cut me off.

“Speaking of the pack,” he snapped, turning to leave, “I have some planning to do.”

I watched as he disappeared down the hall with a sinking feeling in my stomach and an ache in my heart.

I turned to Greyson. “Did you *have* to antagonize him?”

Greyson looked surprised by my accusation, but I didn’t give him a chance to answer before I stormed out of the kitchen myself and stomped toward the stairs. Maybe I just needed some time alone.

I’d almost made it to the stairs when I felt a hand on my arm, swinging me back around.

“What?” I snapped, turning to face Greyson.

His jaw was set, making the angle as sharp as flint. “I didn’t *antagonize* Xavier, Cali,” he ground out.

“You know how he—” I started, but Greyson shook his head.

“You know, too,” he reminded me. “I can’t do anything without pissing him off. If I sneeze wrong, Xavier thinks I did it to rile him up.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Maybe, but I suspect that’s a two-way street. I think you give as good as you get.”

Greyson studied my face for a moment. “Maybe,” he admitted. “I might be guilty myself.”

“*Might be?*” I asked, raising my eyebrows incredulously.

He sighed. “I guess I probably also get riled up pretty easily.” He shook his head. “But it’s only because I love you so much. You know that, don’t you?”

I stared at him in the dim light of the hallway, and my heart gave a painful throb. I did know it, but everything still hurt. I felt tears pricking at the corners of my eyes.

“If you really loved me,” I said, my voice catching, “then you’d find a way to get along with your brother.”

Greyson let this sink in. Then he stepped forward, his steps soundless on the bare wood floor. He reached for me and pulled me close, wrapping his arms around me as he hugged me tight. When he spoke, I could feel his voice rumble through his chest.

“Do you doubt my love for you, Cali?” He ran a lock of my hair between his fingers. “Do I need to prove it to you?”

**Episode 2119**

ARTEMIS

My mom stepped toward me. “Now, I know my magic isn’t the same as yours, but I’m willing to try to help.”

I took a step back. “You really don’t have to. I’m pretty tired from practicing with Cali, anyway.”

My mom didn’t respond to that, and there was a beat of strained silence.

“Is everything okay, Artemis?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

My mom gave me a searching look. “I thought Cali seemed eager to leave the two of us alone. Didn’t you notice?’

Yeah, I’d noticed. Someone walking a mile away would have noticed. Cali wasn’t exactly known for her subtlety. Though, I guess I knew why she’d bolted.

I shifted, feeling uncomfortable. “I think Cali thought it would be helpful if you and I had a chance to talk more about… well, everything.”

My mom raised her eyebrows in mild surprise. “Well, I guess that’s true. Is there anything more we needed to talk about that we may have missed last time? I know we don’t get an opportunity very often. You know I’m always here for you.”

I could feel myself growing warm. I always felt hot when I was uncomfortable, and I was definitely getting there now. Of course I knew what Cali wanted us to talk about, but I didn’t know if I wanted to bring up Kadmos again.

Dodging the question, I shrugged. “I think Cali thought talking with you might help me get my powers back.”

To my horror, my mom’s eyes filled with tears.

She reached for me and—before I could step away—pulled me into a hug. “I never should have asked for that Fae promise. I should never have put you in that position, Artemis. I never meant to, but I was…” She took a shuddering breath. “I was just so worried. I didn’t know how Tom would react if he thought Kadmos was alive, and I just panicked.”

“It’s… okay.” But was it? Sometimes I wasn’t so sure. “I mean, it’s done, and now we have to figure out how to solve it,” I said, patting her back awkwardly.

But she wasn’t done. “I truly hadn’t given the reality of the situation proper thought. And I should have. I knew keeping such a secret would hurt my own daughter.” She tightened her grip on me. “You’re so strong, Artemis. I never considered how emotionally difficult it was going to be. I was so selfish, and I hope you can forgive me someday.”

At a complete loss for what else to do, I kept patting my mom’s back. The thing was, I really did feel for her, and I could sense how much she was blaming herself.

“It’s really okay,” I said, anxious to stop her crying. “I think I understand why you made me make that promise. And I don’t blame you. I think you’re doing that enough for both of us.” She sucked in a breath that could have been a laugh. “I just want to get my powers back. That’s what I’m thinking about now.”

My mom took a step back and wiped the tears from her eyes. “I know that, and I’ll do everything I can to help you.”

“Thank you,” I said, giving her a smile. I took a breath. “And there’s something else.”

She wiped a stray tear. “Anything. You can talk to me about anything. Is it your relationship? Are you having trouble with Rishika?”

“No!” I said quickly, pulling away from her like she had just burst into flames. It was one thing to open up to my mom—something I *still* wasn’t used to—but it was quite another thing to talk to her about my relationship with Rishika. Cali was an open book, and maybe that was what my mom was expecting from me—but if so, she was in for a disappointment. I’d always considered myself a firmly locked box, and I was planning on keeping it that way. “No, it’s nothing like that.”

“So what is it, then?” my mom asked, frowning.

“I know this is a difficult topic, but now that nobody’s dying…” I trailed off, not able to help stalling.

“Yes?” she prompted, patient as ever.

“Sorry. I, uh… I want to know more about my father. About Kadmos,” I said. “For real. I’m not backing down this time.”

I watched as my mother reacted to this. A small but noticeable flinch.

“I know it’s a sensitive topic,” I said again, putting my hands up. “We don’t have to get into *everything* now. Seriously. No pressure at all. Just, uh, when you’re ready.”

I looked back at the bottles Cali had lined up, which were all askew. I moved toward them to straighten them, needing something to do in this tense silence, and then I backed away and took aim.

I tried to concentrate, but my thoughts were spinning, and this time I didn’t even wobble a bottle.

With a frustrated sigh, I shook out my hands, determined to try again. But before I could, my mother spoke again.

“Is there anything specific you wanted to know about him?”

Magic shot of out my hands, but it was uncontrolled and missed the bottles by a long shot. The blast hit a tree and severed a branch, sending it thundering to the ground. A puff of snow rose up, and a flock of displaced sparrows squawked angrily as they rose into the sky.

I gritted my teeth and shook out my hands again. Frustration was overtaking me, even as I felt my strength ebbing away. This had been a stupid idea. Everything about it was stupid. The magic practice, the talk with my mom. I should never have listened to Cali about any of it.

I raised my hands again, aiming for the bottles, but my mom stepped out in front of me.

“Mom!” I gasped, stunned. “What are you doing? I could have hit you! You saw what I did with that branch!”

My mom’s mouth was pressed into a thin line. “You wouldn’t hit me. You’re far too practiced and precise.”

I shook my head angrily. “Maybe I used to be, but I’m not anymore.”

“Well, you’re not going to improve your magic through anger and frustration,” she said, her face flushed with emotion.

“Mom, listen—” I started, but she cut me off.

“You’re right, Artemis. You deserve to know about Kadmos. I will answer any questions you have,” she said, biting out the words as though every one cost her.

I looked at her, shocked for a moment. “Oh, okay.” It felt stupid, but my heart fluttered nervously. “Okay. Well, was Kadmos…” I felt my own face flush. “Was he looking forward to having a baby?”

This clearly wasn’t the question my mom had been expecting. Her face paled for a moment, then she looked away, into the trees, though I didn’t think she was seeing them. She seemed to be looking at something else—something far away—and her gaze went hazy. “I’d never seen him as happy as he was when I told him I was pregnant,” she said, smiling. “He was beside himself. There was nothing he wanted more than to be a father.”

My throat felt tight. “Wouldn’t he have preferred a boy?”

My mother looked at me quickly, snapping back from wherever she had been. “No,” she said gently. “No, not at all. Your father always wanted a girl. He was the one who suggested naming you Artemis.”

“Really?” I asked, surprised.

She nodded. “It was a family name. He wanted you to carry it.”

I tried to take a breath, but my chest felt constricted. I tried to imagine my father—Kadmos—talking excitedly about a child. About him naming a daughter he wouldn’t live to meet.

My mom must have seen some of what I was thinking on my face, because her own expression turned sad. “He would have loved you so much, Artemis, if he hadn’t been killed before you were born. With all his heart.”

I nodded, unable to speak.

“I was heartbroken when he died,” Orla said, her voice breaking. “His death nearly broke me. The only thing that kept me going was you. The thought of bringing his daughter into the world kept me alive. But then,” she said, tears coursing down her cheeks, “even that was taken from me. It was unbearable.”

“But you heard that he might not be dead, right?” I asked quietly.

Orla dashed the tears from her cheeks. “That was only a rumor. There have been many over the years. I learned to stop listening to them. It was too painful.”

“But what if it’s true?” I asked, my heart pounding.

“Artemis—”

“Don’t I deserve a chance to find out?” I asked. “Don’t we both deserve that? I mean, that’s what started this whole mess. Have you heard anything else from the trees? Maybe I should go look for him.”

“Artemis, I don’t want you to get your hopes up…” my mom said.

I looked into her eyes, and the pleading look stopped me. She knew what it was like to lose him and want him back.

“I’ve been thinking about it a lot,” I admitted. “Looking for him. But what if I go looking, and he really is dead?”

My mom let my words settle in. Then she took a deep breath. “There might be another possibility.”

I gaped at her. “What is it? Tell me, please!”

**Episode 2120**

XAVIER

I stormed outside, my blood boiling after my conversation with Greyson. Why the *hell* did my brother always feel the need to have those kinds of conversations in front of Cali? I knew that Cali was the one who’d brought up the co-Alpha thing, but I would have shut it right down if it hadn’t been for him. I hated arguing in front of her. She obviously hated seeing it, and somehow I had the knack for always coming across as the bad guy.

But I didn’t feel bad about what I’d said, or what I thought. Greyson *had* abandoned the pack before, and *I’d* stood by it. How Greyson had gotten it into his head that his history of bailing on the pack made him a solid leader was far beyond me.

Frustrated, I ran a hand through my hair. I just wanted this all to be over—resolved, once and for all. With *me* in charge as Alpha. But I knew it wasn’t going to be that easy, and this shitty situation was going to continue for a while longer.

I glanced around, noticing for the first time that the rest of the pack was outside. I saw a few pack members in the distance running sprints, and Sage and Zainab were near the wood pile, locked into what I hoped was just a mock fight. Though it must have been, because I saw Sage laugh as she ducked easily under Zainab’s kick.

Maybe they had the right idea. Maybe I needed to go for a run and work off some of this fury that was making my chest tight. I needed a clear head to plan for this situation with Violet and Charlie.

I could already feel my aggression starting to ebb at just the thought of a run, and I was about to shift when I heard a call from behind me.

“Xavier!”

I turned to see Charlie running toward me. “What’s up?”

As he neared, I could see that Charlie looked pale. “It’s happening.”

I frowned. “What’s happening?”  
 He swallowed, trying to catch his breath. “We were able to get in contact with the stalker. We set up a trap.”

“*What?*”

He nodded. “We’re going to meet them at the other pack house.”

This was music to my ears. This was better than a run. There was nothing I wanted more at the moment than to rip into some bastard.

I nodded at Charlie. “Okay. Get the group together, and we’ll meet out here.”

“Okay.” Charlie nodded, then sprinted back toward the house.

I watched him for a moment, but then something else caught my eye. It was Iris, Charlie’s mom, pacing on the lawn a short distance away from the house. I squinted, trying to see her more clearly. She seemed to be on the phone, and she was speaking rapidly, looking grave.

She turned and caught sight of me, watching her, and even from a distance I could see her jaw flex.

“I’ll have to call you back,” she said into the phone, just loud enough for me to hear. Then she slipped her phone into her pocket and smiled at me.

Which was… strange. A *smile*? It seemed like an odd reaction.

She walked toward me. “Something going on?” she called out.

I waited until she drew near to answer. “Apparently, yeah. I think we’re ready for some actual action. Charlie just told me they’ve been in contact with the stalker and set a trap.”

“What? Where?” Iris demanded.

I shrugged. “That’s all I know for the moment.”

Iris looked at me, clearly shocked, but before she could ask any more questions, Charlie and Violet slammed through the back door to the porch and down the steps. Ava was behind them, looking inscrutable as always.

She looked at me, trying to catch my eye. I looked away, but not fast enough, apparently, because the dreams from last night flashed into my mind, flooding my body with uninvited heat. I had no idea where the hell they had come from, but my feelings for Ava that had started the night of the Vanguard party didn’t seem to be going anywhere. Did that have something to do with the Vanguards and their stupid obsession with Seluna? I didn’t believe in any of that, but I also couldn’t deny what I was feeling. Had kissing Ava “under Seluna” done something to me? Had it reignited our mate bond?

A mate bond I was still bound and determined to get rid of.

“So,” Iris said, pulling me out of my thoughts. “What’s going on?”

“Well, we called the stalker back on the restricted number.” Violet shrugged. “I know it’s a risk, but maybe this is our one chance to unmask who this person is.”

Iris nodded, looking unfazed by this, and I watched her, interested. It was kind of fascinating to watch a hunter in action. I’d never actually seen one up close before.

“Okay, so you’ll go, Violet,” Iris started crisply. “You’ll make the meeting happen, and the rest of us—Charlie, Xavier, Ava, and me—will take our places in the cardinal points around the area. The goal here is to surround and subdue the stalker before harm can come to anyone. Are we clear?”

Everyone nodded. Her tone was so decisive, even I nodded along.

“Excellent,” she said, looking satisfied. “Are you all ready for this?”

“Yep,” Charlie said quickly, giving Violet’s hand a squeeze.

Violet and Ava nodded.

I didn’t say anything. The whole thing was surreal—teaming up with a hunter was weird enough, but I was even more concerned about the idea of working with Ava. I knew she wanted our bond back—not just back, but back the way it used to be—but I just couldn’t find a way to fully trust her, and I wondered if it was a good idea, letting her come on this mission.

But maybe I was overthinking it. Ava knew better than anyone what happened to people who betrayed the Redwood pack—or who betrayed me.

“We’ll shift and head over—that’ll be faster,” Charlie said. He looked over at his mom. “You can hitch a ride with me.”

Iris looked a little surprised, but she nodded. “I’ll need my weapons. They’re just inside; I’ll grab them.”

She hurried back into the house as Charlie and Violet shifted into their wolf forms. I was just about to do the same when Ava touched my arm.

I looked down at her hand as a jolt of electricity coursed through me. I’d been so close to shifting that my wolf was fully alive within me, and he flamed with desire at Ava’s touch.

Where the hell was this coming from? I couldn’t figure out the answer to that, so I just tried to push it deep, deep down.

“What?” I snapped, looking up at her.

She gave me an intimate smile that made my wolf throb with want. “It’s just like the old days, huh?”

I gritted my teeth as two warring sets of desires raged within me. My reason won, and I shook her hand off my arm.

“When this is done, you should leave,” I said coldly, sneering at her. “I can’t count the number of times I’ve said that. When are you going to get it through your head?”

I didn’t wait for her to answer, just shifted and dropped to four paws, then sprinted toward the trees.

Behind me, I heard Iris’s voice, and she must have hopped on Charlie’s back, because I soon heard the sound of three other sets of paws on the path as we headed toward the lake house.

The air was cold but clear, and it felt good to breathe it in as I ran. It cleared my mind—which helped me prep for whatever was waiting for us.

When we reached the lake house, we stopped in the cover of the trees, and Iris slid to the leaf-strewn ground.

“Okay,” she muttered. “Everyone to their positions.”

I moved to the north of the lake house, keeping my eye on Violet as she stepped out onto the cleared lawn and started moving toward the house. My nerves were on edge—partly because of Ava, but also in anticipation of whatever was waiting for us. I was angry and frustrated and ready as hell to find out who’d been harassing Violet. The kid was like a little sister to me, and I was going to make the bastard pay.

*Everyone in position?* I mind linked to the wolves.

*Yep*, Charlie said quickly.

*Here*, Ava confirmed.

Iris couldn’t hear or answer, of course. I looked around, wondering if I’d be able to spot her. She was supposed to be positioned to the west, but I couldn’t see her.

I squinted into the trees, scanning for her, but I still couldn’t see her. That was odd. I should’ve been able to—my vision was nearly flawless as a wolf. But there was nothing.

Figuring I might just need a better angle, I moved quietly through the underbrush, coming out from behind a grouping of withering bushes. Then I stopped dead in my tracks.

I could see Iris. She was visible through the trees, standing in the clearing. She had a gun aimed straight at Violet, and her finger was on the trigger.

**Episode 2121**

GREYSON

Cali gave my chest a gentle push. “You don’t have to prove anything, Greyson,” she said, rolling her eyes. “I know you love me.”

When she looked up at me, I felt my chest tighten. I was thinking about the spell the witches claimed had the power to stop the veins, and to protect Cali. I thought about the possibilities of it—both the good and the bad. I had so much to gain, and so much to lose. My heart thumped hard against my ribs, and I leaned down to press a kiss to her forehead.

Her skin was soft beneath my lips, and I could feel the warmth of her breath on my cheek. The heat of her did something to me—nearly hijacking my brain—and I moved to her lips, kissing her.

I’d intended to be soft and tender, but Cali gripped me hard, and my body took over. I ran my hands down her back, feeling her warmth radiating through her clothes. She clutched me tightly, pulling me closer, deepening the kiss impossibly further.

I pulled back, and she looked up at me, breathless. Her cheeks were flushed, and her lips were bee-stung, and my heart constricted with love. Could this be it? Depending on how the spell went, could this be one of our last moments, our last kisses… ever?

There was nothing I wouldn’t risk for Cali—I knew that—but I still felt an edge of uncertainty. Though even that was mixed with love and tenderness and…

I looked at Cali’s lips, swollen with my kisses. I wanted to kiss her again. I *needed* to kiss her again. And again. I needed to kiss her everywhere.

“You want to go upstairs?” I asked, my voice low.

Cali’s flush deepened. “What? *No!* Greyson! We can’t. Are you crazy? Everyone’s up and about. And someone will notice if we just disappear.”

“That’s never stopped us before,” I said huskily, grasping her tighter.

Cali’s eyes went wide, but her pupils were dilated with lust, making her warm hazel eyes look almost black. She didn’t shift her gaze from mine, and she traced her finger absently down my chest.

As her fingertip brushed downward, I could feel it running across the veins.

She must have felt them too, because she stopped halfway down my chest, and I felt her tense in my arms.

“Sorry about that,” she murmured, looking down. “I didn’t mean to—”

I grasped her hand. “They don’t hurt, love.”

She looked back at me, her breath catching. “Really? They don’t?”

I nodded. “I promise. Now let’s go.”

And, keeping hold of her hand, I led her up the stairs.

She was quiet as we climbed the stairs, but when we reached my room and I shut the door, her eyes were bright. And when I kissed her, pressing her against the locked door, she was ready for me, kissing me back with the kind of wild enthusiasm that drove me insane. I moved from her lips to her neck, trailing kisses down the impossibly soft skin. Her hair tumbled around me, and I was consumed by the smell of her—deep and sweet and so distinctly *her* that I couldn’t breathe it in deeply enough.

There was only one thought in my head: *I need her*. *Right now.* I needed to feel her against me. I needed her skin and her kiss and her voice saying my name.

Her breath hitched as I ran my tongue across her collarbone, and I smiled to myself. I loved that I could do that to her. It almost felt like I was controlling her, but it was the other way around—every moan of pleasure from her drove me wild.

I moved back to her mouth and slid my tongue along hers. Her mouth was hot and eager, and her hands slid up under my shirt.

“Maybe we should move to the bed,” she murmured against my lips.

I shook my head. “No, love. I have plans for you.”

Her eyes were wide as I stepped back.

“I want to see you strip for me,” I growled.

Her lips parted in surprise. She watched me sit on the bed without a word.

“Do you want to do that for me?” I asked. “You can say no, love, but I would enjoy it.”

She still said nothing. It felt like my blood had been replaced with pure electricity. I felt wired, more so than I’d ever felt before. I was on the edge of something, and my whole body tingled with an awareness of it. But when Cali stayed quiet—staring at me—I started to feel anxious. Had I said something wrong? Was I pressuring her? I would never want her to do something that she wasn’t comfortable with—

“Like this?” Cali asked, interrupting my spiraling thoughts. She slid her thumbs into the waist of her leggings and started pulling them slowly down her legs.

Struck dumb by the sight of it, I could only nod.

She threw the leggings to the side and grasped the hem of her T-shirt. “And like this?”

I watched her pull the T-shirt over her head, revealing her stomach and lacy bra.

“And then, like this?” she asked, raising an eyebrow as she reached around for the clasp of her bra.

When the bit of pink lace fell to the floor—revealing her perfect breasts—I was on my feet. I couldn’t wait another moment to touch her. I grasped her, lifting her from underneath her legs, and felt her wrap her legs tightly around my waist. I pressed her into the bedroom wall and kissed her so hard she moaned. She was wearing nothing but her panties, and I ran my hands across every inch of her skin, cupping her breasts and feeling her nipples harden under my fingers.

“Greyson,” she moaned, leaning back to take a breath.

I slipped my hand down, and, digging my fingers into the lace of her underwear, I ripped it away, so she was fully naked as she wrapped herself around me.

She moaned. As I pressed my hips into her, she bit her lip. “Oh god, *Greyson*.”

Just hearing her moan my name nearly made me come, and I yanked my jeans down. When I plunged into her, she gasped and gripped me tighter, digging her fingernails into my back.

“Oh, yes! *Yes!* Greyson!”

My mind was a blur, but I knew I wanted to savor the moment, so I slowed down and watched Cali’s face as I moved inside her.

She dropped her head against the wall, her eyes closed as she tightened her legs around me. “Please,” she begged, “let me finish.”

“You want to come for me?” I asked, brushing a kiss across her lips.

She opened her eyes and nodded. “Yes,” she whispered. “Yes! Yes! God, YES!” She was screaming, completely lost as her orgasm overtook her.

I came an instant later, holding onto her like there was no tomorrow. Because there might not be.

I carried Cali over to the bed, where we both collapsed, breath heaving, slicked with sweat. She felt around and pulled a blanket over us both, cuddling close.

“Mmm,” she hummed. “That was amazing.”

I smiled and pressed a kiss into her hair. I didn’t know what was going to happen with the spell, but I was grateful for this time with Cali. I needed it—even more than I’d realized.

“You know you can always count on me, right?” I asked quietly.

Cali craned to look up at me. “What?” she asked with a baffled laugh. “What kind of question is that?”

“You do, don’t you?”

“Of course I know that,” she said, nuzzling closer.

“And you know you can count on Xavier, too, right?” I asked.

She made an indistinct noise against my chest.

I closed my eyes. “I just want you to know that if anything ever happened to me, I’d trust Xavier to take care of you.”

Cali pulled away from me and sat up, pulling the blanket up to cover her chest. She looked at me, frowning with confusion. “What are you talking about, Greyson? Why are you telling me this?”

I shook my head. “I just want you to know.”

This answer didn’t seem to satisfy her. “And I’d like to know why you’re sounding so cryptic and fatalistic right after we’ve had sex,” she said, an edge to her voice.

“No, that’s not what I’m—” I started, trying to smooth things over. “I want you to know that I care about you, that I always want the best for you.”

Cali shook her head, clearly still unconvinced. “No, Greyson, stop. This isn’t the first time you’ve said something like this to me—”

“Cali, I just—”

“Greyson, is something wrong?” she asked, looking at me earnestly. “Tell me the truth. Do you think something is going to happen to you?”

**Episode 2122**

LOLA

When Tracer bit into my neck, it burned like fire, and I had to grit my teeth to keep from screaming. I heard him swallow, and the sound made me feel sick. I wished I’d had the foresight to drink poison earlier, to taint my blood. Of course, the poison could’ve killed me, too, so maybe that wasn’t the best idea. But I was losing blood and maybe not thinking all that clearly.

“Hey… hey,” Echo whined. “Stop hogging… hogging. It’s my turn… turn.”

Tracer made a guttural noise but gave no indication that he was going to move, so Echo grabbed him by the shoulder and ripped him away, throwing him to the ground. Then he bit down on my neck. This pain was more muted, but I didn’t take that as a good sign. It probably meant I was getting weaker. I struggled against Echo, but he was too strong.

“Hey!” Tracer pulled at Echo as he swallowed greedily. “That’s enough, man! We’re only supposed to be sampling. We don’t want to drain her.”

Echo gripped me tighter and shoved Tracer away.

“Stop!” I yelled, pushing back on Echo’s head. I felt sick and dizzy as Echo finally pulled away, wiping blood from his mouth. My blood.

He licked his fingers clean, a smile on his face. “It’s too good to waste… waste.” He turned to Tracer. “Not too bad for werewolf blood, right… right?”

Tracer grinned menacingly. “Not bad at all. In fact, she’s delicious.”

My hands curled into fists. I hated this. I hated being talked about like I was an object. I was not some item on a menu, and these guys sure as hell weren’t food critics.

Tracer gave his head a little shake and looked around curiously. “Actually, I’m feeling a little light-headed.”

He looked over at Echo, and—suddenly—they both started to laugh. And then they kept laughing, uncontrollably.

The sound made my head ache. I wanted to fight, but I didn’t even know if I could stand. What I wanted more than anything was to close my eyes and go to sleep, but I fought off the feeling with everything I had.

Tracer started jumping up and down on the cement floor like he had springs attached to the bottoms of his feet. “I feel fucking amazing! It’s like the hybrid is a wonder drug.” He looked over at me, and his eyes shone with greed. “Imagine what we could make off of her.”

“Off of her,” Echo repeated, his eyes glazing over.

Tracer laughed and grabbed him, pulling him into a headlock, which Echo wrestled out of. They batted at each other, laughing like lunatics.

“We’re going to be rich… rich!” Echo shouted.

I took a deep breath, trying to stop my head from spinning, and tried reaching out to Jay again.

*Jay? Can you hear me? Jay? Are you there?*

My whole body flooded with relief when I heard his voice fill my head. *I’m here. Are you okay, Lola?*

*Hanging in there*, I assured him. *What about you?*

*I’m… healing*, he said. *No thanks to those idiots. They were talking about selling me off like some kind of werewolf blood bag.*

I looked down at the two vampires, who were now wrestling at my feet. *We have to get out of here.*

*I know*, Jay said. *I just need you to stay calm, okay? I’ll think of something. These two don’t seem that smart. They’re bound to make a mistake. And when they do, we’ll be ready for them. We have to be. We may not get a second chance.*

I was about to respond when I realized that the room had gone quiet. I looked up to find Echo and Tracer both looking at me, their expressions hungry.

“I think we should each take one more sample… sample,” Echo said, taking a step toward me.

“Yeah, sure, we can do that,” Tracer agreed. But as Echo bent toward my neck again, Tracer pulled him back. “Take it from her wrist. We don’t want to leave too many marks in one place.

Echo nodded, and as he bent toward me, I kicked out, trying to catch him. I was aiming for his balls, but I would have taken any contact at all. I couldn’t lose any more blood. Something inside me told me that if I lost another pint, I’d be in trouble.

“If my blood touches the silver cuffs, it’ll poison me. I’ll die.” Neither of the guys looked impressed by that information. “Which means you won’t be able to sell my blood,” I clarified.

“Oh.” Tracer looked worried. “We don’t want that to happen.” He bent and unlocked one of the cuffs. “Problem solved,” he said, holding up my wrist to Echo.

I braced myself for the burning pain of fangs sliding into my skin, but when it didn’t come, I looked up. Echo was hunched over my wrist, but he’d stopped, and his face looked pale. Well, *paler*.

“What’s up, man?” Tracer asked.

Echo shook his head. “I don’t feel so good… good.”

Tracer shoved Echo until he straightened. “What are you talking ab—”

He didn’t even get the whole sentence out before he bent over, clutching at his stomach.

“Oh shit, I think I’m going to throw up,” Tracer moaned.

I watched, thunderstruck, as both vampires fell to their knees. They were clearly in agony, and I knew this was my moment. I took a breath and got ready to shift, but I stopped myself just in time.

I was still wearing one of the cuffs. If I shifted, it could cut into my skin. But I didn’t need to shift to be able to handle these to vampiric idiots.

Tracer was leaning over, dry heaving, and I kicked him with absolutely everything I had.

Caught completely off-guard, Tracer fell onto his back.

Echo got to his feet to try to stop me, but I was ready for him. I gritted my teeth against the pain and did a spinning kick that took him *down*. He fell across Tracer, and they both groaned in pain.

Echo’s keys dangled from a clip on one of his beltloops, and I grabbed for it, ripping the beltloop in the process. Then I bolted for the door.

I had to get Jay. I had no idea how much damage I’d done, or how long the vampires would be down. And that other vampire—the tall one—could be anywhere, so I had to be careful.

I tried the door with the sliding window, but it was locked. I looked down at the keyring, but there were so many keys. There was no way I’d have time to try them all.

Peering through the window, I saw Jay standing in front of the cot, looking nervous.

“Watch out!” I yelled. Then I kicked the doorframe. I heard the wood splinter, and then—with one more kick—the lock fell away, and the door swung open.

I rushed over to Jay. He was chained to the cot, and I flipped through the keys, looking frantically for one that might fit his chains.

“Keep an eye out for vamps,” I said.

But I didn’t need eyes, as it turned out.

“Get her!” Tracer screamed. “Echo! Get your ass up and get her!”

My heart was racing, and—panicked—I dropped the keys.

“Leave me,” Jay hissed. “Get out of here, Lola, while you still can!”

I looked up and grabbed Jay’s shirt, yanking him toward me. “Don’t you *ever* suggest that to me again, Jay Taylor Young, or I swear I really *will* leave you.”

By sheer force of will, I made myself focus and found the small key that fit into Jay’s lock.

Freed from the chain, Jay grabbed my hand and pulled me out of the room.

“Do you know where Marta and Lilac are?” he asked breathlessly.

I shook my head as we dashed down the hall. “I was blindfolded when they took me, but I know they brought me outside on the way here. They must be in another building.

Jay nodded. “Okay. Let’s find them and get the hell out of here.”

Running blindly, we ended up at a dead end.

Turning around, I felt my heart pound. “We need to think. How do we get out?”

Jay looked around in silence, thinking hard. “I think it’s that way,” he said after moment, pointing back the way we had come. “And then we go left at the end of that long hallway.”

I looked where he was pointing and felt a wave of fear wash over me. “I think you’re right,” I muttered. And that was what scared me. Because we were going to have to pass by the vampires to get out.

“Okay,” I whispered. “Let’s go.”

We crept along the hallway, the silence pressing in on my ears.

I pointed to the room where we’d left the vamps, and Jay nodded.

I stopped just before the doorway, ears straining to pick up the slightest of noises. There was no sound, and the silence struck me as eerie. I peeked around the corner into the room, and I had to clap a hand over my mouth to stifle a scream.

The room was empty.

Where the hell were they?

**Episode 2123**

“Greyson, what are you talking about?” I demanded. “Do you think something’s going to happen to you? Are you worried about the Vanguard pack? Or Lucian? Are you planning to go back there or something?” He opened his mouth to answer, but I spoke over him. “Whatever it is, please just tell me.”

“Cali—”

“Don’t you dare try to push me away,” I snapped, feeling frustration edging out the contentment I’d just been basking in. “God, Greyson, I can’t believe you would even think about that after what we just shared,” I said, gesturing down at the blanket I had wrapped around me.

“Cali,” Greyson said firmly. “Will you let me finish a sentence? You need to take it down a notch. I am not pushing you away, okay?”  
 “Well, it wouldn’t be the first time,” I said heatedly. “Remember when you tried to do this before?”

“I didn’t—”

“Like hell you didn’t,” I shot back. “Remember when you told me to choose Xavier because you were worried that having to choose between the two of you was going to hurt me? And that was right before the battle with Silas, when everything was so crazy and I wasn’t sure what was going to happen to either of you…” I trailed off, my voice catching as tears pricked at my eyes. “You did it then. You pushed me away.”

Greyson took my hand in his. “I’m not doing that now, Cali. I don’t have any intention of taking on the Vanguard pack, and I never want to set foot in Lucian’s palace of horrors ever again if I can help it. I’m not planning on getting into any battles, and as for pushing you away…” He shook his head, looking tense. “Don’t you see that everything I’ve done has been to protect you? To keep you close? To keep you safe from all the danger you seem to attract?”

I rose to his bait and opened my mouth to dispute this, but I stopped myself. Fear and frustration were coursing through me, but I forced myself to stop and really think about his words.

He had purposefully chosen Joss to be his Luna over me. It had been painful and humiliating at the time, but he’d done it because being a Luna was dangerous, and he didn’t want me to be hurt. He hadn’t wanted me to go to the Vanguard party for the same reason. And he’d just invited me to go to his mother’s wedding as his date, so I had to admit this wasn’t a case of Greyson pushing me away or trying to close himself off from me.

I tucked a stray lock of hair behind my ear. “But I still don’t understand. Why are you worried about something happening to you now? What’s changed? What’s going on that you’re not telling me?”  
 Greyson had been looking at me, but he broke eye contact, looking away into the dimness of his room. He didn’t speak for a moment, and I saw that muscle in his jaw twitch. When he did look back at me, his grey eyes flashed in the darkness. “Our lives are full of risk, Cali, and after everything that’s happened, I want to make sure that you know you’ll be taken care of, no matter what. That’s all.”

I eyed him skeptically. “Greyson, you told me once that you’d never lie to me.”

Greyson’s reaction to my words was almost a flinch, but not quite. He leaned in and pressed a kiss to my lips. “I’m not lying, Cali. I’m telling the truth.” He met my gaze. “Don’t you believe me?”

I stared back at him. I *wanted* to believe him—more than anything, I wanted to believe that he’d never lie to me. And everything he’d said made sense. Our lives *did* involve a lot of risk—his, especially. There *had* been a lot going on. But there was something in the way he’d turned away from me when I’d asked that had left me with questions I just couldn’t answer.

I grasped his hands tightly. “You know that if you ever try anything stupid, I’m never going to forgive you, right?”

The grin he gave me was teasing. “Do I look stupid to you?”

“No—no, of course not,” I spluttered. “That’s not what I meant—”

He pulled me close, cutting me off. “I meant what I said, love. All jokes aside.”

“And what was that? There was quite a lot said recently,” I asked, breathlessly, looking into his storm-tossed eyes.

“If anything should ever happen to me, Xavier will take care of you. And the reverse is true, too.”

Frustration surged through me, and I pulled away from his embrace. “God, Greyson. If that was supposed to make me feel better about this conversation, it didn’t.” I shook my head. “I don’t understand why we’re even talking about this. I don’t want to think about anything happening to either of you. *Ever*. Okay?”

“Okay,” Greyson said quietly.

But I was angry, and I wasn’t finished raging. “I love you both. It kills me to think about either of you hurt or in pain, or even being far away from me. Why would assuring me that I’d be taken care of if something happened to one of you make me feel *good*—”

I stopped myself mid-sentence. A thought had just occurred to me, and it hit me like a ton of bricks. This conversation felt like it was coming out of nowhere, but *was* it? Was it possible that it had something to do with Aysel? Was he… Could he… Was it possible that Greyson was planning something? To run off with her?

*Was* it possible? Even though the woman was totally over-dramatic, she was also beautiful, wealthy, and a princess. And a werewolf. How could I ever compete with that?

But then I stopped and gave myself a mental shake. No. I was being crazy. Greyson was more than my lover—he was my *mate*. Aysel was a lot of things, but she’d never be Greyson’s mate. And she could never take him from me. Even in my darkest moments, I’d always know that.

“Cali?” Greyson questioned, watching me closely. “Everything okay? Where’d you go?”

I leaned forward and kissed him. “Just promise me,” I murmured, slipping my hand around the back of his neck and tangling my fingers in his hair, “that if something’s going on, you’ll talk to me about it.”

Before Greyson could answer, there was a sharp rap on the door. Before either of us could even say it was safe to come in, it burst open.

Big Mac stood framed in the doorway, and she rolled her eyes as she looked down at us.

Instinctively, I pulled the blanket up higher, my cheeks flushing with embarrassment. “Yes, the door is open, Big Mac. Won’t you come in?”

Greyson sat up, looking thoroughly unembarrassed. “What now?”

“I’m worried about Marta,” the witch said promptly.

“Why?” Greyson asked. “What’s going on?”

“She was supposed to check in with me hours ago, but I haven’t heard a thing.”

I leaned forward, anxious. “Isn’t Lola with her?”

“I haven’t heard from any of them,” Big Mac said sharply. “Now, I don’t know who’s in charge around here, and—quite frankly—I don’t care, but I’m just letting you know that I’m going to do a tracking spell to find out where the hell they are.”

As she turned to leave, I shuffled to the edge of the bed.

“Hang on!” I called. “Wait for me. I’ll come with you.”

Big Mac huffed. “Well, hurry up then. I don’t have all day.”

I wrapped the blanket around me as I got to my feet, but Greyson grabbed my arm, holding me back.

“Cali—at least put some clothes on.”

I gave Big Mac a pleading look, and she loosed a long-suffering sigh, but she turned and reached for the door.

“Two minutes,” she said threateningly. “And I mean *two*.”

When the door slammed shut, I started looking around for my clothes.

“Could you hand me my jeans?” Greyson asked, pointing at the balled-up pants lying by my feet.

All our clothes were on the floor—we had created a kind of whirlwind effect when we’d pulled them off. I spied my shirt thrown over the shade of the lamp next to the bed. I guess I’d tossed it farther than I’d thought while I was stripping.

I leaned down and picked up the jeans, but something fell out of the pocket and onto the floor as I straightened up. I reached down for what had fallen and picked up a circular metal object, about the size of my palm. I turned it over in my hand, curious. It was a strange-looking pocket watch. I’d never seen it before, and I’d certainly never seen Greyson carrying it.

I tossed Greyson his jeans and held up the watch. “Want to tell me what this is?”

**Episode 2124**

VIOLET

As I stood in the middle of the clearing, I tried not to pace, or shake, or do anything else that might betray how nervous I was feeling. I knew Charlie and Xavier were stationed at the perimeter, watching me, and that made me feel more confident. But I was a lot *less* confident when it came to Iris and Ava. I didn’t trust either of them.

There was a hurried scuffling noise in the trees behind me, and I spun around, trying to see into the shadows. It sounded like someone running, near where Xavier was supposed to be. My heart beat fast. Had he seen something? Was he chasing the stalker?

My heart felt like it was beating in my throat. Why was this happening? Who could be doing this to me? And *why*?

Unable to answer any of those questions, my anxiety deepened, and I felt doubt start to creep in. Would this trap even work? What if someone got hurt? What if *Charlie* got hurt? What if he got hurt trying to protect me? I’d never forgive myself if something like that happened. And I was pretty sure Iris would blame me for anything that went wrong.

I squinted into the woods again, trying to see anything at all, but there was nothing. My breath made a frosty cloud in the air, and I shivered. I was starting to deeply regret offering to act as bait for this operation. Maybe we needed to just call the whole thing off before it was too late.

*Maybe we should go back*, I said, reaching out to Charlie through the mind link.

*Are you okay?* Charlie asked quickly.

*Yeah, I think so.*

*If you’re scared, Violet, we can pull the plug right now. Say the word and we’re gone.*

I didn’t respond. I hated to admit that I was scared. Why should I be? I was a fucking werewolf! But… I was scared. The whole situation was so creepy and weird. It had me on edge. And for good reason. This stalker—whoever he was—had almost killed both Charlie and me.

*Violet?* Charlie asked.

I was about to answer, but I was distracted when I saw movement out of the corner of my eye.

My heart seemed to freeze in my chest. Was that the stalker?

I spun in a circle, looking around. I was edgy as hell, but I was ready to fight. The trees behind me started to rustle, and I whipped around to look at them, but it was only the wind.

I turned back around, but the sigh of relief died on my lips. A figure had materialized in front of me. He was dressed all in black, and his face was covered by a hockey mask. The white of it shone brightly against the black.

When he spoke, his voice was strange and distorted, like it had sounded on the phone. “Hello, Violet. I’m so glad we could meet.”

Every fiber of my body seemed to be shaking with fear, but I stared into the strange mask and into the black voids that were the eyes.

“Who am I talking to?” I demanded.

The figure tipped his head owlishly. “You ignored me once. You can’t ignore me now.”

I frowned, confused. What the hell was this guy talking about?

“I did what you said,” I shot back, feeling angry.

“You didn’t,” the stalker snapped. “I told you to come alone, and you brought someone. Another freak, just like you. You and your kind don’t belong in the natural world.” He took a breath, like he was trying to calm himself. “And that’s why I’m here. To cleanse the world—to purify everything that you’ve soiled with your existence.”

I didn’t like one word of this little speech, and my instincts were screaming at me to shift. But the stalker moved slightly, and I caught sight of something shimmering in his hand. Silver?

I remembered the knife from the hunter camp that Charlie and I had found. If the stalker *was* a hunter, I was going to have my hands full. I kept my eyes on the figure, but my mind worked fast as I thought through all the possible combat scenarios. I could wait for him to attack, or I could go on the offensive. I could attack first—catch him off-guard. This would give me the element of surprise, and I was pretty sure I’d be able to hold him at arm’s length long enough to allow the others to get close enough to intervene.

But first, I was going to have to put him at ease. Get him talking.

“What do you want?” I demanded.

“You called me,” he reminded me, a teasing edge to his horrible voice. He stepped toward me, and suddenly I could see the dagger more clearly. It was strapped to his thigh.

I swallowed hard. I knew I had to be patient. I had to give myself time to shift, and then to attack. But he still needed to be a little closer, or he might just run back into the woods when I went after him.

“So what do *you* want?” he asked softly.

“I called you because I want this to end. How can I make you stop?” I asked, my voice raw with fear and anger.

There was the sound of soft laughter behind the hockey mask, and the stalker shook his head, like there was something I just didn’t get. “Don’t you see? It won’t end. It *can’t* end. Not until you die.”

The ear-splitting report of a gun cracked through the air, the sound ricocheting off the trees.

I flinched and ducked down. Was someone trying to *shoot* me? Was there someone else with him? Had this been the stalker’s plan all along?

It was impossible to tell, as the stalker bolted for the trees at the sound of the gun.

I heard the sound of swiftly running feet, and Ava’s wolf flashed past me. She cast a glance at me—without slowing down—and kept running, chasing after the stalker. It only took me an instant to decide to shift and follow her into the woods.

My heart thundered in my chest as I pushed harder, trying with all my might to keep up with Ava. But she was so damn fast. I’d never realized just how powerful a werewolf she was.

Following the sound of her running feet, I ran into a dense growth of trees. It was even darker here, and I looked around as I ran, trying desperately to get my bearings. I smelled the air. I knew the lake was to my left, but a new fear occurred to me, making it even harder to focus—what if this was part of the stalker’s plan? He *had* said he’d wanted me alone, and now he had me alone. Was this the plan—to lure me away from all my protection?

At least Ava was still with me.

Ava ran smoothly through the trees, and I sprinted to keep up. It was terrifying, but I thought I could hear the stalker just ahead of us. I was sure I could hear someone grunting and running. It was the sound of someone trying to get away.

The trees started to thin, and suddenly, I knew exactly where we were. So I wasn’t the least bit surprised when we reached the small clearing. The trees were behind us, and up ahead was a cliff, with a sharp, vertical drop of a hundred feet.

The figure in black stumbled to a halt and looked around. Even with the hockey mask covering his features, I knew he was desperate and looking for an escape. But there wasn’t one.

Without a word, Ava moved to flank him on his right, and I crouched down, growling as I moved closer.

The stalker turned to me. “You’re just like all of them,” he snarled. He looked over at Ava, following her every move as she stalked closer and closer to him.

This was the moment, and I didn’t hesitate. I lunged and hit him full in the chest, knocking him to the ground. But the momentum of my leap sent us flying forward, and we landed only inches from the edge of the cliff. In my peripheral vision, I saw a cluster of rocks we’d displaced skitter over the edge and plummet down. I struggled to keep my balance as the stalker underneath me flailed about.

The stalker let out a cry like a wounded animal and struggled, pushing back hard against me. I fought, gritting my teeth against the impacts of his fists in my face and against my neck. No matter the strength of his attacks, I had to keep us from tumbling down over the edge into the abyss. I tugged on his shoulder, forcing him further from the edge. When I felt that, at the very least, we weren’t in danger of plummeting to our deaths, I reached for the hockey mask and gripped it with my teeth, ripping it off. But before I could see the face behind it, there was a sudden, deafening explosion, and then everything went black.

**Episode 2125**

GREYSON

I looked up at Cali and immediately tensed. The watch the witches had given me swung from her hands like a pendulum.

“Greyson?” she pressed, raising an eyebrow. “What is this?”

Speechless, I stared at her. I didn’t know what to say. Cali had *just* asked me if I’d been hiding anything from her, and I’d sworn to her that I’d be honest.

And I’d meant it. But this…

This wasn’t normal. This was a special circumstance. This thing with the witches was the kind of thing that would freak Cali out, and I didn’t think it was wise to involve her in anything to do with those three witch sisters.

Cali looked down at the watch, peering at it closely. She flipped it over and looked at the back. “I don’t recognize it. I’ve never seen it before.” She looked up at me, her eyes curious. “Where did you get it?”

“I—I…” I started, fumbling like an idiot. “It was a gift from my mom. For being a member of the wedding party.”

“Oh!” Cali’s face brightened, and her eyes quickly filled with tears. “That’s so sweet. Your mom is so thoughtful. And she *just* asked you to walk her down the aisle. She must have been planning this for a while.” She shook her head. “You should have shown it to me before. Did she inscribe it or something?”

She ran her fingers along the edge of the watch, trying to get it open, and I lunged forward.

“No!” I thundered, yanking the watch from her hands.

The witches had told me I’d have to turn the hands back to activate the spell, but I didn’t want to take any risks. Not when it came to Cali.

“Greyson!” Cali looked up at me, clearly startled. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry,” I said quickly, smiling and trying to sound normal. “It’s just that… the watch is so old. I’d hate to have it break before the wedding.”

“Oh,” Cali said slowly. “You could have just asked me to give it to you, though. No need for the dramatics.”

“I know, I’m sorry. We’ll check it all out later, okay? And we should hurry. We shouldn’t leave Big Mac waiting. I really don’t think she’s going to give us more than two minutes. And she’s going to need our help if we need to find Lola, or rescue anyone from anything.”

I held my breath, looking at Cali, hoping she believed my cover. I hated to lie, but I didn’t feel like I had a choice.

“No, you’re right,” she said, nodding. “You’re always thinking about the next step.”

She went up on tiptoe to give me a quick kiss, and then she reached for her bra.

I looked down at the watch in my hand. Should I leave it here in my room? The last thing I wanted to do was shift and lose track of it, but… I only had so much time. If I left it here and it turned out we had to go off and save Lola—something I would obviously do if it was needed—would I be left with enough time to do as the witches said?

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Dressed, Cali and I headed downstairs to find Big Mac in the living room. Kira was there, too, standing behind her.

“I’ve been trying to get hold of Lola,” Cali said as she walked in, “but her phone keeps going to voicemail. She’s not picking up.”

Big Mac didn’t answer. She was crouched in front of the coffee table. On the table was a glass dish containing a single hair. Next to it there was a faded old map and a smooth grey stone.

“What’s all this?” Cali asked, gesturing toward the table.

“That’s Lola’s hair,” Kira said, pointing at the dish.

“And why do you have Lola’s hair?” I asked.

“I have everyone’s hair,” Big Mac said.

“*What?*” Cali asked.

Big Mac shrugged. “You never know when you’re going to need it.”

Without thinking, I patted the back of my own head. “And how exactly are you collecting these samples? Are you sneaking around at night stealing it from people while they sleep?”

“Maybe you could just ask people? I’m sure they’d give it to you,” Cali suggested.

Big Mac glared up at us. “No time for that.” She turned back to her spell.

Watching her, it was hard not to think of the three witches. They never asked permission, either. They never explained anything. They just did whatever they wanted, never thinking about how it would affect anyone else.

Big Mac straightened suddenly, her eyebrows knitted with concern.

“What is it?” Cali asked. She reached for my hand and squeezed tightly.

Big Mac didn’t answer. She shot a look at Kira.

I’d seen that look before, and I knew enough to know it wasn’t good. “If something’s up, tell us what’s going on.”

Big Mac looked up. “They never made it to the library.”

Cali gasped. “What does that mean?”

Big Mac fixed her with an even stare. “Do you need me to spell it out for you? It means they never ended up where they said they would be.”

“Can you tell where Lola *is*, as opposed to where she *isn’t*?” I asked.

“I’m not Google Maps,” Big Mac huffed. She looked back at the table and began to mutter. I couldn’t tell what she was saying, but it sounded like a different language. Whatever it was seemed to work, though, as the smooth stone began to move slowly across the map.

We all watched as it kept moving, finally stopping a few inches from the corner of the map.

Big Mac pointed at it. “She’s there.”

Cali stepped closer to the table and looked down at the map, lifting the stone to look underneath it. “It says ‘Glenn’s Junkyard.’ Why would Lola stop at a junkyard?” She frowned at Big Mac. “Are you sure about this?”

I put a hand on Cali’s shoulder and pulled her gently back to my side. I knew she was worried about Lola, but I knew Big Mac well enough to know that you didn’t go around questioning her spells.

Unsurprisingly, Big Mac narrowed her eyes as she looked at Cali. “I have no idea why Lola would stop at a junkyard. I don’t read minds, missy.”

“Well, we need to go. If this is where they are, there must be something wrong. We need to get to them,” Cali said, looking worried.

“Hang on. What about Marta?” Kira said. She pulled another hair from a glass vial and placed it in the dish.

Big Mac leaned close to the plate and whispered her spell.

“They’re together,” she said a few seconds later, looking up.

I took this in. Together, at a junkyard. I didn’t know if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

“Well, what are we waiting for?” Cali asked impatiently. “Clearly something’s happening, and we need to get over there.”

Big Mac nodded. “I agree. Let’s go. It isn’t far. I’ll get Sabine.”

“We can take my car,” I said, heading for the door.

Cali hurried alongside me, practically sprinting toward the car.

“Cali,” I called after her. “Try to calm down. I know this looks weird, but there might be a totally reasonable explanation.”

“Like what?” she demanded, turning to look at me.

“Like maybe their car broke down and they needed a part,” I offered, though it sounded like a pretty lame explanation. If their car had really broken down, they would have called here to ask for help. Or at least picked up their phones when we called them.

I felt the watch in my pocket, running my fingers over the smooth metal. *On second thought…* I pulled it out and slung it around my neck, dropping it into my shirt. I liked having it close, but the weight of it only served to remind me that time was running out.

But what could I do? I couldn’t leave this mission to Cali. And there was no way I’d be able to talk her out of it. Lola was her best friend.

Besides, Lola was a member of the pack, and so were Jay and Lilac. We didn’t abandon members of the pack.

“Here they come,” Cali said, pulling open the passenger door.

Big Mac and my mother hurried down the porch steps and toward the car. They slid into the back seat, and Big Mac had just started to snipe about finding her seat belt when we all heard the call of a howling wolf.

Cali looked at me, her eyes wide with fear. “What was that?”

I stepped out of the car just in time to see a wolf carrying a rider sprint from the trees. As they drew closer, I saw that it was Jacqueline, riding on Plum’s back. Plum was running at a dead sprint, and they were both out of breath when they reached us.

“We have to hurry!” Jacqueline gasped. “Before it’s too late!”

**Episode 2126**

XAVIER

I shifted back to my human form as I headed toward the small clearing near the cliff. As soon as I’d heard the explosion, I’d left Iris behind and run as fast as I could.

The smoke made it hard to see clearly, but as I drew near, I could see two figures lying in the grass. My heart thumped as I realized they were Ava and Violet. As I charged into it, I realized the smoke was even thicker than I’d thought. It hung like a heavy curtain over their still, silent forms.

Just as I reached Violet, I heard a noise at the edge of the clearing. I looked over to see Charlie bursting out of the trees. When he saw Violet lying motionless on the ground, he threw back his head and howled, then hurried toward her, shifting back to human as he ran.

Off to my left, Ava began to stir, slowly coming to, but I didn’t pay her any attention. Ava wasn’t my problem.

“Violet,” I said, looking down and gently shaking her shoulder. “Hey, Violet. Can you hear me?”

She was still for another moment, and then her eyelids fluttered. She opened them slowly and looked around. For a moment, she didn’t seem to know where she was or what she was doing here, but when she looked at me, she seemed to remember, and her eyes widened with fear. “Did you catch him?”

“Violet?” Charlie gasped, dropping at her side. “Are you okay?” he demanded, pulling her into a hug before she could answer.

But she pulled away. “Did you catch him?” she asked again, insistent.

Charlie and I exchanged a glance. It was clear from Charlie’s look that he hadn’t even seen the stalker, never mind been able to catch him.

Ava shifted back to human and slowly sat up. “We didn’t catch him. He got away.” She rubbed her head. “Whoever it was ran off that way,” she said, pointing toward the trees.

Charlie grasped Violet’s hand and helped her to her feet. “This was a huge mistake. I don’t know what I was thinking, letting you come out here like this with that maniac looking for you. I never should have agreed to let you do this,” he muttered, pulling dead leaves out of her hair and checking her over for injuries.

Charlie looked miserable, and I felt for the guy. I knew what it was like to feel responsible for someone else’s safety, and it really sucked when they were in danger.

“Hey, she’s okay, man,” I said. I looked around the clearing, but it was empty of everyone but our team. But there was *something*. I bent and retrieved a white mask from the ground. “What’s this?”

“The guy was wearing it,” Ava said. “It must have fallen off before he ran away.”

Violet was staring at the mask, her face bloodless. I didn’t blame her for being freaked out if her stalker had been wearing it while he’d menaced her.

“Listen, Violet,” I started slowly, “I hate to ask you this now, but the longer we wait, the more time that asshole has to get away. His mask came off. Did you see who it was?”

Before she could even start to answer, Iris stomped over, looking furious. She looked disheveled—her hair was mussed, and she had a streak of mud down her cheek and on her jacket.

She stepped aggressively toward me. “Well it wasn’t me, if that’s what you’re asking.”

I glared at her. “That’s obvious, but it doesn’t explain why the hell you had a gun. Why did you try to shoot Violet?”

Charlie drew in a sharp breath as he rounded on his mom. “*MOM?*” he demanded, pushing Violet behind him, protecting her with his body.

“I wasn’t trying to shoot Violet,” Iris snapped. “I was trying to *cover* Violet when *you*”—she jabbed a finger into my chest—“jumped *me* and the gun went off. It never would have happened if you hadn’t acted so impulsively. Without a single thought!” She shook her head, looking disgusted. “*Werewolves*.”

“That’s not the way it looked from where *I* was standing,” I growled.

“Oh, I guess I forgot the part where you’re *all-seeing*.” Iris sneered. “If you say that’s not what happened, then it couldn’t possibly be true, could it? Never mind that I have absolutely no reason to—”

“*No reason?*” I snapped back. “How about the fact that you’re a fucking *hunter* and Violet’s a werewolf mated to your son—”

“Stop!” Violet shouted. She swayed on her feet—clearly still dazed—but put up her hands to stop our argument. “Stop. You don’t have to do this. I saw who it was.”

The clearing went quiet. Iris and I stopped arguing and both stared at Violet in surprise.

“You saw him?” Charlie asked.

Violet nodded.

“Who was it?”

“It was Zachery,” Violet said.

His face went pale. “What?” he whispered, clearly shocked. “*Zachery?*”

But Iris seemed skeptical. “That can’t be true.”

“Who the fuck is Zachery?” I demanded, annoyed at being left out of the loop. “Am I the only one here who doesn’t know who this douchebag is?”

“I don’t think I’ve heard of any Zachery,” Ava said, moving to stand at my side.

I ignored her and turned to Iris, then Charlie and Violet. “How about someone fills me in?”

“We know Zachery from hunter camp. He was Charlie’s roommate. We all thought he was an okay guy, but—”

“But then he got pissed that Violet wouldn’t go on a second date with him,” Charlie cut in.

Ava raised an eyebrow. “This seems like a bit of an extreme reaction to *that*.”

I gave a hollow laugh. That was a bit rich, coming from Ava.

Iris was shaking her head. “No, this can’t be Zachery. I’ve known his family for years. He’s from good hunter stock; he’s not some rogue, loose cannon.”

Charlie gave his mom a hard look. “You might know his family, Mom, but you don’t know Zachery. Trust me on this.”

“Come on, Charlie,” Iris said. “We’re thousands of miles away from where Zachery lives. He might be a little mixed up, but he’s a good kid underneath it all. There’s no reason to believe he’d try any of the stuff you’ve been describing—”

“Mom,” Charlie said, cutting her off. “He stabbed Violet with a silver knife, and Violet just told you she saw Zachery behind that mask. Ibelieve her. Is there any reason why you don’t?”

This seemed to stop Iris for a moment. She looked away, apparently thinking hard. “No,” she finally said, her voice quiet. “Of course not. You’re right, Charlie.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. I was glad the family drama was over—I hated getting stuck in the middle of shit like that. And now I was ready to chase this Zachery guy down—whoever he was. Nobody went after someone in my pack and ran away unpunished. Nobody.

“Okay, Charlie,” I said, getting to my feet. “You keep an eye on Violet while I go after this bastard.”

“I’ll lead the way,” Ava said.

“You go ahead and do whatever the hell you want,” I snapped, barely looking at her. I wished to hell she’d shift back to her wolf form. Having her hanging around was bad enough, but having her hanging around *naked* was… distracting.

I gritted my teeth and shifted, and—to my relief—I heard Ava do the same thing, and we headed off in the direction she’d indicated.

A few yards into the trees, I was hit with a scent. I took a deep breath and then groaned.

Fuck. It was Ava’s scent, and now it felt like it was surrounding me, taunting me with its appeal.

As soon as I got back to the house, I was going to revisit that unmating spell. Even if it didn’t last forever, a reboot might give me some relief.

After another half a mile, it occurred to me that we were being tailed. And not too discreetly, either. I shot a glance over my shoulder and was unsurprised to see Violet behind me. Charlie was with her, and Iris was riding on his back.

Was the entire pack now comprised of people like Cali, who never listened to a single thing I said?

I spun around to tell them off and slammed into Ava. We both stumbled back, but the damage was done. My skin tingled with the memory of her body against mine, and my senses were filled with her.

Fuck.

I glared at her, but she wasn’t looking at me. Instead, she gestured down the path.

I turned to follow her gaze, and what I saw made my blood run cold—a silver hunting trap lay smack dab in the middle of our path, glittering menacingly.

*Back up*, I said, and Ava nodded wordlessly.

We started to backtrack, but I stopped, with a sudden, sickening awareness. I looked around and realized that there wasn’t just one trap.

We were surrounded by a sea of glittering silver.

**Episode 2127**

Weirdly, out of everything, the thing that freaked me out most was Jacqueline’s appearance. Every other time I’d seen the Tottenville vampire walking around the pack house, she’d always looked completely composed. Perfectly dressed, makeup done, not a hair out of place. She’d looked like a model, literally all the time. But now, sitting astride Plum, she was sweating and windblown and completely disheveled, like she’d just ridden through hell and back again.

“Will someone explain what’s going on?” Greyson demanded.

Jacqueline was winded, and she tried to catch her breath before she spoke. “They’re all in this junkyard—Lola, Jay, that medium girl and her boyfriend, all of them. We were heading for the library when we got into an accident. Not an accident—we were forced off the road by these vampires, and then kidnapped. I was just about to spring them from the junkyard when I saw a bunch of other vampires show up. Like they’d been called in as backup. And they *didn’t* look friendly,” Jacqueline finished darkly.

“You managed to get away,” Greyson said. “You’re saying that a werewolf-vampire hybrid, a werewolf, and a medium combined couldn’t put down a few punk vamps?”

“I’ve only been in a few fights, and there were so many of them—I knew I couldn’t take them all on alone, and then I found Plum here,” she said, gesturing to the wolf beneath her, “so I figured the best plan would be to come back here and fetch reinforcements. That would be you,” she finished, wide-eyed.

She’d ridden at breakneck speed back to the pack house to help save Lola. I wasn’t sure what came over me—maybe it was just seeing this put together girl look so discomposed—but I rushed toward the vampire and pulled her into a hug. I felt the girl stiffen for a moment, and then, slowly, her arms circled me.

“Thank you for coming back to get us,” I said, my throat tight. “Thank you for looking out for them.”

When I pulled back, Jacqueline didn’t meet my eyes.

She kept her gaze down, looking embarrassed. “It’s wasn’t a huge deal. Let’s not make this into some big thing, because it’s definitely *not*. I just did what Lola—Whatever.” She shook her head, apparently remembering why she’d come, and looked around. “Why are we all just standing around? Let’s go, go, go! Evil-looking vampires are out there, getting closer to your friends every second!”

I looked up at Greyson.

He nodded. “I’ll shift. It’ll be faster that way, and Plum can lead us to the junkyard.”

Without another moment of hesitation, he stripped off his shirt and tossed it onto the hood of the car.

The pocket watch I’d found earlier was hanging on a chain around his neck. Which was so touching to see that it made my heart flutter. I loved that he was wearing his mother’s gift so close to his heart… and his abs. Damn, his abs looked amazing. When did he find the time to work on them?

I gave my head a shake. There was danger looming. I had to focus.

Greyson shifted to his wolf form, and on the other side of the car, Mrs. Smith did the same. I climbed onto Greyson’s back, Big Mac climbed onto Mrs. Smith, and Jacqueline stayed on Plum.

“Let go!” Jacqueline screamed, and all three werewolves took off into the forest.

I clung to Greyson’s fur as the bitter winter air whipped around my face, sharp as knives. Riding into battle like this made me feel like I was part of some kind of epic rescue mission in a movie, but I knew the possibility of falling from Greyson’s back was very real and would be very painful, so I gripped his fur more tightly.

I kept thinking of Lola, Jay, Marta, and Lilac. Forced off the road, kidnapped by vampires. I kept reminding myself that they were all good fighters—except for Marta, maybe—and could defend themselves. But against vampires? A *lot* of vampires?

I wanted to believe they were okay. But they *were* in danger, if Jacqueline was telling the truth—and I had no reason to doubt her. She’d come all that way to get us, and with Plum, no less.

*Cali, listen to me. I know you’re worried about Lola, but I want you to hang back when we get there, okay?* Greyson’s voice echoed in my mind. *We don’t know the first thing about these vampires except that they’re a threat, and I don’t want you getting hurt.*

*You know, I’ve already defeated a vampire or two, in case you’ve forgotten*, I reminded him. *And that was* before *I had control over my Fae magic. You’re the one who should be careful. I don’t want anything happening to my mate.*

*Watch out.*

I rolled my eyes. *Greyson, I’m capable of watching out for myself—*

*No, watch out right now! Branch!*

I ducked just in time, and a thick pine branch nearly grazed the back of my head.

*Thanks*, I said ruefully.

I glanced over, making sure we were still all together, and caught sight of Big Mac riding on Mrs. Smith. The sight made me smile. Even now—in the midst of so much danger—they just looked *right* together.

I gripped onto Greyson tighter, and beneath my fingers, I felt the coolness of the chain around his neck. I thought of Mrs. Smith giving the watch to Greyson. It was such a sentimental gift, and a sign that they were getting closer—a true mother-son relationship. I loved that. I knew that was what Mrs. Smith wanted, and I hoped that the wedding would be the final step toward Greyson being able to call her “Mom” without awkwardness. Or would he call her “Mother”?

Before I could work out which term he might use, Jacqueline held up her hand and the other two wolves pulled to a stop. She pointed to junkyard, now visible through the trees. It was surrounded on all sides by a chain-link fence, which was topped by razor wire.

I didn’t like the looks of it at all. No one had thrown out the welcome mat here. I felt fear building in my chest. I didn’t even know what the plan was. *Was* there a plan?

Sliding off Greyson’s back, I dropped to the forest floor. We all turned when we heard the rumble of an approaching car, then watched as it turned into the junkyard.

“Stay hidden,” Jacqueline hissed as we started to move toward the entrance. “There are a couple of buildings inside the fence. Maybe more. I’m not sure. I couldn’t explore much further because the other vampires showed up when I was trying to look around.”

As we neared the entrance, I heard a female voice shouting. It was Lola’s voice, and I could just about make out the words.

“Everyone just *back off*! Back off, or the vamp gets it!”

Fear made my heart thump in a crazy rhythm. I looked at Greyson. *We have to do something!*

Greyson nodded and pointed. We stepped into the junkyard, close enough to take in the scene. Lola was standing in the middle of a group of vampires, staring them down. A tall vampire with black hair and a menacing expression was holding Jay, a silver knife pressed to his throat.

Facing him, Lola was gripping her own vampire, and she had a tire iron pressed against his throat. It was possible she was pressing harder than she intended, because her vamp was choking and starting to turn blue. He was scrabbling at the tire iron, trying to get it away so he could breathe, but she was ignoring him, her eyes on the vampires surrounding her.

But however uncomfortable that vampire was, the tire iron wasn’t going to be fatal.

“It’s not going to work,” I hissed at Greyson. “The tire iron’s not made of wood.”

Big Mac made a sharp, twisting motion with her hand, and the knife at Jay’s throat flew out of the vampire’s hand. Everyone watched—transfixed—as it sailed through the air, sinking itself into the tire of a nearby car. The tire popped with a bang.

The sound seemed to break the spell, and the vampires looked around. As one, their eyes narrowed when they saw us standing near the gate.

“What’s this?” demanded one of the vampires, a woman with frizzy blonde hair and dark purple shadows beneath her eyes. She sneered as she looked us over. “You call in reinforcements, girlie?”

Greyson growled and stepped forward, crouching like he was about to leap.

“Let them go,” I called, stepping up to stand next to him.

“Or what?” the vampire spat.

Jacqueline strode forward, her eyes flashing. “Or you’re going to have to deal with me.”

The vampires sneered at this, and the woman who’d spoken took a deep breath. She looked the group over, and when she got to me, she smiled, showing a mouthful of broken teeth. “Well, isn’t this a little treat. I smell Fae blood.”

**Episode 2128**

Defensively, I clutched my throat, staring wide-eyed at the vampire, who was watching me like I was some kind of rotisserie chicken. I didn’t like the way she was licking her lips, or the feeling of those red eyes being fixed on me.

*Back off, lady. I’m nobody’s snack!*

Jay shifted and immediately tore into the vampire who’d been holding him captive. The vampire fought and snarled and screeched, but was no match for Jay. In a matter of seconds, he’d torn out the vampire’s throat and was making progress on ripping its whole head off.

Now that Jay was free and fighting back, Greyson, Mrs. Smith, and Plum didn’t hesitate.

I winced at the carnage.

“We’re just here for our friends!” I shouted over the chaos. “Nobody else has to get hurt!”

The lady vampire who’d been eyeing me like I was a sweet glass of lemonade on a hot summer day hissed and pointed at Jay, who still had the very *dead* vampire locked between his powerful jaws. “It’s a little late for that, don’t you think?”

The vampire pressed her thumb and forefinger against her mouth and let loose a screeching whistle.

“Holy hell!” I slapped my hands over my ears. How on earth could she whistle like that? Was that a perk of being a vampire? Also, why the hell was she whistling at all?

Greyson leapt onto one of the vampires, and it seemed like with him, Jay, Lola, Mrs. Smith, and Plum—who was still serving as Jacqueline’s mount—we had the upper hand.

Then even more vampires emerged from all over the junkyard, popping up from beneath old rusted cars—a few even seemed to emerge from around the backside of a trash compactor. A snarling vampire rushed toward me, its fangs bared.

I threw up a hand and blasted it with my magic. *Yes!* My smile dropped as I watched the vampire fly backward and land with a squelch on a rusted fender. The vampire looked down at the fender tearing a hole through its chest and let out a guttural cry.

“S-Sorry!” I called out, then doubled over to dry heave. That was… beyond disgusting. Despite all the time I’d spent fighting for my life lately, I hoped I’d never quite get used to the gore.

Nearby, Lola—surrounded by vampires—shifted into her wolf form. The other vampires stopped in their tracks.

“Did you see that?” one of them asked the others.

Clearly, they’d never seen a hybrid like Lola before—but then again, neither had anyone else I knew. She was definitely one of a kind, and the shock of her transformation made the other vampires easy targets. She leapt on the nearest one with a growl and began tearing it apart before it even thought to fight back.

And then it was back to the fighting. I stayed on the edges, blasting away any vampires that tried to come near me while Jay leapt onto another vampire and tore into it the same way he’d killed the last one.

Across the junkyard, Greyson was taking on two vampires at once. He seemed to be handling both his attackers, but a little help never hurt anyone. I rushed over and blasted the one closest to me, sending it flying into Greyson’s other opponent. The vampires hit the ground in a furious tangle of limbs, and my mate didn’t hesitate to pounce on them.

I glanced around the junkyard again. Even though our rescue group and Lola and Jay were all formidable fighters, vampires still seemed to be coming out of the woodwork at an alarming rate. Jacqueline had warned us that there were more vampires, but I’d never imagined it would be like this.

Jacqueline, still riding on Plum’s back, snarled at the vampire they were fighting. “You broke my nail, you stupid bitch!”

Plum pinned the vampire to the ground, and Jacqueline jumped down, a sharp piece of scrap wood in hand—a dangerous weapon for someone like her to be using. She plunged the makeshift stake into the vampire’s chest, grinning as it turned to dust. Then her smile dropped as she inspected her nails. “This is going to take forever to fix!”

I sighed. *We’ve picked up some really interesting allies, haven’t we?*

Not far away from where Jacqueline was having her beauty crisis, Mrs. Smith was holding her own against a vicious-looking hulk of a vampire. I watched in awe as she gracefully dodged each of the vampire’s attacks, tearing off little pieces of him as she moved. It was beautiful and horrific at the same time.

*When I met Mrs. Smith, the woman who made a name for herself with her white chocolate mocha, I never would’ve known she was such a formidable opponent in battle.*

As the battle raged on, I made my way over to Lola, blasting any bloodsuckers that got in my way. The sheer number of vampire corpses scattered across the junkyard was absolutely horrifying, and by the time I reached Lola’s side, the remaining vampires were backing off.

Lola shifted back to human. “Are they retreating?”

It certainly seemed that way. Any vampire strong enough to run was dashing away from the junkyard. In seconds, the last of the vampires had scurried away.

I turned to Lola with a wide grin. “We did it!”

“And you showed up just in time. Jay and I had our hands full.”

Jacqueline hopped off Plum and approached us. “You can thank me for that.”

“Thank you?” Lola frowned. “You bailed on us the first chance you got!”

She rolled her eyes. “And it *worked*! Thanks to me ‘bailing,’ I was able to make it back to the pack house and bring in reinforcements. Again, you’re welcome.”

Ignoring the argument, Big Mac looked around the junkyard. “Where are Marta and Lilac?”

Lola pointed at the run-down office. “I think they’re being held in that building.”

I frowned. “It’s a broken-down shack. How is that big enough to hold anyone?”

“Cali, go with Lola to get the others,” Greyson interjected. “We’ll make sure the vampires are gone, but be careful. We don’t know if there are any unpleasant surprises waiting in that building.”

Lola began to lead me toward the shack, and Jacqueline followed. “I can help too.”

Lola rolled her eyes and muttered something under her breath. Big Mac joined our ranks as well. Between the four of us, I was less concerned about being caught unawares. Still, it was an interesting change of pace to see how obviously worried Big Mac was.

*She must really care about Marta.*

I glanced over at Lola. “How did you guys even end up here? You just disappeared. We had no idea where you went.”

My friend frowned. “I feel like I should be asking you the same thing. You went to that fancy Vanguard party and never came back.”

“I had no choice.”

“I didn’t have a choice either,” Lola said. “We were kidnapped and brought here while we were trying to go to the library. It wasn’t like I woke up and thought, ‘what fresh hell can I bring on the pack today?’”

“Enough, you two,” Big Mac snapped. “We’re looking for Marta, remember? Sort out your issues on your own time.”

Lola grumbled something about witches playing favorites and pushed the door open. Somehow, the shack looked even more run-down on the inside.

Jacqueline shuddered. “Okay, that’s gross. Look at all those cobwebs!”

Lola rolled her eyes and stepped forward. “This has to be the place. I remember going down some rickety stairs.”

I followed her in and glanced around. While the building was tiny inside, with only one room on the ground floor, there was a doorway off to the side. Could it lead to the stairs Lola had found?

“Over here.”

We stood in the doorway and looked down. There were stairs, all right. Just as Lola had described.

*It wouldn’t take much to collapse those stairs, and maybe the whole building along with them. Can they support our combined weight?*

“Cali, why don’t you keep watch up here while Lola, Jacqueline, and I go down and look for Marta?” Big Mac suggested.

I opened my mouth to argue, but the look on the witch’s face told me exactly how things would go if I tried to push back. So I just watched as the three of them descended the creaking stairs.

A whisper-soft scuffling sound grabbed my attention. It sounded like it was coming from the other side of the room. I poked around a little. The place looked empty, save for me and an old desk with a spindly chair. There were papers stacked on the desk, and I started flipping through them.

Suddenly, a shadow fell over me. I spun around. Someone was standing in the doorway.

“Greyson?”

Then I saw a flash of fangs, and, too late for me to dodge, the vampire grabbed me by the arm and pulled me closer to him. I blasted him, but he didn’t let go, so we crashed to the ground outside the shack.

It was easier to see my opponent outside, which allowed me to dodge the fangs that kept trying to sink into my throat, but this vampire was strong—so much stronger than I was.

I managed to free my hand again and tried to blast him, but the vampire dodged away at the last second, and an explosion of dirt hit me in the face.

I rolled away, blinded by all the dirt and dust, blasting wherever I thought I detected movement.

As my vision cleared, the vampire grabbed me again and tossed me through the air. I crashed into a metal car compactor, still blasting wildly in an effort to defend myself. My magic hit the steel plate above me, and a screech rang out as it began to move.

I screamed as the steel plate bore down on me.

**Episode 2129**

MARTA

My heart was pounding double-time. Never in my life had I been so frightened. And that included the horror show of my years spent with Bert, *and* facing down Letifer himself. No, not even those terrifying experiences compared to this crazy vampire wanting to *cut off my hands*.

And even though Lilac had managed to talk him out of *immediately* taking my hands, the vampire was still holding onto the hatchet. I couldn’t take my eyes off it.

As long as that vamp held that hatchet, I was going to buzz between fight, flight, or freeze. It was simple biology.

“Listen, Frank,” Lilac said, his voice so smooth and calm that I wasn’t sure if I wanted to kiss him or scream in his face. “You can’t just go around cutting people’s hands off.”

The vampire’s brows rose. “I’m in charge here, and I’m the one with the hatchet.” He held it up as proof, and I couldn’t hold back the fearful noise that slipped through my lips. Next to me, Lilac tensed but kept fighting the good fight.

“I just mean, if you cut off Marta’s hands, she’ll die. She’d bleed out. And what good would that do? You’re interested in utilizing her medium abilities, but her power would just die with her and you’d be out a medium. I think there’s a better solution here. We just have to figure it out. And maybe you should put down the hatchet,” he added hopefully.

Frank was clearly torn by this suggestion—the freak. Despite my absolute terror, I jumped into the conversation.

“Lilac’s got a p-point,” I stammered. “There’s gotta be some other way to remove the bracelets without removing… everything else.” I couldn’t bring myself to say the words “removing my hands.”

Before the vampire could decide how committed he was to his plan to chop off my hands with a hatchet, a series of loud thumps, glass breaking, metal creaking, and general chaos sounded from outside.

“Hold on.” Frank stomped over to the doorway and stuck his head out of the room. “Tracer? Echo? Is that you guys?”

There was no response, but the noises continued outside, so our captor stepped out of the room to investigate. The moment he was out of earshot, Lilac turned to me and whispered, “We’re going to have to fight him.”

“That is a *terrible* idea,” I snapped. I didn’t know the first thing about fighting, and Lilac was basically a regular human now that he’d been separated from Plum. In what universe would we ever be able to take on a vicious, powerful vampire—who was *wielding a freaking hatchet*—and come out victorious?

“Okay.” He nodded. “Then I’ll distract him, and you can make a run for it.”

“*No!*” I whisper-yelled. “I’m not leaving you alone with some chop-happy psychopath. You don’t have Plum anymore, remember? How on earth do you expect to defeat a vampire?”

Frank shook his head as he stomped back into the room. “Something’s not right out there.” In a blur of movement, he grabbed me by the arm and held out my wrist. “I’ve wasted enough time on this.”

He raised the hatchet, and I let out a bloodcurdling scream while Lilac jumped on Frank’s back. The hatchet swung downward, jolted only slightly by Lilac’s weight, and the blade just missed my bare wrist before it struck the ground. The blade snapped off, and I let out a sigh of relief.

But that feeling was short-lived, because the vampire flipped Lilac over and sent him crashing into the wall with a sickening *boom*.

“Lilac!” I turned to face Frank with a snarl. Suddenly, I wasn’t afraid anymore. Now, I was pissed off—and I knew just who to take that feeling out on. I lunged for Frank, swinging my bracelets like some kind of weapon, and smacked him in the face—bracelet first.

It didn’t even faze him. Frank grabbed my arm and, bearing his fangs, pulled my wrist toward his mouth. He bit down, and I let out a scream, bracing myself for the inevitable bite. Instead, Frank screamed too, then shoved my arm away and stumbled backward, collapsing to his knees.

And standing behind him, her hands raised like some kind of avenging goddess, was Big Mac.

She blasted him again, and he spun around with a growl. A third blast sent him careening to the ground. He braced himself on his hands and knees, then put a hand up to his bloodied face and snarled, revealing a broken fang.

But Frank still had his sights set on me. “You stupid medium bitch!” he snarled as he lunged for me.

Lilac jumped into his path, the splintered handle of the hatchet held tight in his grip. There was nothing Frank could do to stop himself, and I watched, wide-eyed, as the vampire threw himself onto the sharp edge of the handle. It pierced his chest with a wet sound that made my stomach clench.

Frank threw back his head and screamed, right before he crumbled to dust.

“Wow…” Lilac breathed. *Wow* was right. He’d just staked a vampire, saving my life in the process. He turned to me with a grin. “That was pretty cool, right?”

“Good for you,” Big Mac deadpanned. She grabbed my hand and helped me to my feet. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

I was still shaking as Big Mac led us out of the room. Lola and Jacqueline raced over.

“You found them!” Lola cried. Pure relief was written across her face.

“Obviously.” The witch clearly wasn’t ready to celebrate just yet. “We can throw a welcome home party later. Right now, we need to get going. There could be more vampires down here, or waiting for us outside.”

Movement sounded from the hallway, and we turned to see Echo and Tracer stumble out of another room.

“What’re you doing here… here?” Echo demanded.

Tracer smiled when his eyes caught on Lola. “Look who’s back.”

“I’m not *back*!” Lola snapped. “I’m here to save my friends! From *you*!”

“Enough of this,” Big Mac growled. She pulled me out of the way and blasted the vampire duo, knocking them back several feet. Hopefully that would give us the head start we needed to get out of here.

“Run!” Big Mac yelled.

Lilac took my hand, and we followed Lola and Jacqueline over to a rickety set of stairs. Big Mac sent another blast at the vampires before following after us, and we all scrambled up the stairs, which groaned beneath our weight.

One of the boards snapped beneath my foot, and I dropped downward with a cry. Lilac grabbed me around the waist and hoisted me up, and we continued on to the office.

Lola looked around wildly. “Where’s Cali?”

“Probably outside with the rest of the group,” Big Mac grunted. “We need to get out there too.”

We emerged from the shack that I’d been convinced I would die in, and I let out a long breath.

“Are you okay?” Lilac asked.

I threw my arms around his neck. “Better now that we’re out of there.” Something gleaming caught my eye, and I glanced at one of my bracelets and gasped.

One of Frank’s fangs, the one he’d broken, was embedded in the metal cuff. If it hadn’t been for the bracelet, he would have bitten me. Maybe finally hacked my hand off like he’d seemed so keen on doing.

I stepped out of Lilac’s arms and held the bracelet up to inspect the tooth.

Lilac, realizing what was going on, plucked the tooth out of the bracelet. “Wow. Who’d have thought a vampire fang was strong enough to embed into those witch bracelets?”

Cracks spread out from the tiny hole the fang left behind, and the bracelet shattered into dust.

My jaw dropped. “What the hell?”

“What just happened?” Lilac asked.

“Um, I don’t know.”

Big Mac ushered us forward. “Come on. We have to find the others. Stop standing around.”

I stumbled forward, still in shock, but then cold, harsh hands grabbed my bare wrist from behind, and I was ripped from Lilac’s grasp and whipped around.

Echo bore down on me, his fangs exposed. He tightened his grip with a hiss. “I’m not done with you… you.”

I let out a cry as a strange sensation rushed through me. The vampire jerked to a stop, suddenly frozen. His red eyes clouded over, fumes slipped out from between his lips, and…

He started to *melt*.

I stumbled back in horror as Echo dripped to the ground in a bubbling pool of ooze.

*Oh my god. I did that. He touched me, and I* melted *him.*

I didn’t feel guilty, but nothing in my life had ever prepared me for something so horrific.

Lilac rushed over. “Are you okay? What happened?”

I couldn’t even form the words to describe it. All I could do was look down at my bare wrist. Big Mac rushed up and grabbed my still-braceleted wrist. “What happened to the other bracelet?”

Before I could respond, everything took on a shimmery quality. I could see Lilac and Big Mac, but I couldn’t hear them.

Then, everything vanished, and a voice said, “We weren’t expecting you so soon.”

**Episode 2130**

The steel plate hurtled downward. It was going to crush me! I threw my hands up to blast the plate upward, but then I stopped. For all I knew, the blast would backfire and I’d just speed up my untimely end.

The thought sent a wave of horror crashing over me. *Oh god… I could die! This thing’s gonna kill me if I don’t stop it!*

Panic poured into my veins, and as I tried to get the hell out of there, my foot got stuck on this old piece of metal. I groped around the compactor for something to use to pull myself out. But there was nothing. I desperately tried to pull my foot out, but I was trapped. I watched helplessly as the tool that would ultimately kill me moved closer and closer.

“HELP ME!” I screamed. My voice echoed inside the compactor, but the machine itself was so damn loud I had no way of knowing if anyone had heard me. “HELP!”

I couldn’t believe my life was going to end like this. After everything, it wasn’t going to be the *due destini*, or a crazy werewolf prince, or Letifer himself who killed me. It was going to be this stupid goddamn car compactor.

*I didn’t even get the chance to say goodbye to my mates. To Artemis and my mom and dad. To Lola.*

This was so unfair! Tears burned in my eyes, blurring my view of the steel plate as it sank ever closer. I slammed my eyes shut, unable to just sit and watch it crush me. Something warm brushed against my side, and my eyes snapped open with a jolt.

It was Greyson’s wolf! I watched in awe as he pushed up on the steel plate with his back. The machine let out a grinding noise at the resistance, straining against the pressure. Still bracing himself against the plate, Greyson freed me and then gently took my shoulder in his huge jaws and dragged me out of the crusher. We crashed to the ground as the steel plate released with full force, smashing into the bottom of the compactor and smushing the metal inside.

The air was knocked out of my lungs, and I gasped for breath, wheezing as I stared at the deadly machine. Chills slipped down my spine, and I couldn’t tear my eyes away from it. The spot that could have been my tomb.

*That could have been me.*

Movement blurred in the corner of my vision, and I turned to catch the end of Greyson’s shift. In a flash, he was on top of me, his hands cupping my face then moving down to my shoulders, my arms, my hips, like he had to reassure himself that I was physically still there in front of him.

His worried gaze scanned over me, looking for injuries with the same urgency as his hands. “Are you all right?”

Shock had rendered me speechless, so all I could do was nod. I wrapped my arms around him, holding my mate tight and breathing in the comforting scent of his skin.

I pulled in a deep breath. “I really thought I was going to die,” I whispered.

Greyson kissed the crown of my head. “I’m never gonna let that happen.” His lips met mine, kissing me deeply and showing me without words just how much I meant to him. Then he rolled off me and held out his hand to help me up.

I turned to take one last look at the crusher, shivering and still haunted by the thought of what had almost happened, but then movement blurred behind Greyson. Running on pure instinct, I shoved my mate aside with all my strength and threw up both my hands to blast the incoming threat—the same vampire who’d tossed me into the crusher. The vampire flew back and crashed into a pile of crushed cars. He didn’t get back up again, and I didn’t feel an ounce of remorse.

Greyson caressed my shoulder with a smile. “Nice shot, love.”

“Oh my god!” Lola came running up. “You were almost pancaked! I’m so glad you’re okay!”

She threw her arms around me, and I hugged her back just as tightly. Relief rushed in, and for a moment, I couldn’t speak around the emotion filling my throat. I’d survived that car crusher, and we’d made it out here in time to save Lola. Everyone was okay for now. I was never going to take that for granted again. Even after Letifer’s defeat, the world was still a dangerous place. Now, more than ever, we couldn’t forget how lucky we were to have time with the people we loved.

“How could you just let her disappear?” Big Mac snapped.

“Like I told you, one second Marta was there, and the next she wasn’t. There wasn’t time to try to stop anything,” Jay insisted. “I don’t even know if I could have stopped it.”

I peeled myself out of Lola’s embrace, glancing behind us to where the witch and the werewolf were arguing.

“Did something happen to Marta?” I asked.

Worry made my stomach clench. The last time I’d seen Lola and Big Mac, they’d been heading down that death trap of a staircase to go spring Marta and Lilac from the basement. That was before that giant vampire had pulled me in for a fight. Had something happened because I wasn’t there to look out for them?

“Marta just vanished,” Jay continued. “I don’t know what else to tell you. I kind of figured you’d have a better idea of what’s going on here than I do.”

I approached them and glanced around the bloody, ruinous mess of a junkyard. “We can all look for her. She has to be here somewhere.”

Jay shook his head. “No, you don’t understand. She *literally* vanished. Like, in a puff of smoke.”

I blinked. “How is that possible?”

“I wish I knew.”

I looked around the junkyard, as if Marta was just going to pop out from behind a pile of scrap metal or something. A helpless sort of panic set in. *How could we go through all of this and in the end still fail to protect Marta? Did the vampires use some kind of teleportation magic? Is Marta even with them, or somewhere else entirely?*

Big Mac stomped over to the nearest pile of scrap metal and blasted it to pieces with a furious roar. Clearly, she was upset that Marta was missing. Which made sense. Big Mac seemed to have a soft spot for Marta that she didn’t possess for the rest of us. She was always looking out for the young medium. In a strange, Big Mac-type way, she even treated Marta like a daughter.

I was about to ask Big Mac if she had any idea where Marta might be, but then Greyson caught my hand. “I know this isn’t how any of us were hoping this rescue mission would go, but we need to get the hell out of here before more of those vampires show up. We can start the search for Marta when we get back to the house.”

“We can’t just leave her,” Lilac protested.

“We’re not leaving her,” Greyson said. “Clearly, she’s not here.”

To my surprise, Big Mac nodded. “There’s nothing we can do here. When I get back to the house, I can do another tracking spell. At least then we’ll know where to start. Greyson’s right—we should go.”

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The first thing I did when we got back was rush up to each of my parents, and then Artemis, and hug them tightly. Gratitude didn’t even begin to cover the precious gift of having more time with the people I loved.

I glanced around the kitchen. “Where’s Xavier?”

“He’s out helping Violet,” Artemis said.

“Oh. I hope he comes back soon.”

I headed upstairs to change out of my vampire gore- and junkyard-stained clothes. The scent of metal and dirt clung to my shirt after I pulled it off, and I gagged. Was I going to have car crusher nightmares for the rest of my life?

There was a knock on the door, and Greyson stepped inside. “How are you doing?”

“Once I wash this smell off, I’ll be doing much better.” I smiled. He’d cleaned up already, and gotten dressed. The old watch still hung around his neck.

He smiled back at me, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “I bet you never thought you’d be battling vampires in a junkyard, huh?”

“I’m sorry I scared you like that.”

He pulled me into a tight hug, pressing a kiss to my neck. “Don’t ever do that again, okay?” My arms twined around his middle as he pressed kiss after kiss to my throat, jaw, and face. “I’ve never been so terrified in my entire life. I don’t want to be in a world without you in it, love.”

“I love you,” I breathed. “Here’s hoping we’re never in a situation like that again.”

Mostly because I knew he’d do anything to save me, and I didn’t want him getting hurt either.

I pulled back. “Is there any news on Marta?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know. Big Mac went to find Kira the moment we got back.”

“I don’t understand how she could just vanish.” I sighed. “And I’m worried about Lilac. They’ve gotten really close. This can’t be easy for him. We should probably check on him.”

I pulled on some fresh clothes, and we went downstairs to comfort Lilac. Instead of finding him despondent and crushed with grief, we found him anxiously pacing in the den.

“I’m ready to go,” he was telling the witches as we walked in. “Let’s stop wasting time.”

Jay and Lola were standing on the fringes of the room, clearly on edge. Big Mac and Kira were standing over another tracking map.

“It looks like Marta’s in San Francisco,” Kira said.

Big Mac frowned. “It’s just as I thought. She’s been sent to the witch council.”

**Episode 2131**

XAVIER

*Well, fuck.*

We were adrift in a sea of silver traps. An army of revenants had nothing on a dozen well-placed traps. Whoever this Zachery guy was, he wasn’t messing around.

I shifted back to human and turned back to face Iris and the others. “Be careful. There’s at least a dozen werewolf traps up ahead.”

Then I looked forward as Ava shifted back into her human form.

“I think there’s more than a dozen,” she added. “Some of the traps are hidden.” She grabbed a stone from off the ground and tossed it into a nearby pile of leaves. Metal screeched, and the teeth of the trap snapped shut, perfectly illustrating her point. “The ones in plain sight are probably there to herd us into hidden traps.”

“Shit,” I breathed.

Iris, being the micromanager she was, strode forward. “Let me see them.”

I was inclined to let her take the lead here, even if I didn’t trust her one bit. For one, she probably knew these traps better than the rest of us combined, since she was some kind of hunter pro, and for two, she was the only one here who could step on one of those silver traps and survive to tell the tale. It’d hurt like a bitch, but it wouldn’t kill her.

I’d just carefully stepped aside to let Iris pass when Ava suddenly grabbed me around the middle and pulled my body against hers. We were face-to-face, her breasts pressed against my chest. My gaze lingered on her face for a millisecond, dropped down to her lips for another beat, and then the anger caught up and I pulled back.

“What the hell, Ava?” I asked. I wanted to scream, but this conversation wasn’t Iris’s business, and we were still trying to keep a low profile as we tracked Violet’s would-be murderer. “There’s nothing between us. We’re over, so—”

She grabbed my chin and forced me to look down. My words, and my anger, dried up in an instant. My left heel was less than an inch away from the silver jaws of a trap. If I’d fully stepped aside the way I’d intended, I wouldn’t have been snapping at Ava right now. Because I would have been busy dying.

She let go of my chin and shrugged. “Maybe next time, I’ll let you do what you want. See how that goes.”

“Thanks,” I gritted out.

How the hell had I missed something so goddamn obvious? As angry as I was at myself, I was just as angry at Ava. She might have just saved my life, but there was a not so small part of me that wanted to shove her into a trap.

I scooped up a stick and shoved it into the trap, releasing the pressure plate. The jaws snapped the stick in half, and the pieces went flying.

“Hey,” Iris called. “Everyone get over here.”

*Does nobody ask nicely anymore?* Being bossed around by a hunter stung my wounded pride, but not quite as much as being shown up by my ex-mate.

Treading lightly and carefully, we inched over to Iris and watched her use a much thicker stick to activate a trap. The cracking sound echoed through the forest.

She picked up the locked trap. “These are wolfsbane traps. Basically bear traps on steroids, made entirely of silver. The silver’s the deadly part, of course, but the trap itself can still break a leg.” She gave me a pointed look. “Even on a tough Alpha like you.”

My brows rose. “You’ve seen these before?”

“Only a few times.” She set the trap back down. “We don’t have much of a werewolf problem in Minnesota.”

“Werewolf problem?” I echoed. “Sounds to me like Minnesota has a *hunter* problem.”

She ignored the dig, much to my dismay. It was so much more fun being petty when the other side was petty too. “These traps are revered by hunters. Years ago, there was a unit of Oregon hunters around here, but they were pushed out because of werewolves like the Redwoods and the other packs.”

“Good riddance,” I huffed. I couldn’t help myself.

“That’s debatable.”

There was no missing the sneer in her tone. I had to pull in a deep breath to calm myself. Iris might’ve been here to help us protect Violet, but she was still the enemy. She would still hunt me and the entire pack down with a smile on her face if things were different. I couldn’t wait until she packed up and left us the hell alone.

Iris gestured around us. “There’s no way one hunter could be responsible for all these traps. Not only would it have taken hours to set them all, but these aren’t common traps. Nor are they cheap. Whoever this hunter is, they’re not working alone.”

Well, this was just getting better and better. “Whoever did this, they expected us to walk into a trap. And they had a hell of a lot of backups if we missed the first one.”

Charlie frowned. “I don’t see how Zachery could have planned this. Even if he had help, he didn’t know we were going to meet here until a short while ago. And he thought Violet was coming alone.”

I glanced around the forest. “So, *somebody* was expecting Violet to come with backup.”

Violet shuddered, wrapping her arms around herself. “They could have killed us all. The silver would have poisoned us.”

I squeezed her shoulder. “But it didn’t. We’re okay.”

Something in my chest cracked to see her like this. Violet was the little sister I’d never had, and beyond that, she was a good person who’d never hurt anyone, or done anything to deserve all the shit she’d been through. I might’ve been putting on the strong big brother face on the outside, but inside I was boiling mad.

This was still Redwood territory—not far from the lake house. Whoever was responsible for this, whether it was that Zachery kid or a whole army of full-grown hunters, they’d made it personal. They’d come into our home and tried to kill a member of our pack.

And there was no way in hell I was gonna let them get away with it. They were gonna pay—preferably with blood.

“The traps are manufactured in Colorado,” Iris said.

“Okay…” Charlie seemed to seize on this bit of information. “Maybe we can trace them back to the manufacturer and find out who purchased them?”

“That’s a great idea,” I said. “*If* we had plenty of time on our hands. This problem can’t wait. Besides, we have a new advantage. We now know who’s been threatening Violet. All we have to do now is hunt him and his accomplices down. So let’s keep after him while we still have the upper hand—and a scent to track him with.”

Iris was quiet, but she didn’t argue with my logic. Good enough.

I turned to Violet, Charlie, and Ava. “Stay in human form to navigate through all the traps—it’s easier to avoid them walking on two legs instead of four.”

Ava smiled sweetly. “Would you like me to lead the way?”

I shook my head. “*I’ll* lead the way.”

If there was one thing I didn’t want while trying to safely navigate an obstacle course of death traps, it was to follow behind a naked Ava.

I hated to admit it, but she was distracting. Or her body was, at least. And I couldn’t afford to be distracted right now.

*Once we’re finished with this shitshow, I’m doing the unmating ritual again. It might not work forever, but at least it’ll buy me some time to find a permanent solution.*

I carefully stepped out in front of her, ignoring the heat of her body as it brushed against my side.

*Focus, Xavier.*

Zachery’s scent was barely detectable in my human form, which worried me. I didn’t want to lose this pain in the ass. I wanted to get this over with, unmate from Ava for good, and finally move on with Cali.

Dragging this out any longer wasn’t an option.

Leaves crunched up ahead, and I held up a hand, silently motioning for everyone to stop. I didn’t see anything, but it sure sounded like something had moved.

I motioned for Charlie and Ava to flank me as I moved forward. But I barely made it ten steps before I picked up a new scent: a deer. That must have been what I’d heard.

Before I could tell the others about the false alarm, Charlie let out a yelp and fell out of view. Ava and I rushed over as Violet lunged for her mate—and the ground gave way. All four of us tumbled down, hitting the bottom of the pit with a thud.

I’d landed on something warm and soft, and after a moment I realized it was Ava.

*Shit*. I moved off her, ignoring the heated looks she sent me.

I looked up to see Iris peering over the edge of the hole. “Is anyone hurt?”

I glanced around. Everyone was getting back to their feet. “We’re fine.”

“How did this hole get here?” Violet asked.

Charlie shook his head. “Do you think it’s another trap?”

I looked around. “If this were a hunter trap, I imagine it would have some sadistic, fucked up addition—like spikes sticking out of the bottom.”

I noticed a dark edge to the wall and moved closer. It was an opening.

“This isn’t a trap,” I said. “It’s a tunnel.”

**Episode 2132**

My jaw dropped. “Marta is *where*?”

“*San Francisco*,” Lilac said emphatically. It looked like he was near the end of his patience, and his body was practically thrumming with suppressed energy.

“No, I know that. I just didn’t know witches could transport someone like that.” I glanced over at Big Mac. “Might have come in handy a time or two.”

She rolled her eyes. “Do I look like an Uber driver?”

“The witch council has several very powerful witches as members,” Kira explained. “With all that magic and power at their disposal, they can pretty much do anything they want. And they are the council, so…”

*So, they can just blip Marta down to San Francisco. We couldn’t have stopped them.*

The thought wasn’t as comforting as I’d expected it to be. Rather than feeling freed of blame for not protecting Marta better, now I just felt even more helpless. What were we supposed to do against all that power?

*Wait.* A new realization set it. *If they’re so powerful, where the hell were they when we were fighting tooth and nail against Letifer and the revenants? Why didn’t the council just zap them all to the bottom of the ocean or something?*

I kept that thought to myself, since it obviously wasn’t going to help our current situation. Still, it seemed incredibly selfish and cruel for them to be targeting Marta when there were real threats out there that they could be dealing with.

“Okay.” I blew out a breath. “So what are we going to do? Should we book some plane tickets to San Francisco? Try to bring her home?”

“We’re not *trying* anything,” Lilac cut in. “We’re *going* to bring her home.”

“She’s still got her trial to contend with,” Lola reminded him. “Do you think they’re going to move it up and start it now that they have her, or will they wait until the seventh?” She sighed. “We never even made it to the library to find out about past trials. We have nothing new to go on. How are we supposed to help her?”

Silence set in, and I looked around the room. Lilac looked ready to jump on Plum’s back and ride down to San Francisco if that was what it took. Kira, Greyson, and Jay all looked grave. And Big Mac… Well, she just looked pissed off.

Suddenly, Big Mac turned on her heel and headed for the door.

“Where are you going?” I demanded. “Are you seriously just going to leave her and do nothing?”

She stopped in the doorway and threw me a deadly look. “I need to pack my things. I’m going to San Francisco to help Marta.” She gestured to Kira. “Come on. We need to get there as soon as possible.”

“I’m going with you,” Lilac said.

Mrs. Smith jumped in. “And I’ll come too, for support.”

My own declaration was on the tip of my tongue, but Greyson rested a hand on my shoulder, cutting me off.

“Let them handle it,” he said quietly.

I turned to him with a frown. “I want to help.”

“You already have. Don’t you think you’ve had enough excitement for one day?”

He phrased it like a question, like I had a choice in the matter, and I supposed I did, technically. No matter how much my mates liked to throw their weight around, at the end of the day, I always did what I wanted. I pushed when needed.

But something in Greyson’s tone, something raw edged and brimming with barely suppressed emotion, told me not to push. Not this time.

I swallowed. “Okay. I’ll stay here.”

“Thank you.” He kissed my forehead. “I’m going to talk to Sabine before she leaves.”

While Greyson followed the rest of the group out of the den, I headed over to the kitchen, where Artemis was making tea.

“You look better,” she said, by way of greeting. “You looked like you’d been rolling around in a dirt pit before.”

“Not far off the mark, actually.”

“What happened? I heard you had a close call with some kind of crushing machine?”

I filled her in on the nightmarish rescue and the steel compactor that had almost ended my life. “Don’t tell Mom about it, okay? If she hears the whole story, she’s never going to let me walk outside again.”

“I won’t make a promise.” Artemis smiled ruefully. “But your secret’s safe with me.”

I winced. “Speaking of, did you talk to Mom?”

“I kind of had to, didn’t I? The way you left us alone was so obvious. But to answer your question, yes. We talked about my father, and I learned that I have an uncle.” Artemis’s expression brightened. “His name is Adair, and he likes to come into the human world from time to time.”

My eyes widened. “Seriously? You have an uncle? That’s great! Why does he come to the human world? Does he have business here or something?”

She shrugged. “The way Mom described it, it’s more that he likes to come here and… Oh, how did she phrase it? ‘Slum it’?”

“Huh. A royal Dark Fae, slumming it in the human world. You two already have so much in common,” I teased. “Still… ‘Uncle Adair’ kind of rolls off the tongue.”

“I don’t know that I’d go that far.” She rolled her eyes. “But Mom thinks maybe Adair would know if my father is still alive or not. If he’s in the human world now, he’d definitely be the best way to find out more about where I come from.”

“Are you going to talk to him?” I was absolutely blown away by this new information—and maybe a little jealous. Both of my parents were only children, so I didn’t have any uncles or aunts. *If this Adair guy is Artemis’s uncle, does that make him my uncle too? Kind of?*

“I don’t know.” She sighed. “First of all, I have no idea how to find him. And what if I do find him, but he doesn’t want to talk?”

“I don’t understand. Why wouldn’t he want to talk to you? You’re his long-lost niece.”

“Maybe he wouldn’t see it that way. Maybe… Maybe *I* don’t want to know anything about that side of my family. Mom said Kadmos was a good person, but she kind of hinted at Adair being the black sheep of the family.”

I frowned. “Oh. Do you think he’s a bad person, then?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know.”

My fearless sister was looking so small and lost. It reminded me just how complicated family could be, and that while mine had always been objectively wonderful, Artemis didn’t have that luxury.

I slid an arm around her and squeezed her shoulders. “Whatever you decide, I’ll support you. We can talk to him together, if you like.”

“Thanks. I’ll think about it.”

“What are you two talking about?”

I looked up to see my parents coming into the kitchen.

“Oh, just… girl stuff,” I said to my dad. “You wouldn’t get it.”

Dad pretended to shudder. “Heaven forbid.”

I smiled. It was great to see my parents still so happy together, even now that Dad was a werewolf. Despite everything, they seemed as close as ever.

I gave Artemis one last squeeze. “I’m gonna go wash up.”

“Oh, good. I wasn’t going to say anything, but you smell terrible.”

*My sister, ladies and gentleman. Always the charmer.*

I headed back upstairs to my bedroom, peeled off my clothes, and began to run a bath. I was achy from getting thrown around so much, and Artemis was right: I didn’t smell great. All the dirt and grime and god only knew what else from the junkyard was still caked onto my skin.

I settled into the bubble bath with a sigh. Slowly, my muscles uncoiled as my body finally got a chance to relax. The stress of the past day was seeping away, and exhaustion slipped into its place.

I leaned back and closed my eyes, allowing the lavender-scented steam and the hot water to work their magic. The heat and steady dripping of the faucet nearly made me doze off—until I heard a quiet, gentle splash and felt something brush against my leg.

*Greyson?*

I opened my eyes and stifled a scream. Lucian was in the bathtub with me. He grinned and then submerged himself below the water.

I scrambled back in shock, my arms flying up to cover my breasts. Then I realized I wasn’t in the tub at all. I was in a glimmering pond that reflected the moon.

How the heck had I ended up here? And with Lucian, of all people?

I was ready to scream for Greyson when Lucian emerged from beneath the water—only it wasn’t Lucian anymore. It was Seluna, the moon goddess. She looked just like the statue at the Vanguard palace and the woman I’d seen last night in my dream.

She took my hand and said in a dreamy, otherworldly voice, “Talk to Lucian. He is the key.”

She sank into the water and pulled me down with her. As my head slipped beneath the surface, I jolted upright, my eyes snapping open. My heart was banging against my ribs like a caged animal, and I was back in the bathtub. The water was almost cold.

It was just a dream.

I shuddered, thinking of Seluna’s words. She’d told me the exact same thing last night too. But what did it mean?

**Episode 2133**

XAVIER

I stood at the mouth of the tunnel while the others gathered around me to look closer. Naturally, Ava was standing closest to me, smeared with dirt but still naked. Our mate bond tugged at me, and I gritted my teeth and ignored it.

Violet peered down the dark tunnel, her brows furrowing. “Why would anyone dig a tunnel down here? Where do you think it might go?”

A *thump* sounded behind us, and I turned, ready to ward off an attack. This might not be a trap, but the opening to a tunnel we knew nothing about was still a great spot for an ambush. But it wasn’t a threat sneaking up on us—it was Iris, rising from the dirt, having clearly jumped down from the surface.

Her expression betrayed no discomfort or worry as she straightened and approached the mouth of the tunnel. I had to hand it to her—she was cool as a cucumber. So cool, in fact, that I had to wonder where the hell Charlie had even come from. The kid wore his heart on his sleeve.

It really was a shame that she was a hunter. I hated to admit it, but she would’ve made one hell of a werewolf. That cold-blooded instinct couldn’t be taught.

Iris squatted down to examine the tunnel, then stood and looked up at the ceiling. “This looks like more hunter work to me.”

Not exactly a surprise, considering the trap-laden forest we’d just had to pass through. “What do you think the tunnel is for?” I asked.

Iris’s lips pursed, then she shrugged. “They could have dug this for any number of purposes.”

My eyes narrowed. Clearly she was hesitant to reveal hunter tactics to a group of werewolves, but as far as I was concerned, she’d lost the right to be cagey the moment she’d signed on to help us.

“Your son and his mate were nearly killed by these maniacs,” I reminded her. “Do you want to help keep Charlie alive or not? Are we working together or against each other? Cause if you have any reservations about which side to stand on, I’m more than happy to take care of this myself.”

I knew better than to assume she was here out of an abundance of concern for Violet, but I had a feeling she wasn’t quite so flippant about her own son losing his life to a pack of hunters.

Iris’s eyes narrowed. “Listen, *wolf*—”

“I see footprints,” Charlie interrupted, pointing to the floor of the tunnel. “I couldn’t figure out how Zachery evaded us so fast. He’s strong and fast, but he’s still human. I bet he used these tunnels to duck out of sight.”

Charlie started down the tunnel, but I grabbed his arm and pulled him back. I was in charge here, and *if* we decided to check out the tunnel, I’d go first. I wasn’t about to let Violet’s mate wander off into the unknown. For all we knew, the tunnels could be just as rigged with traps as the forest above them.

I turned back to Iris. “Where do you think this leads to?”

She glanced at Charlie, seemingly coming to some sort of decision before meeting my gaze. “It might lead back to the hunter base camp.”

That was all I needed to hear. I’d suspected as much myself, but with Iris confirming it, my decision was made. “Everyone, head back to the pack house. I’ll take care of this.”

Ava scoffed. “You’re joking, right? I know you’re a big strong Alpha, but are you really capable of taking on an entire gang of hunters by yourself?”

“That’s my call to make,” I said curtly.

“It’s the *wrong* call. Just because those hunters laid all those traps, doesn’t mean they’re going to be sitting around a campfire weaponless. You’d be outnumbered and outmatched. It’d be a bloodbath.”

“Enough,” I growled. “You’re all going back to the house. Now. Watch each other’s backs, and be careful around the silver traps. I’ll join you once I’m finished here.”

Ava didn’t budge. She just stared at me through narrowed eyes. She couldn’t seem to get it through her skull that the last thing I wanted was to spend a single second longer in her company. If it meant getting some space from my ex-mate, the mindfuck I couldn’t ever seem to escape, I’d face down an entire army of hunters.

Plus, I wasn’t about to put Violet or Charlie in danger. They’d done well in the past, but they were too young, too inexperienced, to face a team of seasoned hunters. And we’d had more than enough close calls already. Cats might get nine lives, but werewolves weren’t so lucky.

Violet crossed her arms, a gesture I recognized from when she was a little girl. She was digging her heels in for the long haul.

“The only reason you’re even out here is because of me,” Violet said. “I’m not going to let you do this alone.”

“Xavier,” Ava said softly.

Her tone was genuine, and it made that still-living bond between us thrum with new intensity. Ignoring her when she was being a bitch was one thing, but when she actually made herself vulnerable? It wasn’t so easy to shove all my traitorous thoughts aside.

“Please, don’t be a hero,” she continued. “You’re always so stubborn and think you have to do everything on your own, but that’s not true. You’re not alone here. We can help you.”

“Stop pretending you know anything about me!” I snarled.

“Enough,” Iris warned us, her voice barely above a whisper, but still commanding as hell. “You’ve been bickering like an old married couple since we set out, and we can’t afford any distractions. Xavier, you’re a fool if you go after them alone. Ava is right—these hunters have been raised and trained since birth to kill. They will have weapons, and they will know how to use them. If you don’t believe me, try taking a peek in my closet sometime.”

“Oh,” Charlie breathed. “*That’s* why Dad never let me look in there.”

I sighed. Clearly, they weren’t going anywhere, and we’d only waste even more time if I tried to convince them otherwise.

“Okay. But”—I looked each and every one of them in the eyes—“you will do exactly as I say, got it? You’ll follow, *not* lead, and you won’t argue either. Is that clear?”

Violet and Charlie agreed immediately, and even Iris gave me a stiff nod. Ava just smiled. She was clearly so determined to get under my skin.

And the worst part? It was working.

I stepped into the tunnel and immediately had to crouch down slightly because I was too tall to walk upright. *I hope this tunnel isn’t too long, or I’m gonna end up with one hell of a neckache.*

Then again, if that were the case, I was pretty sure Cali would rub my muscles and generally do everything in her power to make me feel better. Cheered by that thought, I pressed on while the rest of the group crept behind me.

The tunnel twisted and turned in nearly complete darkness before it came to a sudden stop. A cool blast of fresh air slipped down from above, along with a few shafts of light. I glanced up—a rope hung from an opening in the ceiling of the tunnel. This had to be where they’d gotten out and continued on the surface.

Still crouched down, my neck muscles screaming at me, I twisted to face the others. “Stay quiet,” I whispered. “There’s a way out. Wait here while I take a look.”

My senses were on high alert as I started to pull myself up the rope. As likely as it was that this tunnel was part of the hunters’ strategy to move through the forest undetected, it was just as likely that this was some kind of trap. That once I poked my head over the edge, I’d be staring down the barrel of a gun loaded with silver bullets or some other deadly weapon. And if the hunters took me out, it’d be the easiest thing in the world for them to overpower the other wolves, and Iris. The tunnel could so easily become their tomb.

I paused just before the opening, listening and scenting the air. Nothing.

I took a deep breath and forced my muscles to go loose as I pulled myself up, ready to fight if I needed to.

But there was nobody lying in wait on the surface. The whole area was cold and empty—save for a watchtower I spotted up ahead, silhouetted against the darkening sky.

I poked my head back into the tunnel and motioned for the others to climb up.

Once they’d all made it to the surface, I led them slowly toward the watchtower. The place looked abandoned, decrepit, with parts of it flat-out falling apart. Several windows were boarded up. If the group was using that as a base camp, it didn’t look like anyone was home.

And then I heard it. Laughter. The scent of smoke teased my nose. Up ahead, a fire flickered between the trees. We crouched low and moved in.

A group of people—hunters, I could only assume—were gathered around a bonfire.

I shot Ava a triumphant look. “No weapons,” I whispered. “Unless you count marshmallows on sticks.”

She glared at me as Charlie and Violet moved up beside us.

“I don’t see Zachery,” Violet whispered.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

It was Charlie who nodded. “He’s not with them.”

Iris crouched down next to us and pointed at the group. “I recognize one of them.”

**Episode 2134**

GREYSON

I found my mother in the room she shared with Big Mac, packing. I leaned against the doorframe, crossing my arms over my chest. Everything seemed to be moving so fast, and I didn’t love the idea of Big Mac, my mother, and Lilac heading into witch council territory.

“How long do you think you’ll be gone?” I asked.

She looked up from her suitcase and didn’t seem surprised to find me standing there. “Honestly, I’m not sure. I’ve never been to a witch council trial, or hearing, or whatever this is.”

Big Mac poked her head out of the bathroom. “It’s a trial, and it shouldn’t take more than a day or two. That’s *if* we manage to get there before they convict Marta.” She lowered her voice. “And just between you and me, I wouldn’t put anything past the council.”

Well, that didn’t sound great.

“Why not?” I asked.

“They’re an institution. A law unto themselves. They’re powerful enough to make the rules and then expect everyone to obey them. And sometimes, the rules change if they think doing so will benefit them.”

“So they’re corrupt.”

She winced and shook her head. “Not necessarily. But they *are* witches—and after all, who trusts a witch?”

Sabine rolled her eyes. “Oh, MacKenzie…”

The witch ducked back into the bathroom to finish packing while Sabine mused about how lucky she was to have snagged such a lovely, honorable witch. I tuned the whole thing out. Not that I wasn’t happy for them, but Big Mac’s words were making me think about the decision I was facing, along with three—dubiously trustworthy—witches.

Could I ever truly trust them? Trust that what they were offering wouldn’t blow up in my face? When had a witch ever done a good deed without it costing something? And, if they were simply trying to do good, why had they been so relentless over the past several weeks? You’d think if they were just being nice, they would have stopped trying long ago.

And yet, here I was, the cool metal chain of the pocket watch wrapped around my neck. There were only hours left to decide, and then they would be leaving me alone for good. I reached up to touch the watch and realized with a jolt that it had fallen out of my shirt. I quickly tucked it back in, breathing a gust of relief that my mother’s focus was still on the suitcase in front of her.

Big Mac emerged from the bathroom, throwing her toiletries—or spell items, I didn’t know—in her duffel bag. “Let’s go. We can’t waste another minute.”

Sabine closed her suitcase. “I’m ready.”

“Can I take your bags down to the car?” I offered.

Big Mac hefted her duffel bag into my arms. “Be my guest.”

I almost dropped the bag. It was… a lot heavier than it looked.

“Careful,” she warned, and I hefted it more securely into my arms.

“I didn’t realize you packed the entire room in here,” I grumbled.

My mother opted to carry her own suitcase, and we headed downstairs.

“Are you sure you don’t want me or Rishika to come along?” I asked. “Just to be safe?”

Big Mac scoffed. “Safe? Bringing too many werewolves into a witch council meeting isn’t just *not* safe—it’s foolish. We’re letting Lilac come because he doesn’t have his wolf with him. So we’re at one wolf, which is plenty.”

“I’m just saying, the council sounds… intense. It might not hurt to have some backup.”

The witch shook her head. “I know we make for a weirdly progressive household, but normally, witches and werewolves aren’t the best of friends—no offense,” she added quickly, looking at Sabine.

“None taken.” She winked. “I know I’m something special.”

Big Mac rolled her eyes, but she was still smiling as she turned back to me.

“Okay, if that’s the situation we’re dealing with, should my mother be going at all?” I asked.

“No one will mess with my fiancée,” the witch assured me. “At least, not if they want to live to tell the tale.”

As we stepped out onto the porch, Lilac came thumping down the stairs, dragging a gigantic suitcase behind him. “I’m coming! Don’t forget about me!”

I carried the ten-ton duffel bag to the car, and loaded my mother’s suitcase into the trunk next to it. Big Mac stood by the trunk, frowning as Lilac pulled his suitcase over to the car.

“Do you really need such a big bag?” Big Mac asked.

“I packed a few things for Marta. After all, she was zoomed away without anything. Even powerful mediums need to brush their teeth.”

“Fine, but it’s going to be a tight fit,” she grumbled.

I looked down at the trunk. My mother’s suitcase was as small as they came, and while Big Mac’s duffel was heavy, it wasn’t *big*. “You two barely have any luggage at all.”

My mother laughed. “Oh, MacKenzie has a few extra things.”

As if on cue, Zainab and Sage came out, carrying two huge suitcases and a trunk.

Big Mac waved them over. “Perfect. Bring them here.”

“What’s all this?” I asked. “I thought you were only going for a couple days.”

“Which part of ‘going to see the witch council’ don’t you understand?” she grumbled. “I have to be prepared for anything. These are all my witchcraft supplies.”

Zainab and Sage tried, helpfully, to lay the suitcases and trunk in the back, but Big Mac held up a hand. “Step away! This is going to require finesse.”

Part of me was morbidly curious to see how the witch was going to pull this off, but she was eyeing me like I was intruding on something sacred, so I backed up. “I’ll leave you to it.”

I gave my mother a tight, short hug and retreated to the porch, watching from afar as the witch ordered poor Lilac, Sage, and Zainab around.

The porch door opened, and Rishika stepped out. “Hey, do you have a second?”

I gestured at the car. “As you can see, I have plenty of time to spare.”

She smirked. “I checked the perimeter again. Nothing unusual there.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it.”

“I also talked to your brother,” she added, gazing at me with a serious, determined look. “I told him you should be the sole Alpha.”

“Oh.”

*That* caught me off-guard. Though it probably shouldn’t have. Letifer was gone, I was healthy again—both mentally and physically—and the Vanguard pack knew Xavier and I weren’t true co-Alphas. There was really no logical reason for me to *not* be the Alpha again, and it was nice to know that Rishika still supported my claim after all this time.

“Thank you,” I finally managed. “You’ve always been one of the most loyal members in this pack, and you’re responsible for bringing in new members. You’re one of the best fighters I’ve ever seen, and it’s thanks to your continued efforts to defend this pack that I can sleep at night.”

“Thanks, but I’m not telling you all this because I want to hear a list of my attributes. I’m telling you because I’m worried about the pack. I want to know—” She paused and corrected herself. “No, I *need* to know that you’ll resume your rightful role as Alpha.”

I sighed. From her perspective, everything was simple, and I didn’t fault her for believing that, but in reality, there were so many things Rishika didn’t understand. She didn’t know about my vision of Cali dying. She didn’t know that, even when I put the crazy-ass witch stuff aside, my “sharing” Alpha with Xavier was the only thing allowing the three of us—Xavier, Cali, and myself—a modicum of peace. Uneasy as it was.

“It’s not that easy,” I finally said.

She frowned. “I never said it was. Listen, I know you and your brother have tried working together, and I think that’s admirable. But don’t you see? There’s no compromise to be found here. You both want to be Alpha. You both love the same woman. I understand there’s no easy way to overlook that.” She grimaced. “If I ever felt there was someone else interested in Artemis…”

Maybe Rishika understood more than I gave her credit for. Because the truth was, even after all this time, I still hated that Xavier was Cali’s mate. It was something I would never accept. Never get used to. But it wasn’t just about me and what I wanted.

“Xavier and I are still trying to work things out,” I said.

“That’s the thing—I don’t think this is something you *can* work out. You’ve been trying all this time, and you haven’t found a solution yet. What makes you think that’s going to change?”

“Lilac!” Big Mac snapped, still over by the car. “Get your hands off my bag!”

Rishika moved closer and lowered her voice. “Maybe I’m overstepping, but if it comes down to it, for the good of the pack, would you fight your brother in another Lupo Finale?”

**Episode 2135**

CHARLIE

My gaze snapped to the side to look at my mom. “You recognize one of them?”

Her face was barely illuminated by the flickering firelight. She looked dead serious as she nodded.

My mind spun with this new information. The traps had told us that Zachery likely wasn’t working alone, but if Mom recognized a member of the group, that meant that she probably wasn’t the only member of the Land O’Lakes Defenders to have come all the way out here.

The fact that Mom recognized one of them didn’t bode well for this person being a trainee like Zachery had been. Knowing our luck, this whole group was probably a team of seasoned hunters. But if that were the case, what were they doing out here? Zachery’s beef with Violet was personal—and petty as hell. Not exactly the kind of thing you’d cross the country, risk your life, or invest thousands of dollars in silver traps for.

I scanned the group clustered around the bonfire again. Still no Zachery. The coward.

I’d been ready to kill him when he threatened Violet the first time, back at hunter camp. Now I regretted not going through with it. I should have known that he wasn’t going to stop being a piece of shit just because he’d been kicked out of camp.

But as angry as I was at Zachery, I also felt deeply betrayed. Once upon a time, what felt like a million years ago, Zachery had been my friend. Someone I’d played with on summer days when our parents got together at a lake house up north. Up until I’d started hunter camp, Zachery had been someone I associated with happy memories and sun-soaked adventures.

I knew there was no going back to the friendship we’d had. Not after everything he’d done and tried to do to my mate. But still, it hurt. And the mere fact that Zachery had come this far just to terrorize, stalk, and attempt to murder a kind person like Violet—even if she was a werewolf—was absolutely insane.

One thing I knew for sure? There was no saving Zachery now. And when I got my hands on him again, I wouldn’t hesitate to do what needed to be done to protect my mate.

“Okay, you recognize someone,” Xavier drawled. “So who the fuck is it?”

My mom glared at Xavier. The question was more than fair, but I had to remind myself that she was essentially betraying everything she stood for to help us. To protect *me*. It seemed she’d finally drawn her line in the sand, and she was just barely on the same side as me. I could only hope she’d stay there.

“It’s someone I heard about when I first became a hunter. Back when I was Charlie’s age,” Mom said. “Her name is Shanna Paiyn, and she’s a hunter from Upstate New York. When I first heard about her, I was so impressed. A female hunter in the 80s, going solo and standing up to the toughest monsters around. As I got older and learned more about being a hunter, I realized that Shanna was a marvelous hunter. She has a killer’s instinct, and that gives her an edge in the hunt.”

“Wow,” I said. “I’ve never heard of her.”

“There’s a reason you haven’t,” Mom said. “She was more into the kill than protecting humans. In the end, she turned her back on the hunters when she was ousted because of disagreements with her tactics.”

“So you’re saying Violet’s stalker has teamed up with a highly skilled sociopath,” Xavier deadpanned. “Fucking fantastic.”

Violet frowned. “I don’t understand how Zachery could have joined up with Shanna. He was just thrown out of Bridgeham! Who would want such a loser?”

“Zachery is just the type Shanna would welcome,” Mom explained. “He’s a gifted hunter—yes, Charlie, he is.” She gave me a pointed look when I made a face at the praise. “I saw enough of his work at camp to judge.”

“Gifted?” I scoffed. “The guy’s delusional.”

“That doesn’t mean he doesn’t have a generous helping of talent. But he’s also raw, untrained. Some might even say moldable. And, from what you’ve told me, he’s also unhinged. Perhaps something else is going on to alienate him and inflate his sense of entitlement. Either way, getting kicked out of Bridgeham would be just the thing to truly sever someone like Zachery from leading an honorable life as a hunter. He’s radicalized now. I wouldn’t be surprised if Paiyn herself recruited him.”

Xavier glanced over to the bonfire. “If this Paiyn woman is recruiting the worst the hunter world has to offer, maybe we should do everyone a favor and take care of her and her followers right now?” He started creeping forward, clearly preparing to attack.

I nervously glanced over at Violet. *Is he being serious right now?* I asked her. *We can’t take all of them.*

Mom grabbed Xavier’s shoulder and pulled him back. “Walking in there right now is as good as committing suicide. These hunters live to kill, and there are probably more out here than just the ones we can see. Fighting now isn’t going to save *anyone*. Just the opposite.”

Xavier wrenched himself free with a growl. I could only imagine how he had to feel, being presented with such a clear threat to his pack and being unable to eliminate it.

“I know how you feel,” Mom said quietly. “But right now, you have an advantage. Think twice before you give it up.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“We know about them now. We know where they are, how they move through the forest, where they’ve rigged traps. We can also identify at least two people in the group—Zachery and Paiyn,” she explained. “They don’t know that we’re onto them, so the best thing we can do now is go back and plan our next move strategically, use the intel we have against them.”

For a moment, I just took this information in. Even now, when my hunter ancestry was old news, it was still jarring sometimes to try to reconcile this cold, brilliant tactician with the warm, loving mother I’d grown up with.

“Iris is right,” Ava said, speaking up for the first time since we’d crawled through the tunnel.

If looks could kill, the one Xavier shot her way would have sent her six feet under. “I don’t give a damn what you think.”

Mom turned to me. “Come on. We’re leaving.”

I didn’t move. I didn’t love disobeying my mother, but my loyalty was to my pack now. To Xavier. And I didn’t want to leave without him.

He looked back out at the campfire again and sighed. “Okay. Let’s head back.”

Relief and frustration swirled inside me in equal measure. As much as I was glad to not be facing off against a bunch of bloodthirsty hunters, Zachery was still out there. Still fixated on killing Violet.

That just wasn’t acceptable.

We made it back to the pack house without incident, and Violet, Xavier, Ava, and I shifted back to human when we stepped into the yard. Mom, Ava, and Xavier entered the house through the back door, still conferring over the best tactics for taking down Paiyn and her hunters.

Violet and I followed, but instead of joining them in the kitchen, Violet headed straight upstairs. She’d barely said a word on the way home, despite my many attempts to mind link with her.

I hurried up the stairs and found her in her bedroom. She avoided my eyes as she headed for the bathroom. “I’m gonna take a shower.”

She moved to step around me, but I caught her gently by the shoulders.

“Sunshine.” I kissed her gently. She didn’t kiss me back. She still wasn’t looking at me, either, so I tipped her chin up, forcing her to meet my gaze. “Are you okay? I… I can imagine how upset you must be.”

“It’s just—” Her voice broke, and she buried her face in my chest. “I just want this nightmare to end. I can’t believe Zachery would do this to us.”

I wrapped my arms around her and held her tight. “I’m sorry you’re going through this. I hate seeing you hurting.”

The truth was, Violet and I were both way too young for this shit.

She looked up at me, her eyes brimming with tears. “Zachery wants to *kill* me! What am I supposed to do?”

My jaw clenched. I had to put a stop to this. It was long overdue. I gently wiped a tear from her cheek. “Why don’t you go take a hot shower? I’m sure it’ll help.”

She nodded and headed into the bathroom. As soon as I heard the water running, I grabbed my phone and stepped out of the room. In the hallway, I scrolled to Zachery’s cell number. The call went straight to voicemail, but that was just fine.

“Cut the shit, Zachery,” I snarled. “We all know it’s you. It’s time to end this. Come face me.”

**Episode 2136**

I stepped out of the tub in a daze. I had no idea where that dream had come from, but Seluna had played the starring role, just like last night. What was up with that? It felt too spooky to be a simple coincidence.

Before the Vanguard party, I’d never thought twice about there being a moon goddess, outside of the occasional Greek myth. But Lucian and Aysel and the rest of the Vanguard pack had acted like she was a true deity, deserving of worship.

And honestly, their version of worship was creepy AF. Was I just having leftover freak-outs from the party and everything I’d gone through while Lucian had held me captive? I mean, werewolves and magic aside, we’d basically gone to a party held by a cult leader. A cult leader who had refused to let me leave, and who’d drugged me. That had to leave a mark, right?

Then I thought back to the Moon Favor ceremony. It was a lot harder to strip the magic away from that. There had been something… fleeting but still tangible in the air that night. Something beyond mortal understanding. Could the ritual have done something to me?

I knew Xavier didn’t believe Seluna was real. He and Greyson were similar that way. Before the party, I might have agreed with them, but now… I wasn’t so sure.

After all, werewolves used to think the *due destini* was a myth, but here I was. All star-crossed and permanently conflicted in all my *due destini*… glory?

No, definitely not glory.Lots of romance novels and movies made a big deal about a girl being pursued by two guys, but the reality was just short of miserable most of the time.

A chill slipped down my spine, bringing goosebumps to my skin, and I realized I’d been standing in front of the mirror, dripping onto the floor and staring at my reflection for… I didn’t know how long. I quickly toweled off, wanting to put as much space between this room and myself as possible.

I pulled on some clothes and was heading downstairs—feeling much cleaner and less achy, if significantly more freaked out—when I saw Greyson and Rishika standing on the porch by the open front door.

Greyson must have heard me coming, because he looked over and smiled. “How are you feeling?”

I forced a smile. “Better. What’s going on?”

“Just updating Greyson on a few things,” Rishika said, then faced Greyson. “We can talk more later.”

She excused herself and brushed past me as I stepped out onto the porch.

“What was that about?” I frowned. Greyson and Rishika had both looked grave. Had something bad happened?

“Sabine, Big Mac, Kira, and Lilac are leaving to join Marta in San Francisco.” He gestured to where a small crowd was clustered around the car, just as Big Mac slammed the trunk shut and they began to pile in.

“Oh no!” I gasped. “I didn’t say goodbye!”

Moving at a pace that probably would have shocked my sister, I yanked on a pair of boots and rushed out to catch the car before they left.

“Bye!” I called as I raced up to the passenger side. Big Mac rolled the window down with a mildly irritated expression, and I lowered my voice. “Good luck. If you need anything, anything at all, just call. And please let us know how Marta is. Give her our love. We’re rooting for her here.”

“It’s killing you that you’re not going, isn’t it?” Big Mac asked.

I sighed, and Mrs. Smith gently smacked her shoulder.

“MacKenzie, be nice,” she scolded, then smiled at me from the driver’s seat. “We’ll be careful, and we’ll keep you updated. Hopefully this will all be behind us soon enough.”

“I hope so too. I can’t wait to attend your wedding with Greyson,” I said as Greyson approached the car.

“I’m glad you’ll be there,” she said kindly.

I put an arm around my mate, smiling up at him. “He’s going to look so good in a suit! I promise we’ll make sure it goes with the pocket watch. He’s going to look so classy!”

Greyson tensed but didn’t say anything.

Mrs. Smith frowned. “The pocket watch?” Then she looked at Greyson, who suddenly had an “oh shit” expression written across his face. “What’s she talking about?”

He patted the top of the car. “You’d better get going. You don’t want to miss your flight.”

“He’s right,” Big Mac said. “We need to go now.”

Mrs. Smith waved and put the car into reverse. I kept my arm around Greyson as we watched the unlikely rescue group set off, but once they’d disappeared down the road, I looked up at my mate.

“Greyson?”

“Hmm?” He was avoiding my gaze. My stomach clenched with anxiety.

Greyson had told me that Mrs. Smith had given him the watch, but just now she’d acted like she had no idea what I was talking about. Had he lied to me? And, if so, why would he lie about something as silly as a pocket watch?

I frowned, watching his face. He seemed to want to look anywhere but right at me.

What was going on? When we’d slept together earlier, we’d talked about the importance of being open with each other. He’d said he wouldn’t lie to me, and yet here he was, literally lying to my face.

My stomach twisted tighter, and suddenly I wanted to cry.

“Nothing,” I finally said.

I tried to rally my increasingly depressing thoughts as we headed inside. Maybe there was an explanation for all of this. Some kind of miscommunication that would clear everything up.

I knew the best way to solve this was for me to talk to Greyson, to trust that he had a good reason for… whatever was going on. I still wasn’t quite ready to accept that he was lying to me. But part of me was afraid to bring it up. Things had been good lately, really good. And part of me worried that if I tugged on this thread and it revealed something hurtful, I wouldn’t be able to go back.

I didn’t want to fight with him. I wanted to trust him. But right now, I didn’t know if I could truly have both of those things.

*Come on, Cali. Just ask him!*

And yet, my lips were shut tight. I usually had no problem speaking my mind, even when the topic wasn’t an easy one, but right now my tongue felt tied up. I didn’t know how to talk about this. How to ask him to tell me the truth.

We headed toward the kitchen, and I caught his arm. “Greyson—”

I stopped when my gaze landed on Xavier in the kitchen. I was so surprised and relieved to see him that I was only passively aware of the divine smell emanating from the kitchen.

I let go of Greyson’s arm, rushed forward, and caught Xavier in a hug. “Are you okay? What happened?”

He patted the top of my head and kissed my forehead. He smelled like sweat and dirt. “We’re just fine. Nothing to worry about.”

“Excuse me,” Torin cut in. “Can you please step away from the kitchen island? Tom says we need it.”

I was barely listening. I wasn’t going to let go of my mate anytime soon. I knew I should care that Greyson was probably seeing this and wouldn’t appreciate me hugging Xavier, and on some level I did care, but right now I didn’t care enough to do anything about it. If he wanted to lie to me, that was his choice. Just like it was my choice to hug Xavier.

After a beat, Xavier gently eased me out of his arms. It was then that I realized he was naked—and a beautiful, older woman was standing next to him, watching the two of us.

“Oh!” I stammered. “I-I’m so sorry. I’m Cali.”

The woman smiled. “I’m Iris, Charlie’s mother.”

Oh. His mother, the hunter. In our house. While my mate was standing next to her, naked. I pasted a smile onto my face and was about to suggest that Xavier put some clothes on when a very naked Ava stepped forward, wearing nothing but a dark smile.

Just like that, the burst of joy I’d gotten from seeing Xavier disappeared. This whole time, he’d been hanging out—naked—with Ava?

“Hi, Cali,” she said brightly. “I’m Ava. I believe we’ve met.”

I scowled at her. “Very funny.”

If only I didn’t know who she was. What a dream that would be.

My mind was spinning with everything that had happened in the last few minutes. Greyson was lying to me, and now I’d found Xavier naked with his equally naked ex-mate?

A warm hand closed around my elbow, and Greyson gently pulled me aside. His eyes searched my face. “Can I talk to you?”

**Episode 2137**

GREYSON

I needed to fix this with Cali.

I’d seen the hurt flash in Cali’s eyes the moment my mother had essentially denied giving me the watch, and it had felt like being sucker punched. What was worse was the way I’d completely clammed up. Freezing when I should have opened up. Avoiding her like a coward when she deserved the truth.

I’d told her I wouldn’t lie to her, and already I’d fucked that up.

Never in my life did I want to hurt Cali, but by trying to protect her from the truth, I’d done just that. The damage had been written across her face from the moment the car had pulled away, and watching her throw herself into Xavier’s arms had felt terrible. I knew I didn’t deserve to be jealous, not as long as I was lying to her, but it still hurt. I knew I was the best match for Cali, but I was shooting myself in the foot by lying to her.

Why wouldn’t she run to Xavier if she felt she couldn’t trust me? I needed to fix this mess I’d made. Or at least try.

Cali was quiet, and her movements were stiff as I led her into the library. Once we were inside, I closed the door and turned to face her. Her eyes were glued to the floor. Something in my chest cracked to see her this way.

Taking a deep breath, I pulled the watch out from around my neck and held it out to her.

Her eyes lifted to the watch and then to my face. “Your mom didn’t give it to you.”

It wasn’t a question, but I still shook my head. “No, she didn’t.”

The admission of my lie seemed to deal a blow, and she sighed. “Okay. Who gave it to you then?”

I pulled in another deep breath for courage. “The three witches.”

Cali’s eyes went wide. “Why?”

“I…” I swallowed. “I don’t know.”

“No.” She shook her head. “There must be a reason. Those witches are tricky. We never know what they’re up to, or why they do any of the things they do, but they wouldn’t have given you that pocket watch if there wasn’t a reason for it.”

I hesitated. I felt trapped. I knew that lying—or even omitting the truth with someone to whom you’d promised honesty—was bad. I didn’t want to hurt Cali. I didn’t want to keep anything from her. But the alternative—stressing her out over the what-ifs and this seemingly impossible choice that I had to make—wasn’t something I could stomach either.

If she knew about the spell, she’d be worried about me, worried about a million other things that might or might not happen to us. I didn’t want to be another thing for her to stress about when I didn’t even know what this stupid watch was going to do.

My only hope was that someday, when everything with the witches was over, Cali would understand why I hadn’t told her the truth. That one day, she’d forgive me for lying after I’d promised her I wouldn’t.

It wasn’t a great plan. But it was the best I could come up with, because telling her about this spell, the time limit, this whole ongoing shitshow with the three witches—that wasn’t an option. Whatever happened with this piece of junk, I didn’t want her to be upset or worried. If this… whatever it was didn’t work out, I wanted her to be spared any suffering.

It might be selfish to feel that way, but this choice—as impossible as it was—was mine alone. For my own sanity, I had to go into it with as clean a slate as possible.

I slipped the watch back around my neck and took her hand, gently rubbing my thumb over the back of her knuckles. “If I could give you the answers you want, love, I would.” That much wasn’t a lie. “I’m wearing the watch because I think it’s important. It’s not something I should leave lying around.” Two truths in a row. Maybe I could do this.

She blinked. “Have the witches done something to you? Are… Are you okay?”

I stared into her eyes, so full of worry on my behalf. All I wanted was for her to feel safe and loved. For her to know that I’d never let anything hurt her. That if it were in my power, I’d never let anything bad happen to her at all.

“I’m okay. Better than okay. The witches haven’t done anything to me.”

Her eyes dropped to my chest. “And the veins… They haven’t gotten worse, have they?”

I brought her hand up to my lips and gently kissed the inside of her wrist. “I swear to you, they’re the same.” I opened a few buttons on my shirt to show her. “See? No worse.”

Her fingertips gently dragged over the veins, and her lips twisted into a pout. “You don’t know how much I wish they’d just go away.”

I caught her hand again. “I do know.”

“I’m just so tired of this curse.”

I pulled her into my arms, resting my chin on the crown of her head and breathing her in. “I wish I could make it go away. I’d do anything to get rid of this curse, if I could.”

Her arms tightened around me. “I know.”

For a few seconds, we stood together in the library. I breathed her in, and she held onto me for dear life.

“Are you okay, love?” I forced myself to ask, even though it felt like a stupid question. None of what we were dealing with was even remotely okay, and it didn’t seem fair to pretend otherwise.

“Not really,” she mumbled into my shirt.

And then I asked the most selfish question of all. “Do you still trust me?”

She didn’t even hesitate. She looked up at me, a crease appearing between her brows. “Of course I do. How could I not? How many times have you saved my life?”

I smiled. “Not as many times as you’ve saved mine.”

I caught her lips in a deep kiss, trying to tell her without words just how much she meant to me. She pulled back, her lips swollen, her cheeks pink.

“You are okay, right?” she asked.

I nodded, and she tilted her head back to kiss me again.

I didn’t hesitate to sweep her into another kiss, spinning us around so she was pressed against the library door. I tried to memorize the sensation of her lips moving against mine, the taste of her mouth, the sweet sighs she let out as I kissed her, the way her curves pressed against me…

She was my mate. My everything. I didn’t want to let her go, even for a second. She was everything I’d ever wanted and didn’t feel I deserved, everything I’d ever hoped for. She was the reason I was even considering taking the witches up on their offer.

Torin’s voice rang out from the kitchen. “Lasagna!”

Reluctantly, I broke away from Cali’s mouth. “You must be hungry.”

She nodded and took my hand, her swollen lips pulling up into a bright smile. “Let’s see what magic Torin has cooked up.”

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Later, I quietly entered my bedroom and closed the door behind me. I’d barely touched the amazing meal Torin and Tom had prepared for everyone. With everything weighing on my mind, hunger didn’t seem to register.

Instead of eating, I’d looked around the table in quiet awe. It was amazing how the pack had remained together through so much turmoil. They were so strong. So much stronger than anyone gave them credit for.

My gaze kept straying to Cali during dinner. I kept fantasizing about what our life together could be like. It was almost too sweet to dwell on. There would be no putting me back together again if I couldn’t have that dream.

Rishika was quiet too, sitting with Artemis. More than once, I’d met her eyes and remembered the challenge in her voice, the quiet determination, her unwavering faith in me. I knew that what she’d told me was true—the pack was better off with one strong Alpha. But should that Alpha be me? It wasn’t like Xavier would just step aside. Did I want to face my brother in another Lupo Finale?

Maybe I wouldn’t have to.

I glanced at the time—just a few minutes before midnight. How had it all passed so quickly?

The house was quiet now. Almost everyone had started to go to bed. I sat on my bed and pulled the pocket watch out from beneath my shirt with sweaty hands.

Chloe’s words echoed in my mind. *All you need to do is turn back the hands until they align at midnight.*

Posie had said it would reset my fate, and finally, I was ready to try. Honestly, what I was about to do had been a long time coming.

I thought of Cali and took a deep breath.

Then, with shaking hands, I opened up the watch and turned the hands backward.